

The Return of the King **(Revelation 21-22)**

Introduction

They are **stories** that all begin with the **same four words**:
“Once upon a time”

The **scene is set** – but then **complications and difficulties follow** as the **plot unfolds**. Little Red Riding Hood sets out to visit her sick grandmother but a wolf replaces her in bed. Will little Red Riding Hood be fooled by the disguise and eaten by the wolf? Thankfully (to cut a short story short), a passing woodcutter intervenes and dispatches the wolf and, depending on which version you follow, frees grandma from the wardrobe in which she has been locked or from the stomach of the wolf.

The story ends– as do all these stories – with the **same seven words**:
“And they all lived happily ever after”.

We call them ***“fairy stories”***. But there is a **true story**, an ultimate story – **the big story** (which the plotlines of all other stories poorly reflect). It is the **story of the Bible** – sixty-six books, forty authors, written over nearly 2000 years, yet behind it all a divine editor and a unifying theme.

Here's an **image** showing the interconnection of 63,700 cross-references in the Bible. Jordan Peterson, the Canadian author references this image in a lecture and suggested that the Bible is the first hypertext!

Over these past 7 weeks in Hope City, we have **exploring the story of the Bible** under the theme of **the kingdom of God** which we have defined as

GOD’S RULE

**OVER GOD'S PEOPLE
IN GOD'S CREATION
BY GOD'S PLAN
IN GOD'S TIMING**

We began with the **beginning of the story** in the first lines of the **first book** in the Bible: not, “*once upon a time*” but
“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1)

We saw how **paradise was lost** due to human rebellion against God and, over the past six weeks, we have explored the plotline, seeing how the **kingdom ebbed and flowed** reaching its **fulfilment** in the **arrival of Jesus the King**, which we have been following in the account of his life in our longer series in the Gospel of Matthew, as he announced:
“Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” (Matthew 4:17)

Next week, we are scheduled to **resume the story in Matthew 13** with a series of **parables** Jesus told each beginning with the words, “*The kingdom of heaven/God is like*”, describing its nature and growth.

But the followers of Jesus pray, as he taught them, “*Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven*”, recognising that the **final fulfilment**, the **end of the story**, has **not yet arrived**.

But it is **described and promised** (not surprisingly) in the **final book of the Bible** – the Book of **Revelation (Revelation 1:1)**. It is a record of what was revealed to a man named John, the last survivor of the twelve disciples Jesus chose when he was on earth. All the rest are dead – mostly martyred (along with many thousands of others) for their faith in Jesus.

John himself is incarcerated on the prison island of Patmos (the ancient version of Alcatraz), when he **receives his revelation** from the **risen Lord Jesus Christ in all his glory**.

It is a **message of reassurance** to John and his fellow first-century believers: that **despite the terrible oppression and suffering** they are

facing, the **final outcome is assured** through **Jesus** who is pictured both as the **Lamb** who won the victory through his sacrificial death, and the **Lion** who is the ultimate victor over sin and death and all his enemies.

But it is also a message of **reassurance to 21st century believers** as it was to **every generation of believers** from the first century onwards, **awaiting the return of the King** who promises ***“I am coming soon”***. The word ***“soon”*** does not primarily mean in a short period of time but ***“quickly, suddenly, certainly”***.

When I read a great story and become emotionally engaged with the characters in it and wondering what the final outcome will be, I am sometimes tempted to **skip to the last chapter for reassurance** - that the hero or heroine will survive and triumph and that the baddies will get their just rewards.

The Book Revelation allows us, encourages us, to do this. So, let's read the description of the **final “happily ever after” scene**. We'll read from the final two chapters of Revelation and then conclude with the **final five verses of the book**.

As we do so, bear in mind that Revelation is a particular kind of literature with symbols and numbers and images that are not be taken literally, but are representative of something else.

Revelation 21: 1-5

Revelation 22:1-5

(page 1249 in the church blue bibles and keep them open for the rest of this message)

I have struggled long and hard to know how and what to comment on these verses. When in 1922, archaeologist Howard Carter peered into a hole in the wall of a tomb in Egypt's Valley of the Kings and was asked by his sponsor, Lord Carnarvon, *“Do you see anything?”*, he simply replied, *“Yes, wonderful things.”*

Wonderful though the treasures of Tutankhamun, revealed for the first time in over 3000 years are, they are **nothing compared with what was revealed to the apostle John** and described to us in these verses.

In them, he describes **two new wonderful things**. First of all,
A NEW CREATION

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (Revelation 21:1)

We saw that the first book of the Bible begins with these words:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

Now in the last book of the Bible that this old creation has been replaced by **a new creation – a new heaven and a new earth**. It is not certain whether this describes a **totally new creation** (with the total destruction of the old) or a **renewed creation** – a complete restoration of our present decaying and devastated world. Think of those TV programmes where a group of experts take over a ruined property and restore it to its former glory.

In Romans 8 the apostle Paul describes creation itself “*groaning as in the pains of childbirth*”, “*waiting in eager expectation*” to be “*liberated from its bondage to decay*”,

The report that that “*there was no longer any sea*” is not to be taken **literally** – that there will be no oceans and marine life - but **symbolically** for the sea in the Bible is regarded as a place of unpredictable power and danger and even death.

Such fears will be absent in the new creation. There will be now ecological dangers or disasters. This will be a real and total green restoration – **a perfect new heaven and earth**.

And, linked in with this new creation, is a second wonderful thing:

A NEW JERUSALEM

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelation 21:1)

The old Jerusalem was the capital city of the nation of Israel where God had chosen to be present among his chosen people and where they could approach him through the sacrifices offered at the temple.

But it is almost certain that, when John received his vision, both city and temple had been reduced to rubble by the invading Roman army in AD70.

But now there is the **promise of a new Jerusalem** – not from the ground up but **from heaven down** – *“the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”*

Unlike the physical city in Israel, this new Jerusalem is not made up of bricks and mortar but of **people**. In his commentary on Revelation, Paul Gardner writes,

*Jerusalem stands as a symbol for God’s people gathered as the church. This is a **Holy City** because God’s people are perfected for eternity.*

The church is pictured as a beautiful bride prepared for her husband. So, if I can put it in metaphorical terms, **where** will the newly married couple **make their home? In the new creation.**

Living in the new creation

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. (Revelation 21:3)

In his book, *“God’s Big Picture – tracing the storyline of the Bible”* (the course for which we are offering at present), Vaughan Roberts comments:

...there will be no special place in the new creation where God’s presence will be concentrated and no holy building to go to if we want

to meet with him. The whole place is a temple. That is why we read, 'I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple' (21:22). There will be no distance between us and God any more; we shall know him perfectly.

So there will be complete happiness and the absence of anything to threaten it:

Living in the new creation

'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.' (Revelation 21:4)

There will be no bad news to report of wars and famine and earthquakes and floods, suffering and sadness, bereavement and death, no more graveyards or crematoria.

All of these things are the consequences which flow from human rebellion in the garden of Eden. But in the **opening section of chapter 22** which we read (and we can only touch on very briefly) everything is put right. Our Bibles entitle this section ***“Eden restored”***.

The river of the water of life flows through the central street of the city, along with *“the tree of life”* from which Adam and Eve were banished now producing fruit to bring about healing and harmony among the nations.

The population of the new creation will be not be restricted to the people of Israel but will be made up of many peoples, described earlier in Revelation chapter 7

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They

were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

*“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”
(Revelation 7:9-10)*

We are privileged here in Hope City to be a small microcosm, united together with people from many nations, our praise a choir-practice for the real thing!.

And the **curse** which was imposed as God’s just judgement on human rebellion is **removed** through the **death of Jesus** who **bore that curse on our behalf on his cross**. His redeemed people will enjoy **intimate fellowship** with him in eternal light: *“and they will reign for ever and ever.”*

So God’s great plan for his kingdom is finally and fully completed.

GOD’S RULE
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Or in the words of Revelation 11:15

*“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.”
(Revelation 11:15)*

Wonderfully expressed in Handel’s Messiah and the Hallelujah Chorus.

-So that is the end – the wonderful, glorious end of the story (and we have barely scratched the surface). It took Howard Carter 10 years to complete his exploration of Tutankhamun’s tomb and catalogue the

hundreds of objects that he found but it will take eternity for us to explore and enjoy all that God has promised to those who belong to him.

So this is the **final scene at the end of the story** But it has **not yet happened** for there is **one more key event** in the divine timetable: our theme today:

THE RETURN OF THE KING

Three times in chapter 22, Jesus says the same words:

“I am coming soon! (Revelation 22: 7, 12, 20)

So what should be our priorities in view of this coming event?

Look with me at the final part of Revelation 22 which the NIV describes as an *“Epilogue”* and the last 5 verses..

Note **three final things**:

A FINAL INVITATION

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life (Revelation 22:17)

Here is **an invitation to the thirsty** - a promise of life-giving water, eternal life-giving water, so that those who drink will never thirst again.

In the Gospel of John we read the account of Jesus speaking to a woman at a well, a woman who had spent her life in multiple relationships but was still thirsty. He said to her,

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:13-14)

Today, the Lord Jesus Christ makes **extends that invitation through both the Spirit and the bride**. It is offered **by the Spirit** who speaks

to the heart and mind and conscience of the individual. But it is also offered **through the bride** - the church of Jesus Christ - through human lips and lives and feet who bring the good news of salvation. This **gospel invitation** should be the **priority of every church**.

It is **offered to the individual** ("*whoever is thirsty*") and must be **received** by the individual ("*whoever wishes, let him take...*"). So, **are you thirsty?** Have you **received by faith the gift that is freely offered to you?** It is a "*free gift*" but it is **not a cheap gift**. It was paid for when the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. He cried, "*I am thirsty!*" so that we need never thirst again.

Now he graciously **invites us to come to him** and find complete satisfaction:

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

This is a **matter of the greatest importance** -. But it is also a matter of **greatest urgency because this offer will not last for ever**. Why? Because the one who makes it says: "*I am coming soon.*"

He will come suddenly and unexpectedly. So, the **invitation to the thirsty is a matter of urgency** - for **those who proclaim it** ("the bride") and **those to whom it is offered**.

Are you **still thirsty** – looking for satisfaction but not finding it. In his famous book "Mere Christianity". C.S. Lewis writes

If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.

For those who are **members of his bride**, the return of Jesus is a **wonderful promise**. For those who have **not yet received the gift**, the prospect of the imminent **return of Jesus is a warning**.

A FINAL WARNING

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll. (Revelation 22:18-19)

In relation to human history and his plan of salvation, **God has nothing more to say - this is his final revelation.** There have been, and still are, **those who want to add to what God has revealed** - further revelations which go beyond what is written here, **further events** which go beyond what is revealed here.

And there have been, and still are, **those who want to take away from what God has revealed** - things which they find unpalatable or unacceptable to the modern mind. Perhaps the litmus test is the very issue of the personal, bodily and visible return of Jesus to earth which some seek to spiritualise or demythologise or even say that it has already happened. Yet, as C. S. Lewis once wrote:

If this is not an integral part of the faith once given to the saints, I do not know what is.

There is only **one further event to come** in the story, in the divine timetable – the **return of Jesus.**

If you **believe** this, if you are **longing** for this, then in response you will want to **affirm it in a**

A FINAL PRAYER

*He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.(Revelation 22*

When you become a Christian, you begin to **see things as God sees them and to feel as he feels about things.** You see the desperate wickedness of your own heart, and the terrible things which human beings do to each other and to God’s creation. So, as the Apostle Paul puts it, *“we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit **groan** inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”*

Were there **no prospect for the future**, no future hope, no day when all the wrongs will be put right, **then we would be filled with despair.**

Yet the **promise of Jesus gives us hope** - future hope - that all the things he has spoken about will come true and that one day he will return.

So, the promise is affirmed a third and last time in these verses:

Revelation 22:20 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

And **our response**, our longing, is to **affirm the certainty of his coming** - "**Amen.**" and to **pray and cry out for it: "Come, Lord Jesus"**. in its Aramaic form - "**Maranatha** - *Come, O Lord!*" (1 Corinthians 16: 22). As one writer comments:

The only remedy for all this mass of misery is the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why do we not plead for it every time we hear the clock strike?

Perhaps we **do not plead for it because we are not ready** for his coming. If he should come today, we would be lost - eternally lost. Perhaps **some of us are Christians** and, if he were to return today, **we would be ashamed at his coming**, for we have unfinished business to do.

And **not one person** living or who has ever lived would have **any confidence or hope at his coming in judgement were it not for his first coming** in mercy and love.

So it is fitting that **the prayer focused on the future** - "*come Lord Jesus*" is **followed by a prayer for the present and our present need:**

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. (Revelation 22:21)

As John Newton put it in his famous hymn - **it is grace** - God's amazing grace - that has **saved** a wretch like me, that has **brought me safe thus far**, and which will **finally lead me home.**