



#20: Revelation: Earth and Heaven United

Bible Readings: Revelation 21 & 22

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PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

We have reached the **final session** of this 20-part exploration of God's covenants with his people through the Bible. As we turn to the final pages, in the last chapters of **Revelation**, it is natural to want to delve into this fascinating book as a whole – to wonder at the prophecies or try to interpret the colourful images. But please bear in mind that Revelation can be easily mis-interpreted, and there must remain a sense of mystery throughout. We will be concentrating on the very end, as a climax of the journey we have been on: Creation, Noah, Abraham, Moses, The Prophets, Christ's arrival, teaching, death and resurrection, the birth of the church, and the teachings of Paul and Hebrews on the New Covenant. All of these can be summed up with the words of **Jeremiah 31:33** "*I will be their God, and they shall be my people*" – words echoed in **Revelation 21:3**. Please pray for moments of enlightening and revelation for your group members, and for God's Spirit to continue to work in their lives – bringing comfort and hope – until you meet again.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS (before the session)

In a time of quiet reflection before the session, consider these questions: *Have you enjoyed this series? What have been the highlights for you? What have you learned? How would you sum up God's purposes in giving us the covenants? What does a covenant mean to you? Are you in any way thinking differently now about your relationship with God? What has been helpful? What questions do you still have?*

As a little recollection exercise, see how many of the themes of this series you can write down. If you need help, please look through the previous issues. *How would you summarise the message of each one?*

STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER (based on Psalm 139)

O LORD, you have searched us and known us.
You know when we sit down and when we rise up; you discern our thoughts from far away.
Where can we go from your Spirit, or flee from your presence?
In the heights of heaven or the depths of the earth, you are there;
in light and darkness, your love shines on.
We are fearfully and wonderfully made: designed and knitted together by you.
We praise you; for all your works are wonderful.
From Day One, you write our days in your book.
Your thoughts for us outnumber the grains of sand on the earth.
We come to the End – you are still with us.
Search us, O God; know our hearts and our thoughts;
reveal your heart to us, and lead us in the Way everlasting; in the name of Jesus, your Son. **Amen.**

FINDING OUR ROOTS – some questions to explore in small groups

Please reflect together on the series – and share your answers to some of the 'PREPARATION' questions.

READING THE SCRIPTURES with background information

Revelation is a mysterious book, never fully understood! The author is called **John**, but scholars are uncertain (and many doubt) whether this was the apostle John, or same person who wrote 'John's Gospel'. He was in exile on the Island of Patmos, and describes his vivid and intense spiritual vision. The book starts with an introduction, and **letters from Jesus** to seven churches (**ch.1-3**); It then moves behind the great curtain to give us glimpses into God's throne-room with magnificent heavenly worship. As different things are revealed, we get a sense of building towards God's future purposes coming to pass (**ch.4-11**). We are then shown a great battle between good and evil (**ch.12-18**), culminating in God's victory declared and the arrival of Christ on a white horse (**ch.19**). Jesus is described in many ways, most commonly **the Lamb** (emphasising his sacrifice). The enemies are described in different ways too, notably '**Babylon**' (code for 'the Empire', the oppressive kingdoms of the world), and behind them all is the accuser, **the Satan**, a **dragon**. All are eventually destroyed, before the completion of God's salvation purposes: heaven and earth are joined together, a **New Jerusalem** appears, and God is finally united with his people (**ch.21-22**).

Written at a time *after* the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (AD 70), the visions of worship and glimpses into God's heavenly throne-room might have been a comfort to any who worried that God's purposes had come to a devastating end. So too, for Christians at a time of great persecution, the visions of the destruction of the great powers and enemies (sin, death, the devil, and the Empire) would have been very encouraging.

Read together the Bible passages: Revelation 21:1-7, and Revelation 21:22-27.

After the terror and turmoil of the previous apocalyptic chapters, chapters 21 and 22 bring us to **a happy finale**. It is a vision of peace and healing, and of tears being wiped away. It is like **a wedding**: the bride revealed for her husband, and an image of the joining together of earth and heaven. The former separation is gone. In the relationship forged here, we see **the fulfilment of all the covenants**, and God's longing to be at one with his creation. There is a sense too of God's will being restored: evil things are banished, and the people live by God's light alone (not only a physical light, but a metaphor for God's goodness and love).

Jesus is at the centre of all that happens in Revelation. He is always the focal point around which the events and battles take place. Yet the vision seems to have room for all creation, all humanity, while the forces of evil and death are destroyed for ever. Christ as **King of Kings and Lord of Lords** seem to reach above and beyond any narrow description of him. His reign is over all creation (rather like expressed in **Philippians 2:5-11** and **Colossians 1:15-20**). In the last chapter, there is an encouraging vision for healing of the nations around the restored **Tree of Life**. It is a reminder that God's purposes are for the welfare and care of all.

Read together the Bible passage: Revelation 22:1-5.

DIGGING DEEPER – some questions for you to consider in your group:

Does anything **surprise you** about these passages from the Bible's last book?

Do you have a vision of **our final destination**, or the 'new creation'? Where do we get our ideas from?

What words would you use to describe the pictures painted for us in these passages of Revelation?

A lot of Revelation focuses on judgement, and the battle between good and evil. Yet these passages seem to emphasise **healing**. Do you find it encouraging or comforting to see healing as part of God's plans?

Which connections can you see with the '**Covenant**' passages we have looked at previously?

PRAYING TOGETHER

Sing or read together '**There is a higher throne**' (*Singing the Faith*, 337). Pray for your group, your church, your community, and all in need. Pray for the world, with hope that good will defeat evil, and God's love will have the final word. Finish with **The Lord's Prayer** together.

COVENANT LIVING: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE (to think about afterwards)

Read the start the Bible (**Genesis 1:1 - 2:9**) and then read the final chapter fully (**Revelation 22**). Think about all that has happened in between, and the journey we have been on from Creation to New Creation. **Now think about it as like a tree**: its roots being the old covenant and the prophets, but its shoot is Christ, growing first as a sapling, but then the protecting cover is removed and the trunk gains strength, putting out branches to bless the whole earth. The leaves and the root may look very different, but they are all part of the whole. **So it is with God's Covenant purposes.** (*Grateful thanks to Anita Beer for this illustration.*)