

FGBC: The Rider and the City: I'm not making all new things

Revelation 21:1-22:5

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When I was about 11 there were six kids in the neighbourhood who played together – three boys and three girls. And us boys had a gang. We were the Eagles. We made t-shirts – in fact I'm wearing the adult copy of our kid t-shirts. I was given this on my wedding day from those boys. It's a collector's item and you don't have enough money to buy it from me. Well, who am I kidding? Everything's for sale.

Anyway, our gang gave itself to two passion. The first was protecting the neighbourhood from crime. And this was epic. So we were air rifle packing military personnel and minibike riding daredevils and tree fort engineering survival experts. And we gave ourselves to protecting that country road by capturing man-eating garter snakes and watching out for suspicious vehicles – anyone who wasn't mom. It was fun!

But our second passion was more tangible and took more of our focus – and that involved keeping girls out of the club. Girls just complicate things.

Now before you change channels that was the 90's – girls were allowed to complicate things back then. I recognize that it's 2020 now which means I need some anecdotal evidence to back this statement up – and I've prepared some.

One day the six of us decided to play together and this meant we had to do what the girls wanted – it's funny how that happens. Anyway, this particular afternoon we gave ourselves to playing teenagers.

Now none of us had much experience with real teenagers but the oldest girl was 13 and that made her the authority and the rest of us entered a steep learning curve. Teenagers, I found out, did all sorts of things that boys had never done before. So the six of us spent the afternoon hiding out in closets making kissing sounds, stealing snacks, and running away from home. It was so traumatic that the next day the Eagles recommitted ourselves to our convictions – no girls. Wasn't childhood awesome?

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How about you? Can you remember some of the games you played as a kid? If you can then use the chat to give us a brief description of those games. It would be great to hear from you. Maybe you were a Lego engineer? Or maybe your bedroom was covered in Barbie weddings? What did you do with your imagination as a kid?

I'll give you 20 seconds to type that in, and while you are doing that if you could also grab your Bible and open to Revelation 21.

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If you are new with us today we have been walking through the last book in the Bible and today we are in our second last week. Today we are looking at the beginning of the Big Beginning after the end.

And at Lighthouse/Fort George we believe the Bible is God's word to us – we hold it in high esteem. So let's read Revelation 21 starting in verse 1 with that in mind.

[Read Revelation 21:1-22:5]

You may be seated.

One of the things we've talked about before at Lighthouse/Fort George is the already, but not yet of the kingdom. So, for example, Jesus started His ministry saying:

"The time promised by God has come at last!... The Kingdom of God has come near!" (Mark 1:15)

And this meant, now that Jesus was here, God was breaking onto our reality in a new way. And our access to abundant life had begun – we can live in that right now. But then Jesus turned around and said:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree (Matthew 13:31-32)

In other words there are parts to the Kingdom that aren't realized yet. There is more to come. So following Jesus is an already and not yet reality.

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Well in chapter 21 of Revelation we leave that seed behind and move firmly into the realm of the not yet. Here Jesus is giving John a picture of what is yet to come.

And so we are going to spend our time today talking about what isn't reality right now. This means we are going to dream and imagine the future.

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But hold on a minute. Isn't there enough going on in the world right now to take our focus? Should we even do this? Should we talk about the future? Isn't it better to live in the present and make the best of today?

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So you've probably had a couple different kinds of conversations lately – you've probably commiserated with someone about how you wish things would get back to normal. I know I've had that conversation.

I mean I miss the good old days of 6 weeks ago. I didn't used to eat nachos and watch movies every night. I used to go to the gym. That's living in the past.

And you've probably fantasized about what you are going to do when Coronavirus goes away. Maybe you're going to take that trip you canceled. Or like Nikki and I maybe you are dreaming about how awesome it will be to hire a babysitter and eat at a table that doesn't have macaroni smeared under it. Do I have a witness? Give me some feedback. What do you spend more time doing? Longing for the past or dreaming about the future? Fire that into the chat.

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Well, when I have those conversations inevitably I get challenged by some well adjusted person to live in the present. After all life is never going to be like it was before. And tomorrow never comes. So live in the now, the new normal.

And as much as I might want to punch those kinds of people in the gut they have a valid point – people who really live are those who live now, not those who live in yesterday or tomorrow.

And Jesus lived like this. He told people to trust God with the future and live in the now. He said:

Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:34)

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But Jesus also made plans. His big one was setting His face towards Jerusalem where He knew He was going to die. He didn't end up there by accident. It was His plan.¹ And so it's healthy and natural to live with an eye towards the future.

So the other day I was watching my kids play an exciting game of who-knows-what that involved a lot of shrieking. And at first I thought, "Oh to be a kid and fully caught up in the now." But then I remembered the Eagles and playing teenagers and I realized that even back then the "now" I played in was looking forward. We were imagining we were old – like 18.

And really everyone lives with an eye to the future. So even with the whole world shut down everyone expects to be around next week. And so as much as you might want to live in the now you still need to go grocery shopping.

And this carries over to every level of life. So even those who think the universe popped into existence out of nothing don't think that it is going to pop out of existence. We all think there is something more to come. Even Woody Allen once said, "I don't believe in the after life, but I am bringing a change of underwear."² So we all live with tomorrow on our minds. And ultimately tomorrow is eternity.

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Now here's the crazy thing. Canada is one of the most secular countries in the world and yet a pole by Angus Reid in 2017 found that 67% of Canadians believe that God or a higher power exists, and 60% of Canadians believe in life after death of some kind.³

But here we have a disconnect – people believe in tomorrow, and ultimately eternity's tomorrow, but instead of planning for it Canadians are just hoping everything works out in the end. And this is not the kind of living Jesus advocated for. He said "I'm coming back so give yourself to getting ready." Let your vision of the future change your now.

¹ See Luke 9:51

² Quoted from Darrell Johnson "Discipleship on the Edge" (pg 359)

³ <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadians-may-be-vacating-the-pews-but-they-are-keeping-the-faith-poll> (Accessed April 21, 2020)

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So let's do that. For the rest of our time today I want to make one major observation about this future, and then look at three things Jesus says will or won't be in eternity.

So first the observation: notice that what John sees is not the end of creation and the entry into an existence totally unlike the one we live in now. Instead he sees the re-creation of the world we are all familiar with.

So the One who is sitting on the throne doesn't say – verse 5 – “Look, I am making all new things.” He doesn't say that. Instead He says: “I am making everything new!” And then we see the New Jerusalem – the home of the people of God, coming down out of heaven to earth. What this means is ultimately we aren't going to heaven, heaven's coming here.

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This means heaven isn't going to be us sitting on clouds playing harps. We are getting new bodies and are going to really live in a real city. Friends, God created us as earth dwellers, and we are going to be earth dwellers forever.

And not only that, but we are going to be city slickers. The new creation isn't a return to the Garden, it's a trip to the city. Now there will be gardens in the city – the beginning of chapter 22 makes that clear – but we are destined for Jerusalem.

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Now two quick thoughts here: first, the initial recipients of this letter were from the seven cities we read about in chapters 2 and 3. So city life was familiar to them, and it's even more familiar to us. Currently 55% of the world's population lives in cities, and the UN's Department of Social Affairs says that is set to rise to 68% by 2050.⁴ It's almost like city life is in our blood.

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And yet as you hear this you probably have a little feeling of push back in your soul. And that's because there are aspects of the city that we all desire to get away from. Cities are full of pollution and crime and they always have been.

The first city in the Bible was built by Cain who had just killed Abel. And then we got Babel where people tried to climb to heaven without God. And then we got Babylon the prostitute and Rome. And now we've got Las Vegas and downtown Vancouver and Prince George the supposed crime capital of the world – or whatever. The cities humans have built have all been broken.

But this new city is going to be different because we aren't going to build it. New Jerusalem is God's new creation that is coming down out of heaven. It's something He does, not us – it's a gift of grace. And Jesus who built us says it is going to be awesome. So what do you think? What are the best things about city life that when perfected in eternity are going to be great? Throw your comment into the chat.

⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/17/two-thirds-of-global-population-will-live-in-cities-by-2050-un-says.html>
(Accessed April 23, 2020)

As an aside, you country bumpkins maybe put in a request for one of the river view mansions that chapter 22 talks about. Or maybe everyone gets a river view? Surly millennials won't be stuck renting basement suites. But it doesn't say.

What it does say is creation is going to be remade to enable us to be everything God created us to be in the beginning.

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Now Jesus enables John to notice several interesting things as He shows him New Jerusalem. Let me unpack three of them.

First, John notices there is no longer any sea – verse 1. Now I don't know how this hits you – I love the sea. I love the relentless surf. I love to sit inside and watch tropical lightning crash into the waves. I love the sea. So is John saying there isn't any large body of water in the new creation?

It's possible, but throughout scripture "the sea" is a picture of creation in chaos, living in opposition to God. And I think this is the point here. The sea was where Leviathan lived, and it was untameable. The sea rose up and threatened to drown the disciples while Jesus slept. And it was the sea that ultimately Jesus calmed. So it represented powers at work in the universe that threaten to undo us.

And this is what is going to be absent in the new creation – there will be no forces of chaos. So no wild fires or floods or pandemics – no natural chaos.

But also no human induced chaos. Everyone who lives in this creation will be made new. This means our sinful nature will finally be replaced with the nature of Christ – we are finally going to bear the family resemblance – isn't that going to be awesome!

And so every characteristic that is inconsistent with God's nature won't exist. And verse 8 gives us a list of these – it isn't an exhaustive list. But it sure gets at the heart of a lot of what's wrong with me – "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars won't be there.

I'm so glad that I'm going to be remade fully consistent with the One Book we looked at last week. I long for the day I can image Jesus perfectly and stop being what's wrong with the world. I long for no more chaos; I long for no more sea.

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Second, John notices God's new city doesn't have a temple. Now a bunch of quarantined PGers probably wouldn't even notice this but this would shock any first century Jew. A New Jerusalem without a temple?! Impossible.

The temple was where God met His people. The temple was the pride and joy of Israel. So what does this mean?

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Here's the point, human history is about God being in relationship with His people. That's why we exist. And when we broke the Garden that relationship was severed. And the temple was the way for us to get a glimpse of what we were missing. God dwelled in the Holy of Holies in the temple – this inner chamber. But we were separated from Him by a thick purple curtain and only the High Priest got to go in once a year.

But here's what we have to see: the separation was for our benefit. God's holiness would consume us. Moses once asked: "God, show me Your glory." And God responded:

I will make all My goodness pass before you.... But you may not look directly at My face, for no one may see Me and live. (Exodus 33:19-20)

Sinful people can't handle God's holiness. But this wasn't the design from the beginning. It was supposed to be intimacy – God with His people. And so when Jesus died the curtain was torn. Jesus paid the debt we owed and so God was able to break out of the Holy of Holies without killing His people.

And that was a huge step forward. And that's our "already." We can have a relationship with God. His Spirit can live inside us now. And if you haven't experienced that you need to ask Him for it. Let Jesus give you abundant life right now.

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But even with Jesus there was still a "Not yet" component to the kingdom. God has something more for us. Now we see through a glass dimly, but one day we will see face to face. That's the goal. And that's what we get in Revelation 21. Now the whole city is God's temple.

So look at verses 16 and 17 where John gives us the dimensions of the city. It's 12,000 stadia by 12,000 by 12,000. Now the point is not the size. The point is 12 – which is the number of God's people – times 1000, the number of perfect completion. There will be room for everyone. And it's a perfect cube – a bit strange, right?

Well the only other perfect cube in scripture is the temple's Holy of Holies, and this is the point. The whole city is the temple, and specifically it's the innermost part of the temple. So 22 verse 4 says that God's people will see Him face to face there. And the Lamb will be the lamp of the city.

This is what we were created for. Life with God is our ultimate good and His glory.

And so the final thing I want to draw out of John's vision today is that the tree of life is there. We get this at the beginning of chapter 22.

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And the word "life" here is the Greek word *zoe*, not the Greek word *bios*. Both these words mean life, but *bios* is the kind we inherit from our parents. It's great, but it runs down and eventually dies.

But zoe isn't like that. It never runs down. Zoe is the kind of life God has and is. This is the abundant life we were created for in the beginning. And God has always wanted to share Himself with us.

So why kick us out of the Garden? Because when we ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil we gained a kind of knowledge that made us independent from God. And so God kicked us out of the Garden to protect us from eating from the Tree of zoe. If we had then we would have been separated from Him forever. But now that sin and death have been dealt with God extends His life to us again. And there are rivers of it flowing through the city.

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Friends, here's the take-away: we don't just know who holds the future, we know what the future holds. We know that Jesus is coming back and He is going to make all things new. And this means Jesus followers aren't just playing teenagers with no idea about what the future is actually going to be like. We know that heaven is going to be a real place without pain or death or sorrow, and a place where we will be with God.

And God has a purpose in telling us this. It's like everything Jesus says about His return throughout the Gospels. "I'm coming back, so get ready." And this is what Jesus wants for us and from us today. He wants you to look at what is yet to come and so root out every area in your life that is inconsistent with this vision now.

And that's because the way we live right now matters. The trajectory we set ourselves on matters. So align yourself with the King. Look at the New Jerusalem, at the place we want to arrive, and allow Jesus' Spirit living in you to empower life change now.

So wherever you are right now think about what that means for you. Maybe you need to give yourself to living for Jesus' glory for the first time, or maybe you are a Christian but can see that there are still aspects of your life that aren't bringing Him glory right now. Maybe there is sin; maybe there are broken relationships. Maybe you've been hiding in the country wearing fig leaves and it's time to take a step towards life with Jesus. Wherever you are don't let this moment pass without a decision for action because how we live now matters.