

The Hope Crisis

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[0:00] If you've got a Bible, you can turn to Revelation 21, verse 1-5. This will be a pretty easy chapter in your Bible to find. It's the second to last chapter, so go right to the back and then just turn over one page and you should be there.

Revelation 21, we're going to read the first five verses this morning. This is the Apostle John, and this is what he writes.

Verse 1, Revelation 21.

Let's ask for God's help as we study. Gracious God, your word is truth. Your word is our sustenance, and so we ask that in your great mercy you would feed us this morning.

Feed us on truth. Help us to see what is in the scriptures clearly. Help us to be changed by what we see, Lord. We don't just want to engage in an intellectual exercise. We want to know you, and we want to become different people by what we see.

[1:54] Show us your son Jesus and his love for us. We ask this all by the strength of your spirit, for Christ's sake. Amen. So we finish off this little micro series, three weeks, called Life in Crisis.

We've been looking at various crises that people in our modern culture find themselves in, particularly young people, but I think it extends to a range of different people. We looked at the meaning crisis in week one.

We looked at the identity crisis last week, and this week we're going to talk about the hope crisis. Like I said, this ties in pretty neatly to some of the stuff we're going to talk about this evening, so there will be some repeated themes.

So, in fact, if you've got some questions after this morning service, I'm going to encourage you to come this evening, and you can bring those questions after we do the evening talk, and we can chat about it there.

But I want to start by making all the middle-aged, white, middle-class women happy, and that is talking about a movie called The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.

[2:58] See that in this last time? I was right. I knew it. I knew it. This is for those of you who are very sad that, like, BritBox is not available in South Africa anymore. But there was this 2012 movie called The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.

This drama with this ensemble cast of Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, Bill Nighy, all these sorts of characters. If you don't watch that sort of stuff, you're probably like, who are these people? Well, but some people know who these people are.

And it's a story that follows a group of British pensioners who move into a retirement hotel in India. A hotel that's not quite as it seemed at first.

The hotel is run by this very eager young Indian man named Sonny, this entrepreneur. And he has all these little pithy sayings all the way through the movie that he always comes back to.

The one saying that he repeats over and over again, all the way through the course of the movie, like when his relationship with his girlfriend is going bad, or when the finances in the hotel are going really bad.

[3:57] He says this. He says, It will be alright in the end, and if it's not alright, it's not yet the end. Now, it's a great little saying. The question is, is it true?

Will it be alright in the end? Here's a different perspective to Sonny's very, excuse the pun, Sonny disposition, but here's a different perspective.

It comes from the 20th century atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell. Doesn't seem quite as Sonny as the previous guy, but he says, That man is the product of causes which had no provision of the end they were achieving.

That his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. That no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave.

That all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system.

[5:07] And that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.

Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's salvation henceforth be safely built.

So in a very articulate, highfalutin way, he's basically saying, hope is an illusion. And you will never really live unless you face up to this despair.

Basically, he's saying, we have no basis for saying that it's going to be alright in the end. The reality, rather, is unyielding despair.

Now, it's kind of hard for me to see how honesty facing up to that reality provides a foundation upon which you can live your life, but that's what he says we've got to do. Because when I think about it, I think hope is fundamental to how we live.

[6:15] Totally critical and crucial to how we live. Timothy Keller gives this illustration. He says, imagine you have two women of the same age, the same socioeconomic status, the same educational level, and even the same temperament.

You hire both of them, and you say to each, you are part of an assembly line, and I want you to put part A into slot B, and then hand what you've assembled to someone else.

I want you to do that over and over for eight hours a day. Now, you put them in identical rooms with identical lighting, temperature, and ventilation. You give them the very same number of breaks in a day.

It's very, very boring work. Look, their conditions are the same in every way, except for one difference. You tell the first woman that at the end of the year, you will pay her \$30,000, and you tell the second woman that at the end of the year, you will pay her \$30 million.

After a couple of weeks, the first woman will be saying, isn't this tedious? Isn't this driving you insane? Aren't you thinking about quitting? And the second woman will say, no, I think this is perfectly acceptable.

[7:29] In fact, I whistle while I work. Now, if you have a hope crisis, I'm not sure you're going to whistle through this life. You have to have something significant coming down the line in the future, significant enough to hold your confidence and undergird your day-to-day, to get you up in the morning, to put one foot in front of the other.

And I don't think there's a better view of hope than the Christian view of hope. And so I'd like to unpack that for you a little bit this morning. You might be aware of this, but the Bible teaches in numerous different places that God is going to wrap up human history, that he's going to bring a giant closure to the story of human history, a positive closure, and a closure that in fact, some ways doesn't end the story, but just takes it on to newer heights going into the future.

And the way God is going to do this is by ushering in what the Bible calls the new heavens and the new earth when Christ returns. And I think that picture of hope is so beautiful, that picture that the end of Christianity portrays is so powerful, so compelling, that it can provide a far, far, far, far better basis for your life than anything else possibly can.

And so when we think about that Christian end, that Christian hope, there's two things I want you to see, two kind of headings for this morning's talk. Number one, the end of loneliness. And number two, the end of tears.

So here's the first one, the end of loneliness. Classic chapter in the Bible on the end is this chapter we just read this morning in Revelation 21. It's a highly symbolic view of the new heavens and the new earth.

[9:10] Let me go over the first four verses again with you. So look down, 21 verse one. Then I saw a new heavens and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea.

Surfers are all very sad about that verse, but I don't think it's literal, so we're safe. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully

dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. Now this is all part of this big vision, this very, very grand vision, over the top stylistic vision that the apostle John sees right towards the very end of his life.

He's an old man when he sees this. Chapter 21 is the vision that he gets to the new heavens and the new earth. The center of this particular vision is a divine proclamation about God.

[10:13] So there's a voice. And the first thing that the voice says is this. God will be with his people. God will be with his people. God himself will dwell with his people.

Now if you think about it, and you've just been reading the whole Bible up to this point, that's a slightly unexpected declaration because hasn't God always been with his people? I mean, isn't that what we as Christians believe?

Isn't that some of the comfort we draw, even in suffering and hardship? The Bible certainly seems to say that God is with his people. I mean, it's all over the Old Testament in the garden, right? At the very beginning, God walks in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve.

During the Exodus, he meets with them in the tent of meeting or in the tabernacle. During the time of the kings, he comes and he presents himself in the temple.

And then we have Jesus Christ. God come to be with us, walking with us, talking with us, sharing his life with us. Right at the very end of his ministry and his time with us, Jesus says these words, surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

[11:17] And as Christians, we have that promise made true to us by the fact that God deposits his Holy Spirit in us, putting God's presence in us. So whatever that bold voice then is declaring all the way at the very end in Revelation 21, it has to be more than everything we've seen in the past.

A fulfillment, a greater fulfillment of even these partial experiences of God's presence up to this point. It seems as if in the new heavens and the new earth, the very end of this present age, God is going to enter into a relationship with his people at a level of intimacy that we have never ever before experienced with him.

Dwelling of God will be with us, he will live with us, we will be his people and he himself will be with us and be our God. And this is important for us as human beings because we're built for intimacy.

We're made for intimacy, we're designed for community. You know that, I know that. We're not supposed to be solitary beings. As John Donne famously said, the poet, no man is an island.

That is a good, natural, biblical impulse to feel that and to think that. It's in scriptures. If you go right back to the very beginning of your Bible, it's in Genesis chapter 2. God declared, it's not good for man to be alone.

[12:34] That is not just a Christian pickup line. That is a statement about our communal nature as human beings. We're not supposed to be rugged individualists.

We're supposed to be in community, sharing significant levels of intimacy with other people, with our family members, with our friends, our church body. And there's actually, interestingly, a sense in which that feature goes even back before the beginning of your Bible, before Genesis 2.

It goes back to the time before time where God has, as far as we can tell from scripture and our theology of God, has eternally existed as one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who between themselves enjoy this absolute, perfect, and unbroken intimacy.

There is a mysterious sense in which we can say that God is intimate community. And so when God creates us, then what He does is He shares something of that with us, making us like Him there.

People who were designed for intimacy, people who were designed for community. Something like the intimacy and the community that He already experiences in and of Himself. The result is that you and I are just very deeply communal creatures.

[13:50] We need intimacy. We shrivel up and die without intimacy. In fact, if you think about this, intimacy, intimate relationships are the things we're probably most passionate about in life, most emotional about in life, most moved about.

If you think of the songs we write, the songs we sing, the most impassioned songs are those about intimacy, intimacy desired, intimacy gained, intimacy lost.

Those are the songs that you put on your, not your radio because no one has radios in their cars anymore, but whatever it is that you put on to listen to your music nowadays. And those are the ones that pull at your heartstrings the most as you listen to that.

But I think if you would stop and think about the different songs, the ones that are the most impassioned, the most emotive, the biggest tearjerkers are not so much the songs about intimacy gained, but about intimacy desired or intimacy lost.

So I really, really want a boyfriend or I can't believe my boyfriend just dumped me. Those songs. That's because we live in a world where our deepest longings, our deepest desires for relational intimacy are not fully met.

[15:08] we have a stirring in us, a stirring of incompleteness in our being. And that's not just if you happen to be single or particularly lonely in terms of human relationships.

You have the stirring inside of you even if you're in like a fantastic marriage. So it's in a sense, it's in a sense that there's more to be had.

There's more intimacy to be had. There are deeper intimacies to be had. Intimacies that not even the most spectacular human relationship can fulfill. I think we feel that.

We know that experience deep down. Deep down, we know even our best relationships don't fulfill us completely in terms of our need for intimacy. See, intimacy is relationship with transparent vulnerability.

That's how we define what intimacy is exactly. Relationship with transparent vulnerability. It comes from a Latin word, a word *intimus*, which means innermost. In other words, you have true intimacy when your innermost being is stripped bare before another individual.

[16:15] Now, ever since Adam and Eve picked up those fig leaves and covered their *intimus*, we have never had true and perfect intimacy like that. The type that God the Father enjoys with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

We have these longings, these desires and these longings. And those desires, those longings are not there to tempt, to just kind of taunt us. They're there to point us forward in hope to the fulfillment of them to a greater reality.

C.S. Lewis, the Christian writer, put it this way. He talked about these desires and these longings and he said they are, and I quote, only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

They're signposts pointing to their ultimate fulfillment, pointing to the day when they will be completely fulfilled. Now Revelation 21 tells us about that day.

The dwelling of God will be with us, he will live with us, we will be his people and he himself will be with us and be our God. Friends, that will be the end of loneliness.

[17:35] It will be and I want you to think about this deeply. Meditate on this. If you could take one thing home and think about this for the rest of the day, think about this because this is an incredible thought.

It will be the end of unfulfilled desire. Every single ache that you feel in your heart right now because of unfulfilled or lacking intimacy will be completely taken up and enveloped by the intimacy of God so that you then in your inner being, in your *intimus*, you will feel completely at one with him and with his people.

Isn't that an incredible thought? In the new heavens and the new earth, God is going to invite you in some mysterious way into that beautiful Trinitarian love and intimacy that he has always enjoyed.

He's going to let you in. He's going to come to you and he's going to say, come in. Come on in.

Come in and be loved. Come in and be accepted. Come in and be cherished to your heart's desire.

Come in and experience the complete fulfillment of every single relational desire and impulse that you have ever, ever had. Come and experience that.

[18:51] You see, friends, everything is going to be all right in the end. Because the end will be the end of loneliness and the beginning of perfect intimacy. That's the first thing I want you to see. Second thing is this.

It's not just the end of loneliness. It's also the end of tears altogether. So if you look down at verse 4, the proclamation says, he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new. And then he said, write this down for these words are trustworthy and true.

Now these are some of the most meaningful and emotional words in the Bible. I know you're not supposed to have favorite parts of the Bible because it's all God's word, but I'm like, this would be in my top three or four passages in the Bible.

But they're incredibly meaning and emotional words in the Bible, especially if you are no stranger to hurt and to suffering. And I think for all of us, the older we get, the more acquainted we get with hurt and with suffering.

[20:04] In fact, the vast majority of people on one occasion or another will experience incredibly painful experiences, gut-wrenching forms of suffering of one kind or another.

The loss of a loved one or a tragically broken relationship or a horrible violation of your person or the contraction of a chronic disease. There's almost nobody who's never touched by any of those sorts of things.

Acute suffering like that causes us to question. Question our existence or at least question whether or not life is worth living. In fact, in some ways, it's a bit of a mercy that we don't all feel each other's suffering at the same level of intensity as if we were experiencing it ourselves all the time because they would completely cripple us if we were exposed to suffering that way.

Because say maybe you experienced two or three instances of really acute suffering in your life, say you're lucky, you are well, well aware that there are many, many, many other people out there experiencing acute suffering in a variety of different ways all the time.

Think about our city right now. Given our city's crime stats this morning, it is highly likely that more than one woman in our city woke up having been raped last night.

[21:31] It's more than likely that there is a family waking up to find out their son was shot last night. Right now, there are families friends and friends sitting around loved ones at hospitals in the final stages of terminal cancer.

Given the economic climate of our country and our city, there are probably more than one man going home after work tomorrow to tell his wife that he has been retrenched and he has no possible way of dealing with the crushing debt that their family is in.

That is all happening right now just in our city. It's a mercy in some senses that God shields our hearts from the collective pain because we would not be able to bear it.

We would not be able to hold on. Life would not be worth living at that point. How do you even live in the face of all of that? But you need more than just being shielded from it because it's still a reality.

You need more than shielding from emotional trauma and suffering. You need actual hope, concrete hope because you absolutely have to have hope to make it through life.

[22:45] We cannot live without hope. J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Return of the King*, the second chapter, Sam and Frodo, the little hobbits, are in Mordor, the bad place.

It's all dark and it's all gloomy. The Land of the Shadows, it's described, and they're on their way to Mount Doom to finish the job. And Sam, at that point, is hit by a wave of despair that they're ever going to complete their mission.

After all of the suffering, all the hardship that they've been through up until this point, and he looks up and he sees a star above the dark mountains in the midst of the gloom. The clouds just part for a little second and he sees the star and the book captures it this way.

Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart as he looked up out of the forsaken land and hope returned to him. For like a shaft clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the shadow was only a small and passing thing.

There was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. life. You see, everybody needs hope to make it through the harshness of life. We are drawn to wanting to believe that.

[24:00] We're drawn to wanting to believe that the shadow is a small and passing thing and that there really is light and high beauty beyond its reach. We need that to be able to face suffering here, our own and the suffering of others because hope gets you through life and you're never going to get through life if you can't get through suffering.

In Timothy Keller's book, *Making Sense of God*, he points to an Austrian psychiatrist by the name of Viktor Frankl, famous guy, who was a Holocaust survivor in the death camps.

Now, Frankl, being a psychiatrist, wrote extensively about his own experience in the death camps and the experience of all the other people in the death camps and he noted that there were four ways that people responded to life in the death camps.

First of all, he said some people, it was a category of people who got really brutal in response to what they experienced and these were people who were, some of them were very nice people going in and they became very hard and very brutal people as a result of the experience of the death camps.

He then said there was a second group of people who just gave up, simply gave up, refused to get up in the morning, refused to get dressed, refused to keep washing themselves and these were some of the most optimistic people going in to the death camps.

[25 : 23] The third group of people hoped in life after the death camps, the hope of getting stuff back, the hope of getting back your health, getting back your family, getting back your wealth, getting back your professional achievements and your status.

Those people, he said, they all became incredibly depressed and broken after the war. And then he said there was a fourth group, a small group, he said, but a fourth group who obtained what he describes as an inner strength that raised them above their outward state because they held on to something that transcended not just the suffering of the camps but transcended even their own earthly achievements.

And so he actually counseled people because people would come to him and say, how do we get through this? And they would ask, how do we make it through this? And his counsel was this, life only has meaning, he said, if we have a hope that suffering and even death cannot destroy.

You see, hope gets us through suffering. But the problem is, we are most often like the third group of people there. We get our sense of hope from our health and our wealth and our family and our status.

And we think that we'll banish the pain or we'll at least sort of cover over the pain if we can get more of that stuff, if we can get it in greater measure, then we can somehow shield ourselves from the pain and we can get through it.

[26 : 45] But the reality is that those things, they all break down. They all don't last because they're not able to survive by themselves. They don't have built in them the resources to help you survive acute pain and suffering.

Wealth disappears in an instant, never to return. There's no guarantee on your money or your material possessions. You have no idea what's going to happen to the stock market tomorrow. Health disappears in a second.

One minute you're on the golf course, the next minute you're in a hospital. Family breaks up. Even that thing that we think is so secure, that breaks up. People die. People hurt each other.

They separate. They divorce. They ostracize. And status, status is incredibly fleeting, especially in our culture today. One minute you're the flavor of the month, the next minute everybody's forgotten about you.

If those things are your ultimate hope in life, then I would suggest you're in a very, very dangerous place. A very, very dangerous, very fragile place. But what if there's a hope beyond those hopes?

[27 : 51] A hope, a sure hope, a more powerful hope? A hope that isn't sort of mere compensation for a bad hand that you've been dealt in life, but a hope that actually undoes pain and suffering.

What if there's a hope like that out there? Well, there is a hope like that in Revelation 21. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

You see, friends, what's being described there is God putting everything right. This is the renewal of all things. The hope of the Christian in the face of acute suffering is not that God is going to sort of like pat you on the back one day and say, sorry you had a rough time, but here's paradise.

The hope of the Christian is that God is going to renew the heavens and the earth. And that when you, in your renewed and resurrected body, get into the renewed heavens and the earth, and you stand there with God in that perfect intimacy, you will be able to look over your life, over human history, and all the pain and all the suffering that has gone before and be completely justified in your heart of hearts in that moment.

That's the renewal of all things. You see, it must be a total renewal of everything in that sense, that somehow accounts for, somehow justifies all the suffering, all the pain that has gone before, because that would be the only way in which God could definitively wipe away every single tear.

[29 : 33] God is making all things new. In fact, there's a sense in which he's already begun to make all things new. We started off with a movie that was in 2012.

In 2004, there was a movie that caused quite a stir in the Christian community. I was a relatively new Christian at that stage, starting out in Christian ministry, and so I can remember all the books being written about and the opinions being floated about, and that was Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*, this R-rated blood and gore movie of the final moments of Jesus Christ.

And there's a lot of interesting stuff in that movie. There's a lot of really strange stuff in that movie. Mel Gibson has a very peculiar form of Roman Catholicism that I'm not even sure most Roman Catholics would agree with.

And he inserts some of his ideas into the movie. So there are several things that you would see in the movie if you ever had the stomach to watch it, that you won't find anywhere in your Bibles, you won't find it in the Gospel accounts of Jesus, but that he inserts in there.

There is one thing, though, that he inserts in the movie that is not in the Bible, and yet in some ways it does kind of do justice to the theology of what's going on. There's a moment where Jesus is walking through the crowded streets of Jerusalem, now carrying the cross on his back, and he stumbles and he falls, and as he stumbles and he falls, his mother comes right by him.

[30 : 54] Now there's no account like this in the Bible, but Mel Gibson portrays it, he falls, and he turns to her, and he's got the blood streaming down, the crown of thorns, everything, and he says, look, mother, I make all things new.

See, because the cross is the down payment. It's the down payment that all things will be made new. The cross is the statement to you, the cross is the statement to me, that all things will be right in the end.

And if they are not all right, well, then it's not yet the end. You see, because according to Christian theology, according to the Bible, Jesus dying on the cross in some mind-blowing way absorbs into himself all of the darkness, all the sinfulness, all the brokenness of this world, and he crushes it. He beats it down dead as he himself dies, making it then possible for him to one day return and usher in a new creation where there are no more tears, where there is no more loneliness, and everything will be all right, because then it will be the end.

Tolkien, in that book, *The Return of the King*, he uses the phrase, everything sad will come untrue. Have you heard that somewhere?

[32 : 22] Everything sad will come untrue. That's the Christian hope. You want to summarize it? That is what it is. Everything sad will come untrue. And so I really just cannot think of a more comprehensive solution to our conflicted world, our conflicted history, our conflicted hearts, our conflicted experiences.

I cannot think of a more powerful hope for us to cling to than that biblical hope. Let's ask that God would help us to really, really, really take hold of that hope in our heart of hearts together.

Let's pray. Our Father and our King, this vision is glorious, and it is made that much more glorious because we do know pain, and we do know suffering, and we do know hardship.

And so that biblical vision of having every tear wiped away, of being with you in endless perfect intimacy, that is a wonderful vision, Lord.

And we know because of Christ, we know because of what he achieved on the cross, that is a vision that has been secured for us, a reality that has been secured for us. And so I ask, Lord, that in the midst of our struggles now, in the midst of our trials, in the midst of our ups and downs, you would teach us to cling to that vision, Lord.

[33 : 46] Because we so easily block it out sometimes. We so easily forget about it. We lose hope. We struggle. So keep our eyes and our hearts clear on the end.

May your Spirit work that truth into us deeply, Lord. Father, we would be changed people, different people, if we could live with that end vision in mind all the time. Make us those changed people, we pray.

And I pray, Lord, for anyone who's in acute suffering right now, that you would in a special way minister this truth to their heart this morning. We ask this for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen. Amen. Amen.