

Revelation 21:1-8

The Everlasting Camping Trip

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Have you ever gotten lost? Have you ever gotten so lost you didn't know where you were? It's like you've stepped into an entirely different space where nothing is familiar. When I lived in Colorado one of my brothers got lost on a mountain. He has since referred to it as being "directionally confused." Maybe you feel a little lost as you read Revelation chapters 20 and 21. But I think that's how we're supposed to feel when we read the great white throne judgment. In 20:11 all of creation fades into a lost space, "From his presence earth and sky fled away." It's as if Christ has moved the whole universe into a type of limbo for the judgment. My professor at Gordon-Conwell called this point in Revelation "no place."

God has opened up a cosmic void and condemns every evil to perish there. In this lost space Satan and the evil dead are thrown into the lake of fire. This utter banishment of evil into a different reality is important for us to understand. God is not going to allow even a hint of evil to come into his new creation. So he condemns every evil thing to eternally perish in oblivion. Sin will be but a memory confined to a reality we can never know. When the new creation comes, it will be completely perfect and free. As we open up chapter 21 we find ourselves no longer lost. We catch a glimpse of a familiar sunrise—a new heaven and earth. We've gone from being lost in limbo to knowing where we are. And when we recognize our surroundings, we realize we're almost home. This is how we should feel when we read Revelation 21:1-8. We should feel as if we're stepping into a new yet familiar reality. We should feel as if we're no longer lost and have finally made it home. Let's read about our arrival home in Revelation 21:1-8.

In Revelation 21 the people of God are finally coming home. We can finally come home because God has been getting a place ready for us.

God is preparing a new home for his people. (21:1-2)

God is preparing eternity for us. (21:1) When you think of eternity, what do you think of? Do you think of heaven—a giant city made of gold? If that's the case, maybe you're not looking forward to eternity. To you, eternity sounds like a rather cold hard place that doesn't fit. Did you know that eternity and heaven are two different places? Heaven is the place or sphere where you go when you die. To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). If you trust in Jesus, your soul will be with him when you die. But that won't be the end because you need your body. The physical and the spiritual are created for each other. Eternity is when you will be resurrected into your newly renovated bodies. You will live in a new heaven and new earth that feel oddly familiar. God is preparing this new creation for us to live in. Scripture tells us that just like we will have a resurrected body, so will creation. Stephen Witmer recently wrote the book Eternity Changes Everything. In his book he explains what it means to be a new heaven and earth three ways:

First, "some things are removed." (pg 17-18) Verse 1 says the first heaven, earth, and sea are no more. This doesn't mean the new heaven and earth won't have oceans. The sea is a symbol for death, separation, and evil. It is an unknown and terrifying mass to John's readers. John is saying death, separation, and evil will be completely gone. The "chaos waters" have been transformed into "peaceful waters." The new creation will feel different because some things are removed.

Second, “some things remain.” (pg 19-21) When we think about eternity, we should try to picture creation in its perfect form. Try to think of people, plants, animals, the world, and everything in harmony. Now imagine what it would be like to have all the time in the world to explore and create. You wouldn’t feel rushed to see all the sights but could truly enjoy them. You’ve never seen the world’s tallest waterfall? You’ve got the time. You’ve always wanted to climb a redwood? You’ve got the time. You’ve always wanted to build a space ship and travel around the universe? I personally like to think you’ll have the time for that one too. The new creation will feel familiar because some things will remain.

Third, “some things return.” (pg 22-23) In his book, Witmer points us to the Garden of Eden. The Bible begins and ends in a perfect garden. We’re going back to creation as God intended it. But this time it’s going to be even better because it can’t be spoiled. The new creation is going to be our return to the garden.

So if God is preparing eternity for us, how can we get ready? Scripture calls those who will spend eternity with Christ his bride.

What is it about getting married that causes the bride and groom to hit the gym? We want to look our best for our loved one so we try and slim down or tone up. Women want to fit into their wedding dresses and men just want to look buff. The spring before I married Monica my classmates at GCTS thought I was trying to lose weight. I kept bringing hard-boiled eggs for my lunch so they thought I was trying to get in shape. What they didn’t know is hard-boiled eggs is one of three things I know how to make. Sometimes this is how we treat our relationship with God. We feel like we have to whip ourselves into spiritual shape before he’ll love us. If we can just shed a few more pounds of spiritual laziness, we’ll be ready for him. When we do this, we turn Jesus into a personal trainer who always wants more. Getting ready for Jesus is not about starving ourselves on hard boiled eggs. Getting ready for Jesus is about accepting his love and growing in his grace.

God is preparing us for eternity. (21:2) Verse 2 describes a city coming down out of heaven that is like a bride. The city of God is likened to the bride of Christ—the church. So which is coming down out of heaven, a city or the people of God? This mixing of images is intentional because the city of God merges with the people of God. The new city appears as a bride because she is filled with the bride of Christ. Notice that that this bride has “been prepared” and has “been adorned.” Christ is the one who has prepared and adorned his bride. Earlier in Revelation 19:7 we read “...and his Bride has made herself ready.” So the bride, the church, both makes herself ready and is made ready by God. Scripture says it both ways because both are true. We do our part to obey but know our preparation is only by God’s grace.

Are you better at preparing yourself for Jesus or being prepared by God? Do you always read your Bible, pray, and come to church? Does the word “diligent” describe you? My wife and I were looking at Romig photo albums in Colorado. My mom had written the word “diligent” next to about five pictures of me as a kid. If you’re like me, you need to be reminded that God is the one who is really diligent. But on the other hand maybe you never really put much effort into following Christ. What if a bride went to a salon to get her hair, nails, and makeup ready for the wedding? And when the attendant asked the bride what she wanted she just said, “Ah, whatever...” God calls us to care about eternity and to prepare ourselves by following Jesus. And at the same time, God is preparing us for eternity.

God is preparing a new home for his people. But he is preparing more than just a house—he’s preparing a life.

God is preparing a new life for those he loves. (21:3-4)

Our new life will be with God. (21:3) The ESV translates verse 3, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man...” The word for “dwelling place” in the original language is the word for “tent.” This word for “tent” is supposed to remind us of the Old Testament “tabernacle.” The tabernacle was a tent God ordered the prophet Moses to build in the wilderness. The nation of Israel needed a place to worship and follow God and this tent was it. God himself was present at the tent as a pillar of smoke and fire resting over the tabernacle. The tabernacle was more than just a camping tent, it was the place God dwelled. Here at the end of Revelation God is promising to set up his tent with us once more. When verse 3 says “He will dwell with them” it’s saying “He will tent with them.” No longer will there be a separate tent or temple for worshipping God. We will have unhindered access to the God who created all things. We will see Jesus face to face and we will worship him. God will belong to us and we will belong to God. Our new life will be with God.

I went camping in a tent when my wife and I went to Virginia beach in June. Monica and I set up a large tent to keep out the bugs. And then we built a second tent inside the first tent to sleep in. If I looked out through the mesh layers at an angle I might be able to see one or two stars. This July Monica and I helped lead a team to France. The night after our hike the campers slept out under the stars. That night I was blown away as I stared up at all the stars in the night sky. Now I could see and experience the stars unhindered by layers of mesh. God is promising us that he’s going to remove the mesh between us and him. If you trust in Christ, one day you’ll see Jesus face to face. Knowing God will be far more beautiful than you can imagine. It will be much better than staring at the stars on cloudless night. Our new life will be with God.

The most significant thing about eternity is living with God. But living with him will have all sorts of impacts on us.

We will no longer know death. (21:4) Verse four is one of the most comforting verses of the Bible. Scripture is saying three things that should give us hope. First, it says although death feels permanent it is indeed temporal. If you’ve lost a love one recently, remember death is not the end if they know Jesus. Second, it says all aspects of death will disappear, not just some. It’s not that you will forget what sickness and death are. Instead, you will no longer know them experientially. You will remember them as what God has delivered you and your family from. Third, it means God understands peoples’ suffering. The words “mourning, crying, and pain” are all very human words. God understands what you’re going through and he’s promising you it won’t last. All these things, the former things, will pass away as we enter into new life. The only wounds we’ll see in heaven are Christ’s wounds. We will no longer know death.

I was just in Colorado for a family reunion. While I was there some of our church’s elderly women dropped by the house. I email these women prayer requests and they faithfully watch my sermons online. I asked one of the ladies named Joyce how she is doing. She said, “Well Jonathan, I almost died in January of this year.” “And I was so excited because I knew I was going to see Jesus.” “I was so excited because I just wanted to see him.” “But I’m still here so I guess he doesn’t want me yet.” When she told me she just wanted to see Jesus my eyes got all blurry. I was moved because this is what eternity is about—it’s about seeing Jesus. You don’t have to be afraid of death because you’re going to him. You don’t have to be afraid for your loved ones who know Christ. They’re going to him too and one day soon we’ll be with him too. Death will be but a dark memory as we live with Jesus forever.

God is preparing a new home for his people. God is preparing a new life for those he loves.

God is preparing you to spend eternity with him. (21:5-8)

God is preparing you to spend eternity with him. (21:5a) Verse 5 says, “I am making all things new.” Ultimately, God is making you into an eternal being. And now we need to ask the question—are you ready? The last four verses of our passage are first positive and then negative. I think John structures the passage this way to give his readers a choice. He first shows them the good that happens when we trust in Jesus. And then he shows the bad that happens if we don’t trust in him. So the question is, will you trust in Jesus Christ?

When you trust in Christ, you can count on God. (21:5b-7) Verse 5 talks about the one seated on the throne. Back in chapter 5 the Lamb is worshipped along with the one on the throne. So here the Triune God himself is saying “my words are trustworthy and true.” He is the Alpha and Omega—the A and Z. He was here at the beginning and will bring us to the end. He offers to bring us safely through to the end by saving us from our sins. Rev 21:6 says, “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.” We all have thirsts and Jesus is the only one who can quench them. You’re thirsty if every day you think about what you don’t yet have. You’re thirsty if you are always trying to change the people around you. You’re thirsty if you’re consumed by guilt and don’t know how to be forgiven. You’re thirsty if you think there’s a God but don’t know how to meet him. God is here and he wants to quench that thirst with Jesus. If you’ve never asked Christ to quench your thirst, you can ask him right now. Just tell him, “Lord, I want you to satisfy me because nothing else can.” God promises in verse 7 that if you trust him, you won’t be disappointed. One day you’ll get to share in the eternal life that only Jesus deserves. God will pour so much love and grace into you that it will change you. The king of the cosmos wants to give you what really matters—his love. When you trust in Christ, you can count on God.

Are you ready? Do you want him? When you trust in Christ, you can count on God, but...

When you trust in yourself, you can count on death. (21:8) Verse 8 is like a surprise jab to the face at the end of a boxing match. The author John has been describing the joy of eternity with God. But now he says that all who reject Jesus will be rejected by God. No imperfect thing can come into the presence of God’s grace without forgiveness. This verse describes those who don’t want to be forgiven. Maybe you don’t think you’re cowardly or faithless or detestable or a murderer. But if you reject God’s gift of Jesus Christ, you’re all those things. And if you persist in your unbelief, you will experience the lake of fire firsthand. This is no joke and I don’t want it to be. When you trust in yourself, you can count on death.

When I was home for our family reunion, my dad taught a short Bible lesson for our family and kids. He broke out a felt set I remember seeing when I was a kid in children’s church. The set was cutouts of Jesus, the angel of light Satan, and a pathway to heaven and hell. It wasn’t a particularly intimidating felt set as Jesus was very American. And Satan looked like an angry angel with a mullet. But there were also two 1950s cutouts of a little boy and a little girl. My niece and nephew were supposed to put these cutouts on the right path. The illustration was simple—God calls us to choose the “broad way” or the “narrow way.” There was even a little sign that said “choose.” We can choose the path with Jesus to eternal life or our own path to eternal death. Today God is offering us a choice as well—what will you choose? Will you choose life your way that can only lead to tragedy? Or will you choose to pursue Christ and enjoy him forever? God is preparing you to spend eternity with him.

My wife and I recently helped lead our high school students on a missions trip to France. At this camp our kids are supposed to speak English and form friendships with the French kids. This is a really good thing but it also means that on the last day of camp there are a lot of tears. Everyone was crying and saying things like “Goodbye” and “I love you.” They kept telling each other “I’ll see you on Skype and Facebook” and “I’ll see you next year.” I thought this would be a great time to give the kids some comforting and very pastoral words. So as the campers were leaving I gave them hugs and said, “Goodbye, I’ll see you in heaven.” They didn’t think these words were very comforting or pastoral. Maybe there’s a reason I’m not the youth pastor here. When we say goodbye to fellow believers, we don’t have to cry. Even if we never see them again in this lifetime, we can take comfort in eternity. You will have forever to grow your friendships with those you love and with those you’ve lost. Can you imagine having all eternity to make new and lasting relationships with fellow believers? Not only will we get to enjoy each other for eternity, we’ll get to enjoy Jesus. God is preparing you to spend eternity with him.