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Riverside Covenant Church
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Perfection to Perfection – Revelation 21:1-8**

This is our final Sunday in the E100 and next week we will be beginning a new sermon series from the book of Galatians. You are probably familiar with the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5. There is a whole list of wonderful characteristics that the Holy Spirit enables Jesus followers to have. But that is not what our sermon series is going to be on. Immediately before all those good things there is a list of 12 things that Paul calls, **“the acts of the sinful nature.”** This is what our next sermon series is going to be on. Those particular sins that are difficult for us to overcome.

And I want to give you a heads up because the first sin on this list is “sexual immorality.” Next week we are going to be talking about sexual immorality and some parts of the sermon might not be appropriate for your kids depending on their age. I am going to call the sermon PG-13. We are going to talk about sex frankly, so if you think that might not be appropriate for your kids and they are usually in the service with you . . . then please plan to have them downstairs for Children's Church. If you are unsure or have other questions, please feel free to talk to me.

This morning we come to the end of the E100 Bible Reading Plan. And I have probably said it 25 times now, but we had two goals when we began: we wanted you to develop a daily habit of reading the Word of God and we wanted you to gain a picture of the whole Bible, the story of God.

This morning we finish up and arrive at the very end of the Bible, the book of Revelation.

I have probably told you this story before too . . . but I like it so I am going to tell it again. There is a story of a group of seminary students from a prestigious seminary that used to play basketball together at a local gym. Every week when they played a janitor would let them into the gym and then stick around for the hour or two while they played so that he could lock up when they left. While the students played the janitor would sit in the bleachers and read his Bible. One day one of the students went over to the janitor to see what he was reading. The janitor was reading the book of Revelation. The student was very shocked by this and proceeded to talk about how difficult the book of Revelation is. He commented that many of his professors do not even agree on how to interpret the book. He then asked the janitor whether he understood it. And the janitor, without hesitation, said, “oh, yes.” The seminary student was

shocked. “Well, what do you think it means?” The janitor looked up, somewhat confused with the students confusion, and said, **“it means that Jesus is going to win!”**

For all of the metaphors and symbolism and wild interpretations that people assign to the book of Revelation, it simply tells the story, through a vision that John received, that Jesus and God are going to win in the end. And we can debate all we want about how that is going to happen . . . but what really matters for you and me is that Jesus wins.

I want to accomplish a couple things this morning. First, I want to talk about our text in Revelation 21 and as we do that I also want to connect this end of the story to the full story that we have spent 20 weeks on. Where have we come from and where have we ended up?

So let's begin by reading our text for this morning. **Read Revelation 21:1-8.**

There are 22 chapters in the book of Revelation and our passage comes from chapter 21 so this is literally towards the very end of the Bible. The book is written by John, the same guy that wrote the Gospel of John and the John letters. He wrote the book of Revelation after having a vision and the book is simply a retelling of what was revealed to him by God through that vision.

This is evident in our passage as it begins with, **“Then I saw. . .”** The passage begins with **“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”**

The first heaven and the first earth are what we know. They are what God created in Genesis. In this you begin to see the bookends on the story of God. Remember where we started 20 weeks ago in Genesis 1. There the Bible begins in chapter 1, verse 1, **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”**

And along the way, almost in the center of our Bibles, in the book of Isaiah there is a prophecy of what is to come . . . Isaiah says in chapter 65, **“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth.”** And he goes on to tell of what life will be like in the new heavens and the new earth.

We know in the story of God that after God created the heavens and the earth in the beginning that he also created us, human beings. But as the story continued, we abused our God-given ability to choose

and chose to pursue things other than God. We chose to sin. And when we made this choice a whole new world of tragic possibilities entered into our existence. Work and pain became a part of our daily reality. Death and destruction and hardship and struggle became a part of what life would mean for us.

All of creation was affected by this. If it was not obvious that all of creation was affected in the Garden of Eden, it became obvious when God flooded the whole earth killing all of creation, every living thing, except for Noah, his family, and the animals that Noah had gathered with them upon the ark. The whole earth was devastated by humans' choice to choose themselves over God . . . to choose what was wrong over what was right.

What becomes very clear very early in the Bible, though, is that God does not give up on us. Sure, humans give up on God over and over again, but God never gives up on us. And so later in the book of Genesis, God again steps into the story in a powerful way and says to Abraham in Genesis 12, **“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

God chooses Abraham for his faithfulness and decides to raise up a group of people from him that will be his witnesses to the world of who God is. And so the story continues through Abraham and his son, Isaac, and his son, Jacob. And over time the descendents of Abraham become God's chosen people, the Israelites. **We can't forget what God is doing though.** God is setting apart a group of people so that through them he can demonstrate who He is, with the goal that others will come to faith in him. **He wants to use the Israelites to bring humanity back to Himself.**

We see this purpose even in God's words to Abraham. He says, **“I will bless those who bless you.”** Others will be blessed based upon their reception of Israel. Israel is God's witness to the world. God wants the nations to see His awesome power and love through Israel.

But as we continue into the story we know that Israel is not always a great witness. We get idols and murder and infidelity and lying, cheating and stealing . . . and about every other type of sin that you can think of. **The chosen people of God eventually find themselves in Egypt as slaves to the Egyptians.** But

again God intervenes and rescues them only to have them wander in the desert again questioning whether being God's chosen people is really worth it.

All along God has promised that he would give the Israelites a piece of land that they could eventually settle on and be a nation. **Moses leads them to the brink of this land, but it is Joshua that finally leads them into it.**

Israel's up and down relationship with God does not end when they get their land, though. It just changes. They fight with other nations and even split themselves. And we won't continue on through this history in detail, but you know the **Bible heroes that pop up. Samuel** who is a mighty judge and prophet. **David** who is God's people's second and greatest King. **Solomon** who builds the first temple for the worship of God. Then we get the **Psalms** that are hymns of prayer to God and **Proverbs** that are the wisdom of God imparted to us. Then we get the **prophets** that remind God's people of their sin and point to destruction, but ultimately a new future that includes a Messiah that will come as Isaiah refers to as the **“suffering servant.”**

This Messiah will come to save humanity once and for all from the effects of their sin. He will end sin's reign on the world and the power of death.

Then for at least 400 years, there are no prophets . . . it seems that God has gone silent in his communication with His people. Then a guy named John shows up eating locusts and wild honey in the desert. John comes as **“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, “prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”**

Jesus is coming and arrives. For 3 years he ministers through teaching and healing not just to the Jews, but to all people. **He calls people to repent from their sinfulness and to seek forgiveness through him. He promises them and us eternal life if we do so.** He gathers 12 people and teaches and trains them to connect others with God. Then all Jesus followers watch as he submits to his death and dies on a cross.

Jesus' followers' hope for freedom from their sin and the frustration and destruction of their world seems lost. But then three days later as a few women are going to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body . . . they see that the tomb is empty. Jesus is gone, but over the next few days he appears to his closest

followers explaining that he has risen and has defeated death. **He has begun a process that will lead to the annihilation of all that is evil in the world. He again calls his followers to be witnesses to what God can do. Jesus tells his apostles in Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations."**

And so after Jesus ascends into heaven, his followers begin to gather other believers and the church is formed as a new Israel. The churches, gatherings of God's followers, become God's new instrument of witness in the world as Israel had been 100's of years earlier. We thus get early church leaders such as Paul and Timothy and in the Bible we hear about them through all of the letters that were written to the churches concerning various issues and concerns.

As the church begins, the faithful eagerly anticipate Jesus' return when our rescue from the broken earth that we caused will be complete. A couple weeks ago we spoke about 1 Thessalonians and how some people were so excited about Jesus' return that they were doing nothing . . . just looking up into the sky hoping that it would come soon. **But while we can't wait when all of this will be finished, we also know we have a job to do here by helping others to know God.**

Today, we are still in this church period of the story of God. We are here in the already, but not yet. Jesus has already come and begun God's reign on earth, but it is not finished yet. We are redeemed, made clean, forgiven for our sins through belief in Jesus, but our earth still wrecks of sin. We feel its effects and it still causes us, despite our belief in Jesus, pain and grief and struggle and hardship.

This will not always be the case though. And this is where we arrive at Revelation. And back to our first verse in our passage, 21:1. This first heaven and first earth that God created in Genesis and still exists affected by our sin will pass away, and a new heaven and new earth will come into existence.

Now there is some theological debate of course about how exactly this will happen, particularly about whether the current heaven and earth will be destroyed and something new will be created from scratch or whether God will just make what we have new again, but the point is that God will make new. No longer will we have to struggle through hardship and pain and sorrow and everything else that became a part of our lives when we sinned. All will be made right and new. That is awesome!

The second part of verse one says, **“and there was no longer any sea.”** This is a reference to Revelation 13 where the anti-Christ or the beast comes from the sea. **The point is that when everything is made new, even the source of evil or the opposition to God will be wiped away.** It will be gone. There will be no evil in the new order of existence.

The next portion of our passage is amazing imagery of what this moment will look like for the faithful. Starting with verse 2, **“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”** The mind of the John's first readers would have understood the mention of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the worship center for the Jews. But this “new” Jerusalem is not an earthly metropolis but all believers gathered together in the new universe.

It comes down from heaven, from God. **The new Jerusalem is not built by human hands.** I like how one commentator describes the new Jerusalem. **“It does not emerge from the earth, the product of human ingenuity, industry and achievement; it is the creation of God, the ultimate realization of God's redemptive purpose of calling a people to belong to him – a purpose which was announced prominently in the Exodus, restated again and again throughout the Old Testament, fulfilled in Christ and now consummated in the intimate fellowship of the community of the Holy City of God.”**

This vision of the New Jerusalem, a holy city of believers united by and in Christ, is the culmination of the biblical story. It is the perfect community that centers on perfect union with God and with each other. It was the image of creation in the Garden before the Fall. Perfect relationship with God and with each other.

The imagery that is used is that of a marriage. And it is deeply loving and affectionate. It is the imagery of the Song of Solomon that paints the clearest picture of what this love looks like.

“How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead.” And later it says in the Song of Solomon, **“I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me.”**

And Revelation continues by painting a picture of what this relationship between us and God will look like. Verse 3, **“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! 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.”

A few weeks ago Adelaide asked Dana if God would help her. And Dana of course responded that God would help her. And so Adelaide asked, “O.K. then where is God?” And Dana did the best she could and told her that God was in her heart and in heaven. Adelaide quickly responded, **“I don't want God in my heart, I want him to come out so that he can help me.”**

As Jesus came down from heaven and put on our flesh and dwelled among us . . . at the end of the age we are told that God will make his dwelling place among the people. God will again come to be with us in a way that is more present than through the Holy Spirit.

And verse 4 tells us what God will do amongst us, **“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.”**

And God reiterates in verse 5, **“I am making everything new!”** He continues then in 6, **“It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”**

A new world is painted by which God again will make everything right for those that acknowledge and trust him.

But he ends too with a warning for those that do not. **“But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”**

In John's vision the relationship of God and believers is depicted as a marriage and for those that are married to God they will be united in a glorious and intimate event like a wedding. But for those that have chosen another groom other than Christ, the consequences are severe, eternally severe. For those that do not choose God, they get what they wanted . . . the absence of God.

But for those of us that choose our creator and maker, our savior, our God . . . a wonderful new world is created for us. A new existence that is perfect. Where there are no tears, there is no death or pain . . . only God and his infinite goodness.

This story of God that we have been studying for the past 20 weeks is ultimately a story of God's victory over evil and sin. **The lesson for us in this final book of Revelation is that God wins.** It is a story of God's triumph on our behalf over all the things we despise in our world today – pain, suffering, mourning, death - and an invitation to be in community with God. An invitation to be a part of God's work to overcome sin and a plea to help others to see this plan. An invitation to be God's people to have God be our God.

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