Westlake Church Lausanne

The New Heavens and The New Earth
Revelation 21:1-5a; 22-23

We're continuing our series on Foundations for Life, and tonight we're going to look at the promise, the doctrine even, of the New Heavens and the New Earth – *the* time, at the end of time, when God will make everything new. And whether you're someone who's been touched by Mark's death, or you're facing issues within your own personal life, or if it's just as you survey the world scene, if ever there was a time to remind ourselves of the eternal hope that the good news of Jesus holds out to us, this is it.

Reading: Rev 21:1-5a, 22-23.

The Old is Going
Now, when you're young, and most of you are, talking about what lies the other side of death might seem a bit esoteric, or even irrelevant to you, because death seems such a long way off: 'that's for the oldies like Martin to think about, for me it's about life *now*.' And even if you're already a Christian, you might believe this stuff about heaven and the new heavens and the new earth in your head, but it's just abstract, it's not exactly something you hold with your heart. Or, if you're not yet a Christian you might hear talk of the new heavens and the new earth and think, 'this is crazy – do they really believe this stuff, don't we all know that this life is all there is?'

And yet, whether you realise it or not, the time when God will make everything new, the new heavens and the new earth, is not something that some of us here just happen to believe in our heads; and it's not just something that some of you may dismiss as Christian craziness. In fact, the new heavens and the new earth is something that every single one of us, whether you're a Christian or not, longs for.

Let me explain. Let's start with those of you who love sport. For you, being stuck behind a computer screen or sat behind a desk all day is like living torture, isn't it. But, when you're out running, or skiing, or biking or playing footy, that's when you feel alive. But what happens when you injure yourself? And more than it being a short-lived thing, it becomes chronic, as some of you have experienced, and it drags on for ages, and you're out of action for ages, and you can't do what you really want to do. How have you felt then? Did you wish that things were otherwise? You're side-lined through injury, and you wish you weren't, you wish that you could get back in there, and do what you want to do, and not be held back by your damaged body.

Or, maybe you're not sporty, but have you had a grandparent, or even a parent die of cancer and you've sat by their bed, wishing with all your heart that they could be cured?

Or, do you ever look out on the world and see all the injustice in the world and you know deep down that it's wrong, and that things should not be like this, and wish it could be put right?

Or do you see the emotional pain and the hurt of life. And you see broken relationships, maybe even your own relationships, and you wish that instead of all this pain and brokenness there was wholeness and wellness, and that people could get along?

Or have you known a friend, as some of us have now experienced, for whom life becomes so dark, even too dark? And you wish with all your heart that life was different.

Or finally, have you ever felt God's absence? That he feels distant, and your prayers seem to be prayers into a vast vacuum of space, and you see others seemingly enjoying a depth of spirituality that you could only wish for, and you do wish for it?

And it's those hard things of life that the apostle John says here in v1 mark 'the first heaven and the first earth' – this life as we now know it; the things he calls in v4, 'the former things' – things like tears, and death, and mourning, and crying and pain.

Now, life is not all bad like that is it? For the most part, for us life is wonderful, and you've got great friends, and life lies before you, and the sun comes up in the morning, and there's snow on the mountains. And life is great. And yet… life is not always great. Sometimes life is also marked by these hard things, and we wish it wasn't.

But why do you wish it weren't? Because if atheistic materialism is right, then this world is all there is, and ultimately there's no point of purpose to it. And if we really are simply the result of blind processes and the survival of the fittest, pain and sorrow is *all* we should expect. So why do we long for something more, for things to be different? Why do you see the world and long for things to be better, a world where the unrighteous do not triumph, a world where kids are not born with terrible malformations, where your friends do not die young, a world where good prevails, and hearts are not broken?

In other words, why do you long for a world that you've never been to, and never visited? Where does that longing come from?

Well, I'll tell you where it comes from – or at least I'll tell you where the Bible tells you it comes from. And that is that you were made for such a world, and your inner longing for a better world is you longing for home. Now, I hate to compare you to a pigeon – but you know homing pigeons don't you? You can

take one of these birds, and drive across a whole continent, and release it somewhere it's never been before, and that bird will find its way home. It has these inner geomagnets, and wayfinding mechanisms, or something (!), that means it will always seek for home.

And so do you.

We *all* long for this new world. The person who gets totally smashed on a Saturday night, ultimately he's looking for happiness isn't he? He wanta to make his world better than it is now, and he thinks that by drinking he'll create it. The person who goes from one relationship to another, looking for love hopes that this one will give her the better world she's looking for. GK Chesterton, the English writer, once famously said that the man who knocks on a brothel door, looking for sex, is looking for God – he wants to be happy, he wants a better world than he's got now, he's just looking in the wrong place. In fact, ultimately, in all our seeking after happiness, we are seeking for that better world.

And the Bible says that ever since our first parents were ejected from the garden of Eden, where the best of worlds, and wholeness of bodies and minds, and intimate friendship with God, we have been longing to get back. We long for the day when all that is wrong will be put right, when everything will be made new.

And the good news is that as John tells us here, that day is on its way.

The New is Coming
Look at v1, 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.' Or verse 4, '[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' Or v5, 'And he who was seated on the throne [of heaven] said, "Behold, I am making all things new."'

Now if you do ever think of heaven, what do you think of? Something resembling Michaelangelo's paintings on the Sistine chapel? Some kind of ethereal, semi-embodied existence, in which white fluffy floating clouds feature rather highly? Well, that's not the picture the Bible presents. The picture the Bible presents is one of the whole of creation, of this world with all its diverse beauty, and of the heavens in all their starry wonder, being made new. And not just new, but infinitely better.

You see, when the apostle Paul writes in 1 Cor 15 about the kind of bodies we will experience in the new creation, he uses an analogy, and it's of a seed and a plant. And this body is like a seed, and one day it will be planted in the ground in death. But God will raise us up in the resurrection of the dead and that seed will

become a plant. Now, is the plant similar to the seed? – well, yes, sort of; but it's also in a different league to the seed.

And the New Heavens and the New Earth will be as better than this world as our resurrection bodies will be to these bodies, as a plant is to a seed. I mean, take an acorn. Is an acorn amazing? It is, it has a beauty and a potential and a life inside it all of it's own. But an oak tree, that is something else. And this earth and these heavens, they're the acorn, but one day God will renew them and it will, like this earth and heavens as an oak is like an acorn, but it will also be as more glorious as an oak is than an acorn.

And just imagine what that will be like. Have you ever stood on a peak and looked at the snow capped mountains and gone, 'that is amazing!'? Or have you ever gone out at night, and got away from all the lights and then lain down and looked up at the stars and gone, 'wow!' Well, one day that wow factor will be multiplied by endless orders of magnitude, if that is mathematically possible!

But it's not just the wow factor that will be different. You see did you notice something odd that John says in v1 'The first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.' Why no more sea? I mean I know God probably doesn't like synchronised swimming, but is there going to be no swimming or sailing in the new creation? No, that's probably not what John means. In the Old Testament, the sea is a symbol for chaos, and disorder, and rebellion against God. And in Revelation, the beast who opposes God comes up out of the sea. And so John is saying that when God makes all things new, those forces of chaos and disorder and rebellion, will be no more. All those things we long to be different will be different. There will be no more mourning, no more tears, and death will be no more.

Why?

Well, the Bible tells us is that all the problems we as humanity face stem from that very first sin in the garden when our first parents rebelled against God, and were shut out of the garden, and God's good presence. Look at Genesis 3:24, '[God] drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.' So they were expelled from this good world, with no way back, except on pain of death. And we have simply carried on walking away from Eden and away from God. And as a result of sin entering God's good world, the world has been cursed – it's dysfunctional, it doesn't work like it should, it's like Microsoft products – it's all out of sync.

But all of that is going to change, the curse will be reversed John says. Verse 2, 'And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.' Now if like me your heart is more

in the country that the city, you might hear that and think, 'ok, great, we lose the garden and we get a city – is that really an improvement?'

Well, look at what John goes on to say in chapter 22:1-2, 'Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.'

So this is not going to be a city designed along the lines of the EPFL, with concrete monstrosities everywhere and not a tree to be seen. The picture of the New Jerusalem is of a garden city, complete with the tree of life and the river flowing from the centre. It's the picture of Eden restored. So what you and I, and all humanity, long for, a world where everything is put right, where bodies don't decay and die, where relationships don't breakdown, this world we've never visited, but are homesick for, this world will one day become a reality.

But alongside the abolition of death and mourning, did you see the other thing that's going to be reversed. Look at verse 3, 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."' So it's not just the way back to Eden that the New Creation will make possible, it's also the way back to intimate relationship with God.

You see, the picture of Eden was of Adam and Eve enjoying unbroken friendship with God, walking and talking with him in the garden. But as you well know, when you hurt someone, it inevitably introduces distance in the relationship doesn't it? So their sin and our sin has left us alienated and isolated from God. But just like in our own relationships, someone has to make the move to heal the breach, so the Bible tells us it's God who has consistently sought to heal that breach. And it began with the tabernacle, the tent in the desert. But the people could not approach God directly. His glory dwelt in the Most Holy Place, behind a thick curtain, and only one man, the High Priest, could go behind that curtain, and then only once a year.

Then came the temple in Jerusalem, and again, the people could not approach God directly. Once again, he dwelt in the inner room, where they could never go. But then Christ came, and in the opening of his Gospel John tells us that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14), literally, he tabernacled, he pitched his tent among us. That just as God had pitched his tent among the Israelites, Christ, the one greater than the temple, came and dwelt among us.

But now look what John says. In the new Jerusalem, he says, v22, 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.' So when God makes everything new, there's not going to be a need for us to be

shielded from his presence anymore. There will be no more 'God is here and we cannot approach him'. That alienation will be gone.

Which means that for you there will be no more of that sense that God is not there, that I can't feel his presence. There will be no more, Does he listen to my prayers? Is God even real? Am I deluding myself? Is there any point believing this stuff? And there will be no more of those times when sin leaves you feeling cut off from him and unable to approach him.

He will indeed make everything new.

The question is, how is that possible? How can God take our broken, sin-ravaged, death-damaged *now*, and change it into something inexpressibly wonderful?

Well, it's not a how, it's a who.

The One who Makes it Possible:
You see in v2 John says he saw this garden city, this new Jerusalem, 'coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.' And if you've ever walked your daughter down the aisle at her wedding, or stood at the altar as your bride walks towards you, you know John is trying to express something of the inexpressible beauty and joy and purity and consummation of what he's seeing. But who's the husband? Because you might be tempted to think it's you, or us as his people, and God is giving this gift of the New Jerusalem to us. But the Bible writers repeatedly talk of God as the husband, and we, his people, are his bride. But we're like a bride that runs away after other men, and yet in his love God does not abandon his bride, instead he sacrificially loves her. And now John says, all that sin, all the waywardness, all the running away will be put away, and we, God's people will be made perfect for Christ, her self-sacrificing, loving husband.

And this world is marked by sorrow and grief, but Jesus became a man of sorrows and was acquainted with grief, so that your tears might be wiped away. And he was taken outside the earthly Jerusalem, and crucified outside her city walls, so that you might enter the heavenly Jerusalem. And at the cross all our sin, all our brokenness, all the mess of the world, was put on him. And he underwent the ultimate alienation and separation from God for us, as he called out, 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me?' And the sword of God's judgment, that sword that barred the way back into Eden, fell upon him, and at pain of death he made our way back to the garden possible, back to the world, and the home we all long for.

And here John calls him in v22, 'the Lamb' – the sacrificial Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. And that's how death can be no more, because

the Author of life dies, he takes death upon himself, that death's power might forever be broken, that we might live.

But listen, the New Creation, God's work of renewing all things, and putting everything right, is not something in the far ahead, never-going-to-happen future. It begins now. You see as you put your trust in the Lord Jesus, as you're made alive for the first time by his Spirit, you become a part of that new creation now. Listen to how Paul puts it, 2 Cor 5:17: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.'

So if you're already a Christian, you're already part of the new creation – so let us live as those who do not live as this world is our home, but live and work and share our lives as those who live for the one to come. And if you're not yet a Christian, consider what Jesus has done for you, and put your trust in him, and be reconciled to him, that you too might become part of God's renewal of all things.