

18. A deeper country

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[0 : 00] Could you imagine a world without music? I would find such a world very, very trying indeed. I love music. I don't know a great deal about it.

Don't worry, I'm not going to give you an exposition on my favourite composer, Elgar. But one of the things that I love about music is listening to a great piece of music and seeing how, as the symphony or whatever it is goes on, the earlier tunes, the earlier motifs, the earlier moments are gathered up in great and rich harmonies.

Now that's exactly what is happening here at the end of our Bibles. This great and glorious symphony, which is the Bible, the Word of God, as we come to the end of it, there's rich and powerful symbolism which draws very deeply from the very beginning of the Bible and indeed all through the Bible.

The key is verse 5. And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making, I am creating all things new.

Cornhill students are accustomed to my saying that the whole of the Bible is really a development of Genesis 1, verse 1. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

[1 : 25] And this shows us how he's going to complete that task, complete it gloriously. Shows us how he hasn't been blown off course by the fall, by Satan, by all his enemies.

He is going to create new heavens and a new earth. Passes from Isaiah that I refer to at the beginning, Isaiah 65 and 66.

A lot of the imagery is drawn from there. Behold, I am creating new heavens and a new earth. Glorious passage in Romans 8. The whole of creation on the tiptoe of expectation, groaning in the pains of labor for the new creation.

And 2 Peter 3. The heavens and earth melting with a fervent heat and a new creation being brought in. It's beyond our most wonderful imaginings.

After all, Paul says in 1 Corinthians, the human eye has not seen, the human ear has not heard, neither has it entered into the human heart, the things that God has prepared for those who love him.

[2 : 29] But, and I want to say this, it is enormously practical. Let's imagine because this is about the future, it has nothing to do with us here and now. So, everything we do now, everything we are now, will either be consumed by God's judgment, or it will last into eternity, and will become part of that glorious new creation, fully restored and freed from the curse.

So this is the culmination. This is the story as it reaches its climax. And this is a total transformation. It is, of course, a spiritual transformation.

As we will see, it's also a material transformation. As C.S. Lewis says, God likes matter. He made it. That reminds me, I'm going to read from my favorite commentary on this part of the book of Revelation.

I've not found a better commentary on these chapters than the one in the last battle. And this is where I get my title from for this evening. I'm sure I've read this before.

Do you no harm whatever to hear it again. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was that the new one was a deeper country.

[3 : 50] Every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that. If you ever get there, you will know what I mean.

It was the unicorn who summed up what everyone had been feeling. He stamped his right hoof on the ground and neighed and then cried, I have come home at last. This is my real country.

I belong here. This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it until now. The reason why we love the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.

The deeper country. So, what is John saying about that deeper country? It suggests there are three movements in this chapter. First of all, in verses 1 to 8, he's saying that in this deeper country, everything is new.

Now, obviously, there will be discontinuities and continuities between this life and the world to come. And we'll come back to that. But it's very important, actually, we look at the continuities as well as the discontinuities.

[5 : 02] Because this governs how we look at this creation, how we live the life of faith in this world. John loves mixing his metaphors, doesn't he?

The lion, who is also the lamb. Here we have the city, who is also the bride. Now, I want to suggest that means perfect community and perfect individual intimacy.

Now, in this world, we never quite manage it, do we? We either have a kind of stifling community, where no one's individualism is allowed to develop, or else, as so often in the West, we're all very individualistic, and we tend to do our own thing.

In the new creation, perfect community and perfect intimacy. And this is the culmination, of course, of the Bible's tale of two cities.

Some weeks ago, we looked at the other city, the city of this world, Babylon, the world which passes away. This is the world which does not pass away. And notice, it's not going to be achieved by human effort.

[6 : 12] In the 19th century, the liberal humanism of the time, imagined that we would create utopia, we would create the city by our own efforts.

We won't. Look what it says in verse 2. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. This is a gift of grace, not achieved by human efforts.

And God is not an occasional visitor, but a permanent resident. Now, you'll notice in these verses, there are both negatives and positives.

What is not there, and what is there. First of all, it's not terribly attractive. Verse 1, The sea was no more. I love the sea.

I grew up by the sea. And I was disappointed when I was a boy, when I was told there'd be no sea in the new creation. But the point is, the sea is the symbol of the anti-God powers in the Old Testament.

[7 : 17] The sea is the symbol of what opposes God. Because remember, the sea is not evil in itself. Remember, in the unfallen creation, there was sea. God created the land, and he created the waters.

And I'm fallen about it in itself. It only associates with the powers of evil as a result of the fall. But look what else is not there. Verse 4, Death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be all the things associated with death, mourning, crying, and pain. That grim frontier post that brings up short all our hopes, all our joys, all our dearest relationships.

Death shall be no more. Now, it doesn't just mean that no one will die. It means there'll be no possibility of dying. Because death, the enemy, will be destroyed.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, saying that Christ must reign till he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

[8 : 27] No possibility of dying. So, all these things that mark human life, all these things that shadow human life, all these things that cause us to mourn and cry and weep, they'll be there no longer.

And we're reminded of the beginning of the book as well. Verse 7, the one who conquers. I said a long time ago that this whole book is the letter to the seven churches.

The individual letters are individual notes, if you like. The one who conquers, the one who perseveres to the end. Look what else is not there.

Verse 8, the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable. This is a very sobering verse indeed. I want to say two things about it. First of all, clearly, this is talking about persistent attitude and deliberate actions which lead away from the city of God to the city of destruction.

Not an occasional lapse into sin which has been repented of but deliberate turning away. The second thing I want you to notice is look who are first in the list, the cowardly and the faithless.

[9 : 43] This seems a bit harsh, doesn't it? Who are the cowardly and the faithless? They are those who, when the gospel is under attack, when the word of God is being scorned, they are those who ultimately side with the enemies of the gospel, who fail to stand with God and with his people at the time of crisis, who fear men more than they fear God.

So it's a sobering thought, isn't it? Losing by default, almost. But you'll notice there is the free offer of the gospel.

Verse 6 again, to the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. Who are the thirsty?

Those who realise their deepest needs cannot be satisfied in this world and in this life, drinking from the deep wells of the joy of God. So, it is a new creation with continuity and discontinuity.

I'll say a bit more about the sea was no more and that when we come to the end of the chapter. But, it's a tremendous and wonderful and glorious transformation.

[11 : 10] Everything is new. We get glimpses of this in this world, don't we? Get off on a glorious morning with some exciting prospect in front of us and everything seems new.

The sun shines brightly, the countryside seems more glorious than usual and we get glimpses of the world to come. What's he asked Lewis called? Joy. Stabs of joy which he believed are anticipations of that place to which we really belong.

So, everything is new but that leads on really to verses 9 to 21. Everything is real. Very important to realise this is not a fantasy.

This is not a dream. This is not John giving his ideas of what utopia would be like. This is revelation because look for the final time in the book in verse 10 he carried me away in the spirit.

Now I identify these as the markers for each of the four great revelations in the book of Revelation and here is another one. He's taken up to a great high mountain just as Ezekiel was at the end of his book and shown the world to come.

[12 : 29] The mountain is the place of vision, the place of insight and of course taking us back still further to that mountain where Moses received revelation. See what I said, all the images, all the pictures, all the ideas are coming together.

Now this doesn't mean a second descent of the city. After all we've been told in verse 2 I saw the holy city coming down.

This is really suggesting rather God's continuing and developing presence. Some of the ways in which people talk about the world to come make it exceedingly dull.

When we use words like the end of the story, when we use the kind of concept that everything is wound up then, that's not the biblical view.

The biblical view is creation, this new and glorious creation will continue into all eternity. God will continually be creating, God will, and there will be continually things to explore, new things, things perhaps which we never managed to do in this world and long to do.

[13 : 40] All these things will be there. Now the reality of course goes beyond the pictures, but the pictures are true pictures and I want to suggest that the city which comes down out of heaven is not an entity in the new heaven and the new earth.

In other words, it's not we've got the new heaven and the new earth and then the city as another entity. I want to suggest this is the new heaven and the new earth from a different perspective. As I said often, this book is like a great portrait gallery, a great art gallery.

if you go around and see different angles of the same reality. So what is this city then? The first thing about this city is both secure and has abundant access to it.

Hence the walls and the gates. The walls suggesting security and the gates suggesting welcome. Now of course the new creation does not need to be defended.

The enemies have gone. We learned in previous chapters Satan death and Hades have been cast into the lake of fire, disarmed to all eternity. But this is a pictorial way of talking about the eternal security of the people of God.

[15 : 02] After all, the apostle John had said this in much more literal terms in the gospel, I give to my sheep eternal life and they will never perish.

Paul talks about justified, glorified, the golden chain of the salvation events. Eternal security.

And the twelve times twelve, as I've suggested throughout the book, and I'm not going to change my mind now, is the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, the one people of God in both testaments.

We remember back in chapter fifteen, the one people of the one God sang the one song of Moses and the Lamb, the same salvation, the same gospel, same covenant in different forms to all eternity.

And this is the city to which Abraham travelled. Hebrews tells us, remember, he travelled to the city which had foundations. Well, here are the foundations, the scribe, whose builder and architect is God.

[16 : 10] the foundations, the names of the twelve apostles, that suggests, the foundations and the gates suggest that all who are there, the whole city is built on the teaching of scripture, the apostles and the prophets.

And this will last into eternity. John, after all, does talk about this again in chapter fourteen where the Lord Jesus Christ says, I go to prepare a place for you.

Well, here is the place he has gone to prepare. Will we enjoy the place when we get there? It must have occurred to some of you, certainly occurred to me.

Remember, of course, we will, of course, enjoy it because we were made for the place. It was there first and God created us to be there and to fill it.

The true humanity which is fallen and spoiled, he created that place so that his people, his redeemed blood-bought people, could grow to their full heights and reach their full potential.

[17 : 24] So there is security, there is abundant access, everyone who wills can come. And there is perfect symmetry, verses fifteen to twenty-one. And this takes us back to 1 Kings chapter six to Solomon's temple, where the inner sanctuary, the most holy place, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was, the place where God met with his people is a perfect cube.

And that is the, and that's the idea we have here. Verse sixteen, the city lies four square. Now, clearly, this is a gloriously symbolic picture.

We're not to imagine a literal city of that height and length and so on. But it is a picture which says so much.

Jasper, for example, verse eleven, like a jasper, clear as crystal. Jasper is used in chapter four of God himself, the one who sat on the throne, was like jasper.

This place is the dwelling place of God himself. And it speaks of God surrounding his people. And the gold, God's people are now gold, refined in the fire.

[18 : 50] And the jewels correspond to those in the high priest's breastplate. You can read about that in Exodus twenty-eight. So he says, all coming together, the priestly ministry of the people of God comes to its culmination here.

All of these great pictures and symbols, these acted parables, they are all here. And the twelve gates, verse twenty-one, were twelve pearls.

Each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

And I think the pearl reminds us of Matthew thirteen, about the man who sold everything he had to find the pearl in his field. And that pearl is the kingdom of God.

So, you can see how John is opening windows, showing us windows into the deeper country, and the reality will be more glorious than the picture.

[19 : 55] Of course, C.S. Lewis, yet again, I was going to say, I promised that would be the last quote, but it's probably not a promise I will keep, so let me not say it. C.S.

Lewis talks about it in this way. He says, imagine a child talking to a couple going off on honeymoon, and he says, well, you have chocolates on honeymoon.

Now, obviously, they may well have chocolates, or not have chocolates, but the point is, in the child's world, chocolates are something without which there could be no happiness and no fulfilment.

And you see, probably on earth, we are thinking, the equivalent, will we have chocolates in heaven? In my case, will there be midget gems in heaven? Now, lines, they would have to be, well, of course they would be, wouldn't they?

But the point is that our longings, our aspirations, will not just be met there, but they'll be so far surpassed that we'll see the reality when we see him as he is.

[21 : 00] This is not absorbed in the cosmic ocean as Buddhists teach. This is not some kind of disembodied existence in a shadow land. This is resurrection bodies, enjoying the glorious new creation, where everything is new, everything is real, and thirdly, verses 22 to 27, where everything is holy.

Holy is a word which has fared badly. Holy often suggests sour, vinegary, somebody who's been sanctified by vinegar, someone who is unattractively harsh.

Holy is a beautiful word. Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, says one of the Psalms, and this is what's about here. I saw no temple in the city.

How I loved that verse when I was a boy, when I was told going to heaven would be like being in church. I think even after a hundred years, even the hallelujah chorus might begin to get a little stale.

The point I want to make is this, that when we think of the new creation, we've got to think of all the pictures and images that are used in Scripture.

[22 : 19] After all, Adam and Eve believed in their unfallen state, didn't go to church, did they? In the Garden of Eden, because God himself came down to be with them, and so it is here.

Here, there is no need of a temple, because the reality, the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are there.

We will see him face to face, no longer through a glass darkly as Paul says in 1 Corinthians.

This is now the unlimited presence of God. At the end of the book of Ezekiel, interestingly, Ezekiel sees the whole of the new creation as temple and city, which, undoubtedly, among other things, reflects Ezekiel's own training to be a priest.

Now, that's really, once again, the same reality from a different point of view. Both Ezekiel and John are saying that God will be there.

[23 : 21] Everything will be holy. The people of God, after all, what is the temple of God? The people of God. And when the people of God are present with the Lord Jesus Christ, there will be no need of a specific temple.

The city had no need of sun or moon. Well, once again, sunlight, we love sunlight. The moon on the water is one of the most beautiful experiences in this world.

Once again, you see, we're not being given astronomical information. This is not information about the physics and chemistry of the new creation. This is saying the reality goes beyond what the present creation is.

After all, what were God's first words in Genesis? Let there be light, and there was light. What does John in his letters? It's one of the phrases he uses about living the Christian life, walking in the light.

Now, in the new creation, we will walk in the light, in the unclouded light. And look at the blessings of the life there.

[24 : 32] Verse 24 to 26. Now, this is where we realise that the camera angle is continually shifting.

The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. If there's nothing outside the city, how can the kings of the earth bring their glory into it? How can the nations walk in its light?

I have to misunderstand what the text is saying. What the text is saying, I believe, is all that has been good and honourable in the present creation will last into eternity, not just spiritual things.

Let me put it this way. One of the reasons why the new creation often seems so unattractive is because we have a kind of super spirituality.

It doesn't want to enjoy the good gifts that God gives us in this life. Culture, food, holidays, gifts, all these kind of things that we love and enjoy in this life.

[25 : 42] Now, clearly, these are, to my mind, anticipations of this deeper country. We must have the kind of super spirituality that rejects these good gifts.

Now, of course, if we use them as gods, if we use food, sex, money, all these things as gods, they will deceive us and they will destroy us. That's the point of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Try all these things and they end up as nothing and empty. But if we receive them as good gifts from God, which are anticipations of the new creation, then, I think, we begin to look forward to this deeper country.

We are in the shadow lands at the moment. We are going to the deeper country. You see, we saw a few weeks ago that in Babylon, what was there was destroyed and burned.

up. Many of the things in Babylon were good things. That's why there's a mourning at the end of chapter 18.

[26 : 47] The sound of harpers, the musicians, the flute players, will be heard in you no more. The light of a lamp will shine in you no more. The voice of a bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more. These were all good things.

And if they had been done, if they had been received as gifts from God, if they had been welcomed, as anticipations of the world to come, then they would have lasted into the world to come.

But they were simply taken for granted. They were simply taken in a selfish and totally arbitrary way. And so, they perish.

Here, they will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations. nations. And that, I would suggest to you, is what? One of the things that will make the new creation so wonderful.

Don't be super spiritual in this one. Don't have the kind of idea that the, which is a Gnostic idea, not a Christian one, that matter is evil and that the spirit is good.

[27 : 53] No. Matter, the created order, will be renewed. The body, our bodies will be made like Christ's glorious body.

We're not going to be disembodied spirits in the world to come. We're going to have bodies like Christ. But notice verse 27.

There's a warning not to miss out. Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable and false. Once again, it does not mean, obviously, that someone who makes lapses in these areas can never enter.

It's people who persistently, deliberately behave in a way that rejects the king of the world to come. Someone who is so wedded to Babylon, to the world, they will be destroyed with it, and whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

It is going to be glorious. The creation is going to be unimaginably beautiful. And what perhaps is more surprising, so are we, easier to imagine with some of us than others, but when we are like Christ, we will be all still gloriously different.

[29 : 12] But the person God created you to be, the true human he created you to be, will shine out in all its glory, in all its beauty, without illness, without sinfulness, and above all, without death.

don't miss out on your true destiny. Don't be among those who perish with Babylon. Be among those who rejoice in that city, in the presence of God and of the Lamb.

Amen. Let's pray. God, we know that we cannot begin to imagine the things you have prepared for us.

We know as well that only that will keep us going in the rough paths of life, in the world that is marked by mourning, crying, pain, and death.

And we pray, Lord, that each one of us here will look forward to that city, and by doing so, live more effectively, live lives that will tell in this world, and which will last into the world to come.

[30 : 27] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.