REVELATION 21:1-5
THE NEW AGE DAWNS

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Who here is a Mac user? Well, a little over a year ago, I owned a MacBook. I used it a lot when I was working at the church office. However, it was about 8 years old and getting pretty slow. It ran OS X Leopard, if that means anything to you. The web browser stopped working after about an hour. It didn't sync with newer computers and it only ran the 2008 version of Pages. So whenever I created a Pages file on a newer computer, I had to turn it into a Word file and email it to myself in order to open it on the MacBook. Is this what I was stuck with? Is that all there was? Well, I had just turned 30 and some of my family had promised to give me money towards getting one of the brand new, beautiful, sparkling, MacBook Pros, running operating system OS Sierra. No more crashing. No more incompatible files. Just pure Mac pleasure.

I wonder it you ever feel like you're stuck with "*Life* Version OS X Leopard". Just take a moment to think of something that might make your life feel sort of old, tired, broken, frustrating, or disappointing. Maybe it's financial worries. An ongoing health problem. A broken relationship. Loneliness. Negative emotions out of control. Exhaustion. Disillusionment. Regret. Struggle with sin. Trouble at work for being a Christian. God feeling far away. Do you find yourself asking "is this what I'm stuck with, is this all there is?" Even if you feel like your life is going pretty well at the moment, would you really be OK with this being all there is - a few years of empty pleasure then oblivion?

I think most of us wish deep down we could throw out the old life and have a beautiful, sparkling, brand new "Life Version OS Sierra"? You might think that's too much to ask. But we're going to see that the Bible's answer is "yes, yes, 1000 times yes!" But to see this answer, we need to take a trip into the distant future.

The book of Revelation was written by a man called John to seven different churches who were all, like us, stuck with "Life Version OS X Leopard". They were full of internal struggles and sins, and they were suffering persecution for their faith. And here in chapter 21, John sees a magnificent vision of what will happen after the day when God judges the world, right at the end of time. As you'd expect for a vision, it's full of metaphors and imagery. But there are real facts behind these fantastical images. You'll see in verse 5 that God himself assures us that *"these words are trustworthy and true"*. This is no fantasy. This is history. *Future* history. *Our* future history. And it's the most unbelievable answer to the question "is this all there is?"

Let's read Revelation 21:1-5.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ***2*** *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* ***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.* ***4*** *He 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." ***5*** *And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."* (ESV)

We've all seen trailers for movies. It gives you a preview of the plot-line without revealing all the details. (Although after some trailers you feel like you've seen the whole movie.) It makes you want to watch it. Well, we're going to imagine that this passage is the trailer for eternity. It's a sneak preview of what will happen in the future. Not as much detail as we might wish we could have. But enough to whet our appetites.

Well, to start with there's a little introduction to the trailer, which simply tells us what will happen to this world:

1. OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW...

The lights go dim. Quietly dramatic music fades in, and we hear a deep voice quoting verse 1: "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away". So what is going to happen to this world? It's going to end. A day is coming when everything in existence will no longer exist. That's a pretty big thought, isn't it. Sometimes the Bible seems to suggest that everything will be completely destroyed, and other times that it will be totally dismantled and rebuilt into something new. Whichever it is, we can be sure that this universe will disappear forever. So that chair you're sitting on: gone. Your house and your money and all your stuff: gone. Lake Geneva: gone. The United States of America: gone. The sun: gone. Your body: gone. And you might be surprised to see that, according to verse 1, even heaven: gone. The souls of Christians who have died are already in heaven with God. But even that place will one day pass away to make room for something new!

Why does the world need to end? Well the deep voice then quotes verse 4: "the former things have passed away". That is, this world must end because all those things that spoil this world - the sin and the suffering - must be destroyed.

This is not all there is! We are not stuck with Life Version OS X Leopard! It's going to be thrown out and replaced with "Life Version OS Sierra". Verse 1: "a new heaven and a new earth". Verse 2: "new Jerusalem". And verse 5: "Behold, I am making all things new". This is far more than just a clean-up and an upgrade. It's an entirely *new* creation to replace the old, corrupted one.

Our world dreams of this, doesn't it. We see it everywhere: Snow White on her way to the castle in the clouds. Frodo sailing away from Middle Earth to the Undying Lands. Communist hopes of a utopia. Even "make America great again!" All ultimately empty dreams. But the New Creation is no dream. Out with the old, in with the new.

OK, we might think, sounds promising, but how do we know this new world will be any better than this one? I wonder what you usually imagine if you ever think about eternity. Do you imagine angels on clouds playing harps while a mass of people intone solemn hymns for all eternity? Well, I want you to forget that stereotype! We've watched the introduction, now the actual trailer is about to begin. And we're going to see what this new world is like. Fasten your seat-belts. Here we go. The title of the movie fades dramatically onto the screen:

2. THE BEST IS YET TO COME...

Epic music starts to gently swell as images of the New Creation appear. What is it like? Well, the first thing we notice is that we're not just "going to heaven" - some floaty, ethereal, spiritual place. Verse 1: it's specifically a *"new earth"*. A physical place. But of course perfectly *spiritual* as well. This passage doesn't focus on what it will look like, but I imagine it will have everything we love about this world, but probably a million times better than we can imagine. So it will be **a real place**. The best is yet to come!

As we watch the trailer, the music builds in intensity and, verse 2, a great, dazzling city descends from heaven. Except this is not some heavenly Manhattan. In Revelation, the holy city is a *people*. Here we have all of God's people arriving on the new earth. Then trumpets sound out a bold and beautiful theme - it is a wedding song. As we look again at the city it seems to take on the form of a woman dressed as a bride, in white robes so beautiful and pure that we can hardly look at her. Then it dawns on us who she is, who this people is. These are people who, like all of mankind, were covered with the filth of their own self-centred rebellion against God. They were under God's just condemnation. But Revelation 7 tells us that they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb". They are everyone who has trusted in Jesus to die in their place, to take the punishment they deserve, to clean up all their filth and make them perfectly pure in God's eyes. And they will be his Bride. That means that one day God and his people will be bound together. A perfect, unbreakable union. They who were once rebels will be cherished and protected like a beloved wife. And Revelation 19 tell us that the Bride's wedding clothes are also their beautiful new, God-honouring lives. If you've been to a wedding, you'll know that look on a bride's face as she walks down the aisle. The joy, excitement and relief that the day is finally here. Well, the Bride is us. She is God's **redeemed people**. The best is yet to come!

The trailer continues. The music now swells to a massive climax and then suddenly stops. In the profound silence, we see that the Bride is now in God's arms. With a strong but tender voice he says these beautiful words: "behold, the dwelling place of God is now with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God". We're now at the very heart of what the New Creation is all about - intimate relationship with God. This is the resolution of all history. It's what we were made for. It's what we lost when we were banished from Eden. It's what the whole Bible story seeks to get back again. It's why Jesus died to save us - to reconcile us to God. It's why this passage pictures us as the "new Jerusalem" - the city where God's presence lived in the Old Testament - now we can all live in his presence. It's why this verse pictures us as a bride walking down the aisle to be united to her husband. One day we will at last know the fullness of his love towards us as he says to us "my people". And we will at last know what it is like to love him fully as we say back to him "our God". I think it's hard to imagine how incredible this will be, since our hearts are still so cold and not used to knowing God's love or to loving God. But just try to imagine for a moment what it will feel like to stumble wearily over the doorstep of the New Creation and to be taken up into God's arms and hear him say "welcome home at last, precious one". What an indescribable joy, peace and contentment we will know right then, as we cry out: "yes, this is what I was made for, this is what I was looking for all my life, this is what didn't feel right all that time, this is all I need for all eternity". **Perfect relationship** with God. The best is yet to come!

And then, in the trailer, we hear soothing music, and the camerawork goes from dramatic to intimate, as we zoom in on the face of the Bride. Verse 4, we see a tear of pain still on her cheek from her life in this world and we see the wonder and relief in her eyes as God

himself gently reaches out to stroke away the tear. We've just seen what *is* there at the heart of the New Creation: God. Now we see what is definitely *not* there: suffering. And the two things are connected aren't they. There is only suffering in this world because it is a fallen world. But if the problem of relationship with God is solved, all other problems evaporate as well. Just imagine that new world: No more funerals, for we'll have everlasting life. No more care homes, for we'll have everlasting youth. No more hospitals, for we'll have perfect health. No more police or prisons, for we'll perfectly care for one another. No more military, for we'll have perfect peace and security. No more relief workers, for we'll have all the food, possessions and security we need. No more counsellors, for we'll always be perfectly content in ourselves. No more divisions, or disputes, or loneliness, or loss, or pain, or fear, or worry, or confusion, or exhaustion, or frustration, or disappointment, or regret, or despair. Only perfect, indescribable joy, peace and contentment, 24/7, getting better and better forever. And of course, best of all, no more guilt, no more failure in the battle with sin, no more struggle to love God as we should, no more feeling like God is far away. That will be the greatest comfort of all. So there will be **rest from suffering**. The best is yet to come!

The trailer fades out and the lights come back on. We all plod out of the cinema back into the cold air of this world. But we know our lives will never be the same again. In our final point, let's think about how the New Creation totally transforms the way we live now.

3. SO LIVE FOR ETERNITY NOW!

I want to think briefly about four ways the New Creation impacts life now, and they all begin with C!

1. Be **confident**

The New Creation often just feels a bit unreal, distant, not really relevant to life. That is, if we even think about it all. Is it just some pie-in-the-sky? Well, this passage gives us confidence that the New Creation is real. As real as the building we're sitting in now. This is actually going to happen. If you are a Christian, you are *actually going to be there*. It doesn't belong in a fairy tale. It belongs on our calendars: "do shopping, fix bike, go to New Creation".

I think sometimes we're also afraid that God might not let us in to the New Creation. But remember that the Bride is only there because she was washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. If you have come back to God and trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, you can be 100% confident that God will welcome you home with open arms. If that's not you yet, can I encourage you to reflect on these things. The one thing we mustn't say on that day is: "please accept me, I've tried to be a good person". Only trusting in Jesus' death on the cross can get us ready for that day.

A friend of mine had a close friend who sadly died of leukaemia at the age of 20. Yet those who saw him before he died spoke of his confidence in the face of death. He was not afraid. He knew he was washed clean. He was ready for the wedding day. Be confident.

2. Be **comforted**

Remember my old MacBook? What kept me going was the promise of the new MacBook Pro. What keeps the Bride going during the long engagement period is the promise of the wedding day. As we said at the beginning, we all get bogged down by troubles and trials. But this passage is supposed to be a massive comfort to us in our suffering. Of course I'm

not suggesting that we should all put on plastic smiles when things are hard. God knows and understands our pain. It's OK to hurt. It's OK to cry. It's OK to grieve. But the New Creation is an endless well of comfort that we're meant to draw from whenever life is hard. It's the ultimate incentive to keep us pressing on when we feel like we can't get back up again. It won't last forever. The former things will pass away, nothing more than dim memories. We're going home. We'll be with God. He'll wipe every tear from our eyes. He is making all things new.

But even if you already know all this, I want to ask you how often you actually turn to the New Creation for comfort in your suffering. I think we're really not very good at looking past our present suffering. We have to *choose* to fix our minds and hearts on eternity. So if you're worn down with worry about money, your career or the future, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when you will lack nothing and the future will always be secure. If you suffer from an ongoing health problem that stops you living the life you wish you could live, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when all sickness will be gone forever. If you're tired with your work or studies, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when work will always satisfying. If you are scarred from a broken relationship, or you're lonely and long for a relationship, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when you will be perfectly satisfied in intimate friendship with God and other people. If you feel like you've missed your chance in life and that it's too late, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when you get to start again and live a life of purpose and contentment. If you struggle with negative emotions - anxiety, low self-esteem, frustration, exhaustion, disillusionment, loss, despair, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when you'll want to dance and sing in unspeakable joy. If you're suffering mockery, exclusion or restrictions at work for being a Christian, *choose* to fill your mind with be the day when everyone will bow the knee to Jesus. And if you're feeling weighed down and defeated by your own sin and God just feels far away, *choose* to fill your mind with the day when you'll know the full warmth of his love, and love for him will just pour from your heart.

Horatio Spafford was a man who lived in 19th century Chicago. He'd already lost most of his property in a fire and lost his son to scarlet fever. And then, as his wife and four daughters were on their way to England, their ship was hit and all four daughters drowned. As he himself sailed to England and passed over the site of the tragedy, he wrote the famous hymn *It is Well with my Soul*. The hymn speaks of how, even in terrible sufferings, he can still say "it is well with my soul", since he is safe in Christ, and ultimately, he is looking forward to the day when God will "whisper peace to my soul". Be comforted.

3. Be **committed**

Do you struggle to feel excited about the New Creation? I think this passage convicts us that we're all far too interested in this life, especially if things are going well. We start to think this world is what really matters, that life after death is just a bonus. Now I don't want to suggest that this life is just a meaningless chore to get through while we wait for it all to go in the trash. The New Testament says that we can enjoy the things of this world, that we should be responsible members of this world, and that the spiritual blessings of the world to come have already broken into the present. But I think this passage helps us put things in perspective. This life is just a tiny, fleeting breath compared to the vast swathes of time that are going to roll on for eternity. C. S. Lewis ends his final Narnia book *The Last Battle*, by saying that this life *"had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before".* [C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle, London, Harper Collins, 1980, p. 224.] In the same book, he talks about this life as being like a shadow of the life to come. Imagine that I've tried to upload the new OS Sierra

operating system on my old Macbook. It runs, but not very well. It's just a shadow, a foretaste, while I eagerly anticipate the new Macbook Pro. The spiritual blessings of the world to come have already been uploaded into our lives. But it doesn't run very well on our old hardware. It's just a shadow, a foretaste, while we eagerly await the New Creation.

We can often be like children who've been promised a trip to Disneyland but are more interested in playing on some rusty old swings. So why not pray every morning for God to help you get excited about eternity? And not because you think you're going to some sort of self-centred paradise. Instead, anticipate the joy of being with God forever. Anticipate the joy of being free from all suffering and all sin forever. Maybe take the time to read a book or sing some songs that warm your heart with eternity. And try and make decisions in the light of eternity. Ask yourself, "does this impact eternity? Does this help to keep me or someone else going as a Christian? Does this contribute towards saving someone for all eternity? Does this grow my own or someone else's character, producing fruit that will glorify Jesus forever? Be committed.

4. Be **courageous**

As Christians, we also suffer the costs of following a crucified Saviour. What else makes it worthwhile other than the New Creation? Eternity teaches us to be courageous in this life, to choose the hard road, because we know it's leading us home to be with our God forever. Live for eternity now!