

The Mission of the Kingdom (Part 2)

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[0:00] Well, we end our series today on the mission of God, our 12-week series. And it's been talking about the whole story. And the whole story is that God has come to redeem the world from sin, and not only to redeem it from sin, but to renew it, to renew the whole cosmos.

And there's been lots of lower case R redeemers that we've looked at in the Old Testament, Moses, for instance, prophets, priests, and kings that were foreshadows, that were types of the coming redeemer, the redeemer, the centerpiece of all of history, Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection.

Jesus came preaching a message about a kingdom, and His message was that redemption, ultimate redemption, final redemption means a kingdom, a kingdom where human beings and God are together.

The New Testament talks often about Jesus Christ being His resurrection being a first fruit. And when it talks about that, it means that Jesus' resurrection is the first crop, the early crop of the agricultural harvest that every farmer knows about.

And you know what that means? When there's a first of something, it means there's a second. Seconds follow from firsts. And Revelation 21 and 22 is the second that follows from the first.

[1:21] Jesus' resurrection is the first fruit of the kingdom, but there's a not yet. Derek introduced it last week. There's a not yet to the kingdom. And the ultimate not yet of the kingdom, it's here. This is it. It's this vision.

And Revelation 21 and 22, the mission accomplished, the close of the mission of God is the kingdom established. We got a baptism today. We got 30 minutes for me to talk to you about the kingdom of God.

The ultimate kingdom of God is impossible. But try, we must, and we will. What is the kingdom of God? That's the first question.

And the second question is, why does it matter for today? What is the kingdom of God, and why does it matter for you today? What is the kingdom of God? The first thing John tells us the kingdom of God is, is it's heaven and earth.

See the first, very first thing he says, then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. He sees something new, and he sees a new heaven and a new earth. New here, when he says the word new, he's not speaking of a different world, an entirely alternate world.

[2:29] He's speaking of the restoration of this world. How do we know that? Did you know that most of the book of Revelation, almost every single image in the book of Revelation, is taken from the Old Testament? It's not stuff he made up. It's taken from the Old Testament.

And in this passage, every single verse has a reference to Isaiah, to the book of Isaiah. And in chapter 22, every single verse has a reference to the book of Ezekiel.

And in Isaiah 65, it's, he's quoting, you see, Isaiah 65, behold, God says, I am creating a new heavens and a new earth.

And in that passage in Isaiah 65, it's as if God knew that when he told the people of Israel, he's creating a new heaven and a new earth, that they would be sad. Because it's as if they would lose the things that they love from the current earth.

Right? And so the next, very next sentence he says, but be glad. Don't be sad, be glad. Why? Because then he calls it the new Jerusalem. You see? The new Jerusalem. It's not something entirely new. It's the new Jerusalem.

[3:37] Jerusalem is a very old city. It's been around from the beginning. It's the restoration of something very old. It's the new Jerusalem. The way that, the way we know this is because Jesus' resurrection is the only really concrete thing we have, a paradigm for what it means to be a part of the future kingdom. Jesus' post-resurrection life.

And in Jesus' post-resurrection life, there was something very different about him from before. He was mysteriously, mysteriously veiled in a way. People couldn't quite tell who he was.

But at the same time, at the very same time, people of the old order, people in the world we live in, also knew him. They could see him. They could touch him. They could eat with him.

You see? It's not an entirely, what's being offered here, a new heaven and a new earth, is not an entirely different world. It's a restoration of the world we live in. You see? One commentator puts it this way, that Revelation 21 is a vision of a radically changed cosmos involving both ethical or moral and physical renovation. It's not only transformation of the moral, a new moral order, but it's a transformation, he says, of the fundamental cosmic structure, including physical elements. And we saw that in our passage. In verse 1 of this passage, it says that there will be no more sea. That's a 70% of our world's metaphysics.

You see? That's a big physical change. And in Revelation 22 verse 5, he says there will be no more sun. No more sea and no more sun. It's fundamental physical differences of a transformed world.

[5:22] But those physical differences are wrapped up in an ethical reason. You see, why is it that he has a vision of no more sea and no more sun? Why? Because it goes back to our first sermon on the mission of God, in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1, the sea, as it was for all ancient and eastern people, represents chaos.

It represents disorder. And God separated the sea from the land. He put order where it should be, and He put chaos where it should be. You see, in a perfect world, in a place where God lives with humans, you don't have chaos anyway, so you don't need a sea. Or in Genesis 1, you remember that there's light on day 1, 2, and 3, but there's no sun until day 4. Where did the light come from on day 1 and 2 and 3?

It came from God Himself, you see? You don't need a sun, it says in Revelation 22.5, when God is present. When you're in a perfect place, when you're in a place of righteousness, which is what 2 Peter calls the New Heavens and the New Earth, you don't need sun, you don't need sea, you don't need chaos, you don't need light, because God is the light. There is no darkness, there is no nighttime.

Fundamental physical changes are coming, but there are changes wrapped up in ethical differences in a place of perfection, in a place of righteousness. Look, in other words, what this means is that when heaven comes down, everything changes.

What's the fundamental nature of the New Heavens and the New Earth? The fundamental nature of the Kingdom to come, what's most basically, what is it? It's wrapped up in a little verb that appears in two places in our text, verse 2 and verse 10.

[7:05] The little verb is to come down. It's heaven come down. Did you think of heaven as a place that you go up to? Is that the way you thought of heaven? No.

You see, the Kingdom says that heaven, you don't go up to heaven, heaven comes down to you. That's the fundamental nature of the Kingdom. Now in the Bible, throughout the whole course of the Bible, the word heaven is used in two ways. The first way is the heavens, which just means the sky.

That's all. It's just sky and space. The heavens declare the glory of God, literally the sky above us. And that's the way it's most commonly used, but the other way it's used, like in the vision of Isaiah, when he goes into the throne room of God, or the visions of Paul, is that heaven is the place where God's throne is.

It's simply the place where God lives, where Jesus Christ reigns. You see what's happening here? The vision here. It's this. It's that heaven, the throne room, the palace, the temple of God is coming down to earth from the heavens.

John looks up and he sees heaven coming down from the heavens. And most fundamentally, what the Kingdom of God is, is it's the unity of heaven and earth. The unity of heaven and earth no longer separate.

[8 : 29] Now, if you were around in the spring for our Ephesians series, this especially should make sense to you. Because we repeatedly said during that series that the thesis statement, everybody remembers the thesis statement of the book of Ephesians, right?

The thesis statement of the book of Ephesians, Ephesians 1, chapter 9 and 10, is this. The purpose of God's ultimate will is what? The unity of all things in Christ, and then he qualifies it.

What unity are you talking about, Paul? And he says, the unity of things in heaven with things on earth. You see? Paul told us what it was going to be. The kingdom of God ultimately is a union of heaven with earth.

No longer separate anymore. Heaven is the place where God lives and earth is the place where people live. You know what that means? It means two things. First, it means that the kingdom is both spiritual and physical.

It means that the kingdom is where embodied spirits live. Not spirits on clouds, not spirits floating around playing harps. Michelangelo got it wrong. Not doing telepathic and telekinesis to each other. No, it's physical. It's embodied.

[9 : 52] You see, the vision John's offering us here is God's pronouncement that you matter to him and you matter to him as an embodied person.

And that the stuff of this world matters to him enough for him to come and save it. And the second thing it means is that fundamentally the unity of heaven and earth, the kingdom, is where God makes his home with human beings.

It's where you come home to God and God comes home to you. You see? Now my parents are here today because we had a, my wife had a baby this week.

And so they've come to visit and it reminded me, you know, when you're a little kid, every little experience you have that's kind of a big experience or a long experience is great to you. For instance, if you think back on your childhood home, for many of you, you dream of it.

There's a nostalgia, right? Or if you go visit some just amazing place like Disney World when you're a little kid, it's so amazing. And then what happens? You go back, right? You go back when you're an adult, if you had this experience.

[11 : 08] You go back when you're an adult and you, I had this opportunity. I went back to my house that I grew up in after we had all moved away. And I loved it. I loved this place. I wanted to see this place. I had a nostalgia, a sweet nostalgia for this, the house I grew up in, the house that I was raised in.

And it was good. I liked being there. But you get there and you know what? It's not as big as you remember it. And the pain is different. And eventually you find yourself kind of looking around and saying, alright, let's go get lunch.

You see, Miroslav Wolf, he's a Croatian theologian at Yale, a very famous public intellectual in America. He talks about a truth and a lie in our nostalgia for home.

And our nostalgia for the places we grew up in. The truth is the desire itself. You have a sweet, true desire to remember the greatness of the place that you call home. And the lie is that when you actually get there, the desire that you had for it, it never quite matches up. It's never quite what you had hoped that it was going to be.

You see, heaven, no, not heaven, sorry, the unity of heaven and earth, the kingdom of God, it is the truth of that sweet nostalgia.

[12:39] You see, the kingdom of God is the home that you have always wanted but never actually known. And you know what that means?

That means that even if you don't believe in God today, you don't believe in heavens. You don't believe in afterlife that you actually do.

You know why? Because you want it. You want it so bad. And believing in something is more than just your intellect, it's your desire, it's your heart.

The mission of God, we might say, is that he has come to give us the homes that we've always wanted. Not only were we created for a unified heaven and earth, but also we were created, the text tells us secondly, for a garden city.

So the second thing that we learn about what the kingdom of God is, is it's a unified heaven and earth where God's throne dwells, but it's also a garden city. It's a garden city of God. It's a city that is a garden. It's a garden that is a city. You know, my wife and I, we always talk about what's better to live in.

[13:55] The rural countryside, you know, where there's nobody or the city with tons of people. There's only two places we think are good to live in that we like. And God's answer, yes. You can have both. The kingdom of God is a garden city. You get both.

We're giving this in verse 2. I saw the holy city, you see, the new Jerusalem coming down out from the heavens. Now, as you guessed it, this is a quote from Isaiah chapter 52 verse 1 where God prophesied the new Jerusalem, the holy city.

And here we're giving all the elements of a city. What's a city? What's a city? A city is a place where people live. And it's a place where people live particularly in close proximity to one another. It's urban in that way, right?

And when you live in close proximity to people in a tight place, that means you have relationships. And when you have relationships, that means you form a society. And when you form a society, that means you need a government.

And what we're given is that the kingdom of God includes every element of a city. There's a government. There's a monarch. There's a king. And there's people in relationships outside of the immediate family. And it's in a close urban context.

[15:16] It's in a city, a new Jerusalem that's come down from heaven. But did you catch that the relationship that you have with the monarch, the king of the city, it's not simply that he's your governor. Did you catch the primary relationship that's been described in this passage? Did you see it?

It says that the new city comes down as a bride adorned in clothing, dressed for marriage. You see, the fundamental relationship that's being described here, the relationship between you, between the people in the kingdom of God and the monarch, their king, is that they're married to him. And this, again, is a quote, is an idea that's taken straight out of Isaiah 52.

So it says in Isaiah 52 that the people in the city of Jerusalem are in captivity, but that their clothes in beautiful garments are waiting to be redeemed. What does this image mean? What does it mean to be married to the monarch? What does it mean that the new city includes all the people married to King Jesus?

What does it mean? It's not complicated. It's not tricky at all. It's actually very clear here. It means, behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

See, it means the same exact thing that it meant to have the unity of heaven and earth. It means that you go home to Jesus Christ and Jesus goes home to you. What does it mean to have a spouse in one fundamental, practical, everyday sense? It means that you go home to them.

[16:50] And that's exactly what it means here, to be married to the bridegroom, to Jesus Christ. It means that this is the place where you go home to him and he comes home to you.

This means that when you live in a perfect place, in perfect righteousness, with a king, a monarch that governs the whole world, that is Jesus Christ, and that you're married to him, it means that not only is your relationship restored with God, but that every single relationship that you have with the whole world is also restored. Every single relationship that's suffered under the curse, your relationship to nature and your relationship to other people, all of those things are restored and that's why it calls it a holy city, a city set apart, a righteous city. And some of you here may not live in Edinburgh, may not be from the city, or may not like the city.

And if you don't like the city, it's probably because you haven't lived in a holy city yet. But if you're a Christian, you will. In a holy city, a holy garden city, that's the ultimate perfect context that we've been offered.

So it's not only a city, but it's also a garden. It's a garden city. And this is the point of chapter 22. This is what we read in chapter 22. This garden image in chapter 22, you see it, it speaks of the river of life, of the trees that are in the very streets of the city.

See, it's a garden city. This is taken straight out of Ezekiel, chapter 40 to 49. So John's not getting this out of nowhere. He's taking this straight out of the book of Ezekiel.

[18:37] And in the book of Ezekiel, well, let me say this, the Bible begins with a garden and it ends with a garden. You remember that? The Bible begins with a garden and it ends with a garden. See, one commentator says this, both the visions of Ezekiel and Revelation of the garden city taken together envision an escalated reestablishment of the garden of the first creation, Eden, in which God's presence openly dwells.

Even the decorative palm trees in the cherubim portrayed as part of the temple in Ezekiel allude to the garden setting of Eden. And so did, just like an earlier temple, Solomon's temple, which was decorated in plants and flowers and trees and water, which included everywhere carvings of flowers.

And you must remember that Jesus Christ was murdered next to a garden. John tells us, buried in a garden, resurrected in a garden, and mistaken for the gardener.

See, scholars will talk about Eden in Genesis 1 and 2, being God's garden temple, or his garden palace, the place where he comes and dwells on earth. And the mission of God in Genesis chapter 1, way back 12 weeks ago we saw, was that God told them, God told Amonie to be fruitful and multiply.

In other words, I want you to take this garden temple, and I want you to make it into a garden city temple. You see that? A city is where lots of people dwell in close proximity. That was their mission.

[20:20] To take the garden temple and make it a garden city temple, and you see what's happening in the kingdom, the vision of the kingdom in Revelation 22, this is it. This is the garden city temple that Adam and Eve had been told to make and couldn't.

It's the fulfillment of Genesis chapter 1 and 2. It's the garden city temple. We see in this passage, the middle of the city street is a river flowing from God's dwelling place. This is exactly what's present in Ezekiel 47.

In Ezekiel 47 it describes that the river, everything the river touches, it gives life. The trees it says, or for the healing of the nations, the images of the garden is a place always in full bloom, always in blossom, always growing wide, because it's a place that is always life giving.

It is a forever life place. It's a place where people come and dip into the river that flows down the main street, down the high street, and they live forever.

When you eat the produce, when you drink the wine of the fruit that this city produces, and when you break the bread that this garden produces, you don't do it in order to remember a resurrection.

[21:47] You do it to live the resurrection. The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the mission ultimately established is a kingdom where heaven and earth are in full unity, where you come home to be with Jesus as an embodied person, and where you live in a garden city. That's the kingdom of God. Oh boy, there's so much more to talk about. This is just a little taster. You have to go and you have to get back into the passage and see all the more stuff, all the more terrible grammar, all the more stuff that there is to see.

But that's all we can do for now. Lastly, I simply want to ask, what does it matter for you today? What does this vision matter for you today? There's been this idea historically that when Christians historically have gotten a vision of the kingdom, a vision of heaven, that they've become no earthly good. So they're so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good. They separate themselves from society and they don't care about the problems of today, the current culture, the problems in the cities now.

And that's been true in the past. But that's not the Bible's logic. The Bible says no to that. That's not the point. That's not the point of giving you a heavenly vision, of giving you a vision of the kingdom.

But you know what is true about that idea? That what you believe about the end of history makes a difference on how you act today. Have you thought about that before?

What you believe about the end of history makes a massive difference on the way that you live today. Let me prove it to you. There's a popular preacher illustration, some of these that float around and everybody uses.

[23:48] And this is one of them. I think it probably came from Tim Keller first. There's a story of two men and they get a factory job, the same exact job, and they're told to take a widget and screw it onto a widget.

Now there's widgets and there's widgets and there's widgets. Right? You know what I'm talking about? A widget is a gadget. A widget is something you screw a gadget onto to make a bigger gadget. And I have no idea what a widget is. But that's the three words that go together.

They're told take a widget and screw it onto a widget. A gadget onto a bigger gadget. And they're told they're going to do it 12 hours a day, every day for a year. Both of them. Same assembly line. And one of them is brought out and said, we're going to pay you 12,000 pounds, 12 hours a day, seven days a week for a year to screw a widget onto a widget.

And the other guy's taken out back and he's told, we're going to pay you 12 million pounds. You know what happens? They start screwing widgets onto widgets. And before you know it in a week or two, the first guy, the guy that's getting paid 12,000 pounds, what's his disposition? He's absolutely miserable.

He walks out, he throws the widgets. He quits, right? Because he's getting paid 12,000 pounds to screw a widget onto a widget for a year, 12 hours a day.

[25 : 16] The guy across from him, if we get him paid 12 million pounds, he doesn't understand. He's whistling. He's whistling. This is the best job he's ever had.

Screw a widget onto a widget for 12 million pounds. You see, what you believe about what's coming to you in the future makes a huge difference on how you live today.

Did you know that? Have you thought about that? What does this do for us today? Look no further than the actual context of the book of Revelation.

You see, one of the problems with reading the book of Revelation in a one-off sermon like this is that you forget the context of the book of Revelation. And the book of Revelation was not written to give us a bunch of images in order to construct a mathematical prophetic timeline.

No, that's not what it's for. All the images are taken from the Old Testament. It was written in a place, in a very specific context. In that context was in the 90s of the first century during a systemic persecution under the Emperor's Domition.

[26 : 26] And John himself was exiled to a little island called Patmos, and that's where he's writing the book from. He's been persecuted. He's in exile. But it wasn't just exile that Domition perpetrated.

One writer says that the Domition persecution included regular mocking and jeering of Christians in the streets of Rome and other places, but even more.

It included Christians being taken out of their homes, sent to the arena, and ripped up by the lions for spectacle. That was quite common. But even more, it included Christians being wrapped in brush and twigs, dipped in oil, and burned to death for nighttime lighting.

It was a regular event to use a Christian to light the streets at night. You see, maybe you were thinking when we looked at the passage earlier that I skipped the best part, and I know, I did.

The best part of the passage, did you see it? Verse 4, 21, verse 4, He will wipe away every tear from their eye, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more for the former things have passed away.

[27 : 48] You see, this book was written for specific people in a specific place. What does it mean for you to look no further than what it meant for them? You see, a lot of very little eyes, the eyes of little children, would have had lots of little tears flowing from their face as they watched their parents, torn by beasts, in the Colosseum, or hung up on a string and lit on fire. You see, why does John give them this vision? Why does God give them this vision?

Because he says, one day I will wipe away the tears from those little faces. Ah, it's not just images and metaphors.

He's giving them a worldview, a way to think about the future in order that it will change the way they live today, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of pain. He's giving them something to be courageous about. And you know, you're not going to be thrown to the lions, I'm just going to go ahead and bet on it.

But you live under the same exact curse that the people that suffered under the persecution of the mission lived under. And you will suffer, and that's a guarantee.

And you know what else is a guarantee, what's being offered here? Is that this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, he's saying this is as much a true fact, a guarantee, as is the fact that you will weep in this life.

[29 : 22] This is for your hope. This vision is for a living hope. It's not to hide from the world, but it's to give you the ability to be right in the midst of its problems and to keep going.

Now, two minutes and we're done. We'll close with this. How do you get this kingdom? How do you get this kingdom that right now you can only imagine and imagine it you must?

That's the point. There's a subtle reference in this passage. I don't know if you called it in verse six. He said to me, it's done. I'm the Alpha, the Omega, the beginning and the end. And here it is. To the thirsty, I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. Now, this is a, guess what? This is a quote from Isaiah. It's a paraphrase of Isaiah.

And it comes from Isaiah 55, one at which says, come. We use it as a call to worship sometimes. Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. Come without money and without payment, without cost. And he's quoting. And if you've read the other books and the book that John wrote in the New Testament, the gospel and his epistles, he's often using references from Isaiah 55 to water.

Because Jesus did. And you'll remember the most famous one is in John chapter four. Jesus walks up to a well in the middle of nowhere. And there's a woman there. And he asked this woman for water. And the woman is a prostitute.

[30:53] And he asked, will you give me something to drink? And you know what she thinks? She thinks he's asking for her body. And so did the disciples afterwards. And he responds to her by saying, woman, if you knew who was talking to you, you would ask me to come and to drink from the waters. And you would never be thirsty again.

And he says the same exact thing in John chapter seven. If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and to drink. And then we find it again in the new heavens and the new earth and Revelation chapter 21.

And so all of you who are thirsty come and drink from the waters that flow out of this temple down this city street and don't bring payment. Don't bring payment. You see, water, the river of life for John, for Isaiah, it's a symbol. It's a metaphor for true living, for true life.

And the logic of the New Testament is that every single one of us are thirsty. All of you who are thirsty, you're thirsty for a home that you've heard of, that you've desired, but you've never actually known.

You're thirsty for true life. You're thirsty for what C.S. Lewis calls that remote music that we are born remembering, but we've never actually heard.

[32:19] Everyone is thirsty because everybody knows they ought to be perfect and they aren't. You see? And here's the irony of Christianity. If you try to get this perfect kingdom through living a perfect life, then you will never get either of them.

Instead, what's true here is what's true for the woman at the well. Jesus is saying, come without payment. Come and drink from these waters and don't bring anything.

Don't come offering me money. You're a good works. You're perfections. Come without payment. These are metaphors. Let me say it in plain language. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Here's how. Because on the cross, Jesus said, I thirst. Jesus, the water of life himself, the one who gives life to anyone who asks, he was deprived.

He was ultimately deprived. He was thirsty and that's not just a reference to his lips. He was deprived of ultimate thirst so that you could come and drink of the waters of this kingdom.

Believe it. We're not just peddling images and metaphors here. It's only a living hope if it's actually real. So, the mission of God. To redeem the world from sin, to renew all things in Christ Jesus unto the kingdom. This is the best true story that's ever been told. The end. Let's pray.

[34:01] Father, we ask that you would give us a vision of the kingdom that would change who we are today and that we would know that the only way we're going to get it is by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ who offers us water of life without payment, without cost.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.