

“The Gift You’ll Never Return” – Revelation Part 19
Revelation 21:1-7

As we all know, this has been an unparalleled year, with a wide array of challenges, uncertainties, suffering and loss. We continue to adapt in an effort to serve and safeguard others. But, of course, these adaptations have affected countless other dimensions of our lives – distance from family and loved ones; perhaps intensified grief in the midst of isolation as we recall all the more those who are not with us.

Even our efforts to find Christmas gifts for those we love have become more of a challenge, as many are leery of entering stores because of their compromised health or the health of others. And so online shopping has skyrocketed, causing many items to be more expensive, undeliverable before Christmas, or unavailable all together. In the midst of a trying year, these added hurdles, however small they may be, still compound our anxiety, frustration, discouragement, and disappointment.

But in the midst of this changed world around us, affecting you and me, those we love, and those we have yet to meet; I want to challenge us to shift our gaze – even if it’s the hundredths time – to that which is constant and sure no matter what changes around us. Today, I want us to consider the best of all gifts – how we can receive ours, and give it to everyone on our shopping list. There is literally no subject we can discuss of greater significance, for today and for eternity.

Jesus’ birth (and subsequent death & resurrection) were intended for a central purpose: to redeem and reconcile us to the Father, so that we might dwell with Him forever.

Jesus was born so we could be born again. He came to earth so we could go to heaven. He died so we could live. He was raised so we will be raised. He exchanged a crown for a cross, angels for shepherds, his throne for our thorns. He knew the meagerness of the manger, so that we could know the grandeur of his glory. [P]

So, let’s learn some facts about the eternity that Christmas offers us. 1. **Heaven is a real place.** V. 1 – *“I saw a new heaven and a new earth.”* John “saw” it. He didn’t feel it, or hear about it. John was graced to get a glimpse of the heaven and earth to

come. And if we wonder if the new heaven & earth is just a symbol, an image, just remember Jesus' words: "*In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.*" (John 14.2).

A note on v. 1: "*The first heaven and earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.*" I have heard folks say, "Ahh, I love the sea!" But the message here is not an absence of the oceans in the New Creation, but rather the absence of what the sea symbolized. In ancient cultures, the sea was associated with evil, chaos and death – "going down to the abyss." For those who are afraid you won't get to enjoy the beach (though worrying about being disappointed in heaven is rather ridiculous), there are other passages in Revelation where the sea appears positively (Rev. 5 & 15).

But what I don't want us to miss is an important contrast here. The *sea of death* is gone. What do we find in its place? The *river of life!* Verse 6 – "*To the thirsty, I will give water at no cost [we call that grace] from the spring of the water of life.*" The beginning of chapter 21 points to the *end* of chaos. Then the beginning of chapter 22 points to the *endlessness* of joy – "*The angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal [purity] flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb [the Source of our purity and life] down the middle of the great street of the city [right there at the center, where the people dwell with their God!]*" Which brings us to ...

2. Heaven is the place where God dwells. Jesus taught us to pray, "*Our Father who art in heaven*" (Mat. 6:9). But God is not content for Him to be there and for us to be here – in a fallen, fractured world groaning for its redemption. And so, our God will make all things new – including heaven and earth, and will restore the union that was broken by our sin.

Revelation 21 tells us something profound. It's not only that we go to be with God in heaven when we die. At the consummation of all things, God will remake all and bring his dwelling place to us! Look at Vs. 2 & 3 – "*I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... God's dwelling place is now*

among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.”

Should this be hard for the Christian to accept? After all, God has come to dwell w/ us once already. John 1:14 – *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* And the day is coming when our King will return, bringing the new heaven and earth with him; and we, His Bride, will dwell with him forever.

Did you catch that about the Bride? V. 2 – *“The New Jerusalem ... prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”* Some might say that this is just imagery describing the new heavenly city. But there is more going on here. Just as Jerusalem in the OT usually included the people and not simply the geographical site, the New Jerusalem undoubtedly includes the people of God. The New Jerusalem is called the Bride – and in case there was any doubt about this bride, we simply need to jump to v. 10 – *“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”* So, the New Jerusalem is a place, but it is occupied by Christ and the beloved of Christ – His Church!

3. Heaven is a blessed place. V. 4 – *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”* Because our God is there, all that is perfect is there as well. And all that is not will be gone forever – all the fears, all the doubts, all the grief ... *all* of it.

There is joy in heaven: *“You will make known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand”* (Ps 16:11)

There is celebration in heaven: *“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God”* (Luke 14:15).

We will reign in heaven: *“To the one who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father ...”* (3:21).

We'll have perfect understanding in heaven: *"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known"* (1 Cor. 13:12).

Heaven is the place of blessing beyond all description: *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what the Lord has prepared for those who love him."*

There was once a man who died and went to heaven. Walking around, he was shocked at some of the people he saw there—people he never expected to find in heaven. Then he noticed the look on their faces—they were shocked to see him as well! [Pause]

So, who are those who will dwell with the King in the new heaven and earth? [P] We discovered the answer a few weeks ago: *"If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"* (20:15). But for those written in the book of life, purchased by the blood of the Lamb, they will be with him forever: *"Those who are victorious will be dressed in white. I will never blot out their names from the book of life, but will acknowledge their names before my Father"* (Rev. 3:5).

The rich young ruler kept all the commandments, so he thought. And yet, he left Jesus sad. The Pharisees were zealous for the law in every detail. Yet they rejected the Messiah. Conversely, David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the murder of her husband Uriah. And yet he knew that he would *"dwell in the house of the Lord forever"* (Psalm 23:6), despite his sin. Because he walked in repentance and faith ... in surrender and trust ... in dependence and devotion.

We can dwell in the house of the Lord forever as well, but only if we have asked Jesus to take us there ... *"I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"* (Jn. 14:3). Have you found forgiveness in the One who died for you ... New life in the One who rose for you ... Eternal hope in the One who returns for you?

If the answer is yes, then let me ask you another question: Who are you to God? Our final verse reveals the answer: *"Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children."* At first glance, this may seem like a repetition of verse 3 – *"They will be His people, and God Himself will be their God."*

Repeating this phrase would make sense, since this is the key language of the Covenant that God made with His people throughout the Old Testament. But here in chapter 21, as the final book of God’s Word draws to a close, God makes a significant distinction – “*They will inherit all this ... they will be my children.*” Not only does our covenantal God, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, call us His people ... through the gift of His Son, He has made us *His children* – children of the King, who will share in His kingdom!

We see glimpses of this royal reality throughout the New Testament. Listen to these words of promise for those who are victorious in Christ:

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (Ja. 1:12).

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

Why are we, sinners deserving of death, able to receive the crown of life? Because of the grace of God, the work of Christ, the gift of faith, and the life marked by surrender.

So as those who have received the gift of life eternal – as those who will one day dwell in the perfect presence of our Father and King, the One who will make all things new ... how do we live *right now*, so that we can overcome and be victorious, and be crowned with His life and righteousness? [P]

By walking each day in dependence on the Spirit of Christ – enduring persecution, resisting temptation; running hard after the lost; staying faithful to God’s purpose; serving God’s people in love. Live for these. Jesus said, “*Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.*” (Mat. 6:20). These are rewards which last forever. [P]

What will you give the people you love this year? For the guys you know, there’s a watch with a strap made out of duct tape—waterproof, of course. For birdwatchers on

your list, there's a sound amplifier focused on birdcall frequencies – “binoculars for the ears.” For every husband, there's a remote control which connects through the internet to control 255 operations at once ... These are all gifts you can live without.

Here's one you cannot. Here's the Christmas gift Jesus came to give you: If you have made him your Lord, your name is in his book of life, and heaven is yours forever. [P] This is the gift you will never return. [P] Are you ready, today? [P] Are you using your life to help others be ready tomorrow?