**The Celestial City**

Text: Revelation 21:1-4

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**Scriptures:**  1 Corinthians 15:50-58; Joshua 3:14-17; Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Revelation 21:1-4

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 169, 27, 119:33-40, 466, 429, 523

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress

**Theme:** The new Jerusalem where there is intimate communion between God and His people without any suffering and death.

**Proposition:** Keep following Christ all the way to your eternal home.

**Introduction**

Today we come to the end of our series working through the first part of John Bunyan’s most famous book ‘The Pilgrims Progress’. We’ve been following the character Christian as he has journeyed from The City of Destruction, through the Wicket Gate, via The Interpreter’s House to the Cross and the Sepulchre. We’ve seen Christian climb the Hill Difficulty to the Palace Beautiful before descending into the Valley of Humiliation, passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and onto Vanity Fair. After Christian was held captive in Doubting Castle, he was guided by the shepherds on the Delectable Mountains and finally, as we’ll see today, He arrives at His destination: The Celestial City.

As we’ve followed Christian’s journey and focused on a range of Biblical texts, we’ve also seen some of the related theology summarised in different parts of the Heidelberg Catechism. If you are familiar with The Pilgrims Progress you will have noticed that I have not tried to include every detail, every character or every section of dialogue from the book in this sermon series. I have restricted our focus to the main places that Christian visits along his way.

The ‘end of the road’ for the character Christian was The Celestial City – representing the New Jerusalem in the New Heavens and New Earth. The ‘end of the road’ for all Christian pilgrims is their eternal home; in the words of 1 Peter 1:5 ‘*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading*’. Our text from Revelation 21:1-4 describes this future paradise with rich imagery that resonates with many earlier Scriptures which all point forward to this promised land.

1. **The blessed bride**

Think about this. What do you picture in your mind when you hear the word ‘bride’? Perhaps a radiant woman, wearing a beautiful white dress, perhaps with a necklace and ornate earrings, carrying a small posy of fresh flowers. In the book of Revelation, an angel shows author John ‘*the Bride, the wife of the Lamb*’ (21:9). Surprisingly, she is pictured in the symbolic imagery of this book as being, not a woman, but a city – radiant ‘*like a most rare jewel*’ (21:11). Why a city? Because this metropolis represents many individual people, symbolically 144,000 in number (Rev 7:4) ‘*from every tribe and language and people and nation*’ (Rev 5:9). This city bride is united to her husband the Divine Bridegroom.

True human marriage is the intimate covenant bond between a man and a woman, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until parted by death. This holy bond is used through Scripture as a powerful image of the relationship between God and His people. For example:

* ‘*My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away”*’ (SofS 2:10).
* “*I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD*” (Hos 2:20).
* *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church”* (Eph 5:31-32).

In our text John writes: “*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*” (Rev 21:2). As the characters Christian and Hopeful approach close to their final destination, The Celestial City, John Bunyan writes that they come to the country of ‘Beulah’. Beulah is a Hebrew word which means ‘married’. Isaiah prophesies of a land called ‘Married’ when He speaks on behalf of the Lord to the covenant community of Israel, saying: “*You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.*” (Isa 62:4-5).

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, the land of Beulah lies within sight of the Celestial City. It is a beautiful, delightful place with ‘very sweet and pleasant air’, continual birdsong and blooming flowers. Here the sun shines night and day because this land is beyond the Valley of the Shadow of Death and out of reach of Giant Despair. In this land of abundant goodness ‘*the contract between the Bride and the Bridegroom was renewed*’. A gardener there explained that the vineyards and gardens in the country of Beulah were planted there for the King’s own delights and also for the comfort of pilgrims. As John Bunyan draws on many Biblical references and allusions, he is portraying the joy, peace and blessing of knowing the Lord intimately in this life.

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses the comfort of ‘life eternal’ which can be felt in this life in these words: “*Even as I already now experience in my heart the beginning of eternal joy*”. The delight of being in ‘the country of Beulah’ is sometimes especially felt by those who are in the latter stages of this life; who have been pilgrims for many years and have walked through many valleys and over many hills as they have followed Jesus. For all of us, time moves on at the same pace. We are all closer to the end of this life than we were but a second, an hour, or a day ago.

However far away each one of us is today from the ‘end of the road’, the radiant glory of the Lord shines towards us from the promised holy city of Jerusalem, which is yet to come. A clear vision of this reality helps us to live this life well. It was author C.S. Lewis who famously said: “*If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next*”. As the pilgrims Christian and Hopeful enjoyed their time in the country of Beulah they could see clearly the reflection of the sun on the golden city which was to be their final destination.

Approaching closer to the glory of the Lord is exceedingly joyful in this life, but there is one more obstacle to overcome before we can enter into The Celestial City, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The Dark River**

Rivers can be barriers that stop travellers from moving forward. That is why fortified castles and cities were surrounded by water filled moats in medieval Europe and elsewhere. Trampers in New Zealand can get stuck when rivers rise, blocking their route and presenting great danger if a crossing is attempted. For the Israelites, about to enter the promised land of Canaan from the land of Moab, the Jordan River was a potential barrier. We were reminded of this in our earlier reading from Joshua 3. At that time the Jordan was running high, but the Lord caused the water to be held back so that the Israelites could cross over on dry ground, just as the previous generation had done through the Red sea.

John Bunyan draws on this Old Testament entrance into the promised land through a river when he describes a large water course separating the pilgrims from the gate into the Celestial City. There was ‘*no bridge to go over, and the river was very deep*’. Two angels who were accompanying the pilgrims explained ‘*you must go through, or you cannot come to the gate*’. ‘*Is there no other way?*’ the stunned pilgrims inquired. The angels explain that whilst Enoch and Elijah had avoided this river, no others have done so since, and will not do so until the last trumpet shall sound. The river represents death – which all people must face at the end of their lives on this earth (Heb 9:27), unless Christ should return first.

The association of death with a river that must be crossed is found in ancient mythologies. For example, the Greeks thought that Charon, the Ferryman of the Dead, transported people across the river in his boat. His fee was a single coin, which was place in the mouth of a corpse before burial. You might know that the name of the mythological watercourse was the Styx river {from which the stream that runs through some of the northern suburbs of Christchurch is named}.

The association of crossing the river with death has entered into Christian thought, partly through the linkage with crossing the Jordan into the promised land, but also through the huge influence of Bunyan’s book The Pilgrims Progress. Later, I plan for us to sing the hymn by William Williams ‘Guide me, O thou great Jehovah’ which includes the lyric: “*When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside. Death of death and hell’s Destruction, land me safe on Canaan’s side*”

Anxious fear of death is understandable. When we die it is an individual event that we have no prior personal experience of ourselves. Death is the loss of everything physical that we have known in this life, and it is the entrance into a future as yet unseen by our eyes on this side of the grave. Death is the enemy of the living. It is not natural and was not part of the good creation that God made. Physical death came into this world because firstly spiritual death entered in when our first ancestors Adam and Eve broke fellowship with God. The effects of this have spread to all the descendants of Adam and so death comes to all people because all have sinned (Rom 5:12). Even the youngest child is sinful by nature, being conceived in sin (Ps 51:5).

Bunyan writes that his character Hopeful’s feet found the river bottom as he crossed, but that Christian began to sink in deep waters. He cried out the words of Psalm 42:7 ‘*the billows go over my head, all the waves go over me*’. As Christian went down in "a great darkness and horror" recalling all his sins "*both since and before he began to be a Pilgrim*", Hopeful did all he could to ‘keep his brother's head above water’. This went on until Hopeful persuaded him that he was not lost, and that his faith in Christ would save him, which it did.

The personal experience of death does vary with individual people. For some it is more like the character Hopeful, who crossed the river with ease, for others, like the character Christian, it is more troublesome. However, for the Christian pilgrim there is no reason to be fearful or anxious because, in the words of 1 Cor 15:54 ‘*death is swallowed up in victory*’ – the sting has been removed. Imagine being bitten by a poisonous snake, but one whose venom glands have been removed. The experience of the bite might be a bit painful, but does not result in the loss of your life.

John Bunyan didn’t want to portray the experience of dying and death as being easy for every believer, and neither do I. However, for all who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Saviour, the sting of death has been removed. Brothers and sisters, ‘*thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*’ (1 Cor 15:57). Beyond the river, beyond death, for the Christian pilgrim is their glorious final destination, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The final destination**

Brothers and sisters today, God in the person of the Holy Spirit dwells within us as individual believers and together as a church (1 Cor 3:16-17). Today as a worshipping church, we have a foretaste of our heavenly home to come – ‘*the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*’ (Heb 12:22). Spiritually, in Christ, we are close to God, yet He remains in His heavenly abode whilst we are here on this earth.

But the day is coming when we will be with Him in a place where God will present amongst His people. Revelation 21:3 reveals this to us in these words: “*And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them*”. This home to which we, as progressing pilgrims, are heading is a holy place because it is the dwelling place, the tabernacle, of God. Unlike the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temple, this holy city is not temporary, but permanent. There the glorious presence of God will be with His people forever.

There, brothers and sisters, we will never be separated from intimate fellowship with Jesus. The church, His bride will be with her divine Bridegroom for eternity. She, we, will finally be completely holy by nature, without blemish (Eph 5:27). Our faith will be sight! We will be with Christ our Lord in glorified flesh. This will be paradise because God is there, and He is the source of all life, perfect peace, joy, and satisfaction. The New Jerusalem is full of God’s glory. Full of the myriads of angels and of saints. Full of brothers and sisters in Christ, some known, some yet to know. We will be home together with God and with one another! The first things will have passed away!

But not everything will be entirely different from how it is now. A common misunderstanding about our eternal home is that it will be completely unfamiliar, alien, foreign to us. It is true there are many details which the Lord has not revealed to us about our future home. The many mysteries that await us are spoken of in these words "*no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Cor 2:9, quoting Isa 64:4).

Yet there is much that we do know. As John, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit reveals: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea (Rev 21:1).* Notice that our future home with God is not an ethereal spiritual realm where we float around like disembodied people. It will be a physical place; a renewed planet with terra firma (solid ground). Notice that it will not be a new Mars, new Venus, new Saturn or Pluto. It will be a new heaven and new earth. It will be a physical place like this one with ground and sky. Recognisably similar to here. A place of beauty, design, order and function. A somewhat familiar environment: retaining all that is truly good in this world, having all that is not removed.

The words “no longer any sea” do not refer so much to the absence of any body of salt water, but symbolically to the total absence of evil (ref. Isa 57:20). In a world without evil, without sin, there is only good. The effects of sin in this groaning creation will be utterly removed; abolished forever. No more tears, no more death, no more mourning, crying or pain. All that is troublesome in this earth will be removed forever. In this eternal home there will be no sin, no pride, no malice, no hating one another, no hurting one another, no old age, nothing will be ugly or out of place.

The world will be remade, reformed, restored. The voice of God will say *“Behold I am making all things new”* (Rev 21:5). The New Heavens and New Earth will not be static and boring, but dynamic, stimulating and fascinating. This will not a place of aimless floating on clouds, but a realm in which God is gladly worshipped and served in the company of the best of friends, of the closest loving family. This will not be a place where desire is lost, but an eternal and continuous fulfilment of our deepest yearnings. This will be an exciting and compelling place.

Sound too good to be true? A future fantasy land of wishful human imagination? No. Most certainly not! God who is everlasting, timeless, The Alpha and Omega says, “It is done” (Rev 21:6a). Whilst the New Jerusalem is yet to be, because she is God’s work, her future existence is absolutely certain.

Let’s go back to The Pilgrim’s Progress one last time. Reaching the far bank of the river, the wet and weary Pilgrims find Shining Ones (angels) waiting for them. Their final climb up to the Celestial City is steep, for it stands “on a mighty hill . . . higher than the clouds.” The ascent for them is easy though because the Shining Ones, taking them by the arms, help them up and because “they had left their mortal garments behind them in the river.” As they are climbing, a company of the Heavenly Host comes out to greet them, as well as several of the King's trumpeters, who make the Heavens ring “*with loud melodious noises*”. Over the Celestial Gate is written in letters of gold: “*Blessed are they that do his Commandments, that they may have right to the Tree of Life and may enter in through the gate into the city*” – a reference to Rev 22:14. From the parapet above the gate, Enoch, Moses, Elijah and others look down.

The Pilgrims then hand in their certificates, which are carried forth to the “King of the place”. Satisfied after examining their credentials, the Lord orders the gate to be opened so that they “*that keep the truth may enter in*” (Isa 26:2). With bells pealing joyously, Christian and Hopeful walk into the city and are transfigured, putting on clothing that ‘shone like gold’. Each is given a golden harp and a gold crown, and they are soon marching along the gold-paved streets with many of the Heavenly Host, some of whom have wings. All are praising God as they enter into ‘*the joy of our Lord*’ (ref. Matt 25:21).

Bunyan concludes His account of Christian’s pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City with the words. ***‘****After they shut up the gates, which when I had seen, I wished myself among them’*. Do you also long for the City of God, the New Jerusalem, the church universal finally perfected, finally completely gathered in the presence of her Lord? Come to Christ, enjoy the foretastes of heaven now. Live in the country of ‘Beulah’ in close fellowship with Christ now. Do not fear death but be comforted by the glorious reality of what is most certainly yet to be.

“*Come Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen*” (Rev 22:20b-21).