

Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith
“What Are the New Heavens and the New Earth?”

Revelation 21:9-22:5

Cedars Sermon Series

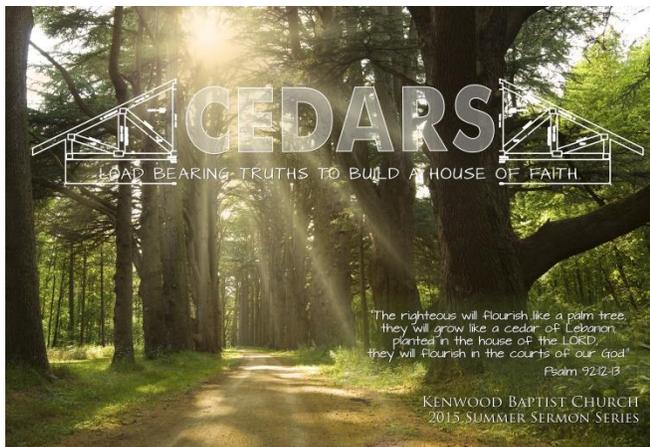
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

August 30, 2015

TEXT: Revelation 21:9-22:5

This Sunday we reach the conclusion of our summer series on the Cedars of Lebanon: Loadbearing Truths of God's Word. This morning we turn to the end of the story, and those who



know me well have heard me talk about experiencing a unique joy that I call ‘exegetical euphoria.’ It is a moment when my heart is inflamed by what I see in the Word of God. There is another experience that has happened just a few times. It is a paradigm shift. Thomas Kuhn, in his influential *book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, defines a paradigm shift as “a change in our basic assumptions, where one conceptual world is

replaced by another.” Kuhn says that “in science, that scientific progress actually is not an evolutionary, peaceful set of interludes, but actually it’s punctuated by a sudden revolutionary insight that changes everything.” When you have a paradigm shift, you move from one way of seeing the world to another way of seeing the world. If it involves dramatic change, that plays out for years and years in your life. When you are first confronted with a paradigm shift, you often resist it, and yet when it comes over you, life is lived in a new way that is truer and more compelling. This is what happened to me this week, and I’m very excited and pray that it happens to you as well.

What is the paradigm shift that is happening my own heart and mind? It is that as Christians, we have forgotten half of the ending of the Bible. The great ending of the Bible is nothing less than a creation of a new heavens and a new earth, and too often as Christians we speak of the ending as though heaven is a place out there, that we leave our body and earthly life behind and we float off into heaven. We’ve missed half the ending. The Bible’s picture is a full, complete picture. The Bible’s ending vision is not our leaving and going to heaven. The Bible’s ending picture is heaven’s coming down and renewing all things, and we have the privilege this morning of seeing this glorious ending in the passage before us. Richard Middleton writes:

“Not only is ‘heaven’ never used in Scripture for the eternal destiny of the redeemed, but continued use of ‘heaven’ to name the Christian hope may well divert our attention from the legitimate biblical expectation for the transformation of our earthly life so that it conforms to God’s purposes – a transformation that has already begun in Christ and that the church is called to live out in the present world.”

It is a paradigm shift. The Scripture we just read together describes the final vision of the Bible. Our summer series has been exploring loadbearing truths from Scripture, from beginning to end, and this morning we look at the Christian hope. We want to see it, for it is compellingly beautiful. Last week, we talked about Christ's return as conquering Warrior. He comes to judge the earth and remove evil from the world, and what happens next in the Scriptures is in Revelation 21:10. John writes:

“And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”

It is a city that is moving down towards the earth. This city is extraordinary and must capture and sanctify our imagination. The city is shining with a luminosity that is nothing less than the glory of God Himself. God's radiant splendor illuminates the city. As John looks at the city, he sees that the city is surrounded by a beautiful, majestic, high wall. All cities in the ancient world had walls defining the perimeter of the city, and the City of God has an extraordinary wall. It is a wall that has tremendous access on all sides of it. There are three gates on each side, and we read in Revelation 21:12:

“It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Those who know the Scripture will be reminded at this point that this city is similar to what the tabernacle was. The tabernacle encampment, the place of God's dwelling in the midst of His people was surrounded by the 12 tribes. Likewise, the City of God is surrounded by the 12 tribes. As he sees the City coming down closer into view, John sees in Revelation 21:14:

“The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

The City of God is a united city in which Old Testament hope and New Testament fulfillment exist together. It is like a massive tabernacle or temple, and we see this clearly in the next scene. As he continues to look at the city, he sees the city is laid out like a square. I remember my first time visiting Washington, D.C. As I drove into the city, I knew I had to go to 8th Street, and so went 8th Street. I saw 8th Street, and I knew my apartment was on 8th Street. But when I looked at the addresses, there was no number for my apartment building. I thought, “I've really been cheated. I've paid rent to move into a place that does not exist.” So I asked someone, and he said, “Which 8th Street are you on? There is a NE, SE, NW, NE, four different

quadrants.” He finally directed me to the right direction, and it did end up a legitimate building with a great view of the Capitol Dome, and God use that time in my life. But, Washington, D.C. is laid out like square, because it was a planned city. The New Jerusalem is not a city planned by the mind of an urban, master architect. It was planned by God, the Master Architect. The City of God is a square, and as we look at it longer, it turns out the City of God is a cube. There is only one other structure in the Bible that is cube-shaped, and that is the Holy of Holies. The dimensions of the City of God are the same as those of the Holy of Holies, only times 1000. This city turns out to be massive in size. Just the length of the City of God is said to be 12,000 stadia. A *stadium* is the Greek distance of a 200 meter race, so this turns out to be roughly 1500 miles in length. One side of the City of God is almost two-thirds the size of the continental United States. This is massive, and we will see why it needs to be so massive in just a moment. But, I want you to see that the City of God is planned by the ultimate Architect; the City of God is built by God Himself, and it is like the Temple that He designed, except this Temple is filling the earth. The wall of the city is beautiful, and we hear a detailed description of the precious stones that adorn the city walls. Again, we have seen these stones before on the breastplate of the high priest. They are also stones described as being placed by God in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:12 we read that concerning the Garden of Eden:

“And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.”

God, out of His lavish generosity and creativity, decided to place them there, and this city, which is like the Tabernacle, which is like the Temple, turns out to be similar to the Garden of Eden. John keeps unfolding the picture in Revelation 21:21:

“The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.”

The Greek term used here for *street* is *platia*, which is a gathering place. In every town and every city there is a central square where the people gather, and this gathering place John is describing is made of pure gold. John says in Revelation 21:22:

“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”

The whole city is a radiant temple, an extraordinary vision of the City of God. The City of God, just like the church of Christ, is not a static, lifeless entity. As we see the City of God further, we discover that the City of God is set down in the midst of a renewed earth. The gates of the city are never closed. There is never any need for danger to be kept out. John looks outside the walls, and he sees the nations of the world walking by the light of the city. Not only is there life outside the walls, but the kings of this world are streaming into the city whose gates are never closed, and they are bringing their gifts into the city. They are bringing the fruit of their labor. This fulfills the vision of Isaiah 60:1-5 when the Lord speaks to the City of God:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ... And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.”

In Isaiah 60, this is described in very concrete ways as multitudes of camels, flocks of Kedar, doves flying in through the gates, and the coast lands bringing their gifts and their people streaming into the city. The gates in Isaiah 60 are open day and night, that people may enter. The City of God is in the midst of a renewed heavens and earth, and we see this transformation even further in that the people that are coming in have been transformed. In Revelation 21:27, John says:

“Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

You and I are impure. *Impure* in Scripture is a term for those who are unclean, ritually so or sinful. When John says *nothing impure*, in this case it doesn't mean an object, but it is people. No impure person comes in, no person enters who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The people streaming into the city are the people of God who have been remade, refashioned by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, transformed, renewed humanity, redeemed, streaming into the city. For many of us who have lived our lives thinking that the end of the biblical story is that we fly way to heaven, this is a paradigm shift. The Bible's ending is that heaven comes down. The Lord's Prayer is finally answered: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Around the Palmer dinner table this week, we had a paradigm shift conversation on this topic. It was fantastic. It anticipated all the thoughts that I imagine are coming through your minds right now. Some of you are wondering: “Is this world, is this creation really going to be renewed?” Listen to Revelation 22:1-2:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.”

This image of a river of the water of life comes straight from Ezekiel 47 when Ezekiel sees, in the renewal and restoration of all things, a river coming out from the throne of God in the sanctuary. As an angel leads Ezekiel 500 steps at a time further out, the river gets deeper, ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep, until it is finally a rushing river. This river then comes out and renews the world, and it is expressed in very real, concrete terms. Ezekiel says: “saw by the bank of the river many trees. I saw that wherever the river goes, living creatures are swarming,” just like in Genesis 1. Then he says in Ezekiel 47:9:

“And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes.”

Wherever the water goes, the sea is renewed, and everything there lives. On the banks of the river, both sides, grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither. Their fruit will not fail. They will bear fresh fruit every month because of the water that flows from the sanctuary, and their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing. God's intention is to renew the heavens and the earth. He says in Revelation 22:3:

"No longer will there be any curse."

Humanity has access to the tree of life. The tree of life brings healing for the nations. There is no longer the curse of judgment. The curse of judgment in the Garden of Eden came on humanity for our sinfulness and also on creation. Creation was accursed because of the sin of humanity. We read in Genesis 3:17 that God said to Adam:

"Cursed is the ground because of you."

Creation is renewed in the end of Scripture. The throne of God and the Lamb are in the city, and His servants will serve Him, reflecting the original commission of humanity in the Garden of Eden to serve the Lord and to reflect His dominion in the world. We see His face shining, no more night. We see the Lord God and reign with Him for ever and ever. In the imagery of Revelation 21 and 22, this reign is happening on a renewed heavens and earth. Humanity fulfills the original commission of God, having been restored and renewed to live eternally. Heaven is not a place that we fly away from while the earth is crumpled up and thrown away. The ending of the Bible is of God, renewing and restoring everything. One of the most under-informed comments you will ever hear is someone saying to you, "I'm not sure I want to go to heaven. I think it might be boring." When you understand the Bible's description of heaven, you would never imagine this. That is why we need the Word of God. Again, Richard Middleton says:

"John sees a new heaven and earth, with a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, and this vision is accompanied by a variety of images to depict God's full presence to his people, including God's dwelling, face, throne, and light. Not only will God's people now risen to new life worship and commune with him, but also, in accordance with Old Testament expectation, 'they will reign forever and ever.' Thus, the final state of the righteous is unmistakably depicted in terms of resurrection and earthly rule."

This is the summons. This is the ending of the Scriptures.

I remember visiting with one of my teachers in seminary. I had learned so much from him, so Christine and I invited this very learned, well-published scholar and his wife to our apartment for dinner. I remember asking him: "Does the Bible really see a renewed earth in the end?" This elderly man, who had walked Christ for decades, just looked at me and said: "Of course, otherwise the devil would have won." I have thought about this for maybe 20 years now, and I just hadn't been able to integrate what he meant by that until this week. God's original

intention was to make image-bearers in His likeness, to reflect His glory. His intention in the prophets is that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord like the waters cover the sea. The devil tried to wreck this design through sin, with the images reflected poorly. But God has solved our sinfulness in the atoning death of Christ, and He has committed Himself to renew and remake and transform us to reflect the radiant splendor of Christ, the image of God. He will display this forever in a renewed heavens and earth, in which righteousness dwells. Does the Scripture really envision a renewal of all creation? Isaiah 11:1-4 tells us about the Messiah:

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, ... with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”

What happens next? Not that we all fly away. We see in Isaiah 11:6-9:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ...They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

Do you anticipate with joy and expectation the end of violence? I do. The older I get, the more I long for the end of violence in this world, and it is coming by God who renews all things and judges evil and gets rid of it forever. No more culture of death, as Pope John Paul II described our era. This is overturned in Christ. The nations are streaming towards the City of God. Does the Bible teach the renewal of all creation? Listen to Paul in Romans 8:18:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

He says in Romans 8:19-20:

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility [in the garden], not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope...”

What is this hope? We see in Romans 8:21:

“...that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

There is coming a day when evil will be removed from the world forever. There will be no more devil, no more sin, no more death, no more hell here on earth in any measure, and it will be a renewal of everything. Jesus Himself, in Matthew 19:28, looked at His disciples and He said to

them:

“Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The word that Jesus uses here in Greek is *another Genesis, another re-creation*. I know a common objection is rising up within your mind: “Doesn’t the Bible say the earth is going to be destroyed by fire?” In the King James translation of 2 Peter 3:10, this is described in this way:

*“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein **shall be burned up.**”*

The King James translation gives us this picture of the earth being utterly destroyed and thrown out. This translation is based on what is called the *Textus Receptus*, the best Greek manuscripts they had when the translators did their work. Since the translation was done, though, a number of earlier manuscripts have been found, more reliable, earlier depictions, and all modern translations of 2 Peter 3:10 are based on this better reading, which does not say that the earth will be burned up. It says that the fiery judgment of God will not be for destruction but will be for a refining fire, a transforming fire. The NRSV version says:

*“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it **will be disclosed.**”*

The New International Version says:

*“... and the earth and everything done in it **will be laid bare.**”*

The ESV version says:

*“... and the earth and the works that are done on it **will be exposed.**”*

A very literal translation of this expression would be that “the earth and all that is done on it **will be found out.**” It will be made known. What if God’s returning fiery judgment is not to crumple up the earth and destroy it, but to purge it from evil, sin, and destroying elements both within us and the cosmos? It is a refining fire, not destruction, but purification. Others are thinking to yourself: “Doesn’t the Bible describe the new heavens and new earth as something totally new?” Many of us have imagined that there is no continuity between this world and the world to come. The Lord says in Isaiah 65:17:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”

Many of us imagine that there is a total break between this world and the world to come. Let me remind you that both in Hebrew and in Greek the word for *new* and *renew* is the same.

Three biblical expressions illustrate this. One of them is the *new moon*. When we see the new moon, is that because the old moon has been destroyed or that the moon is renewed in our sight? When God says, "I will make a new covenant" in Jeremiah, it is a renewal of the covenant. When the Lord says, "I will make you a new creation in Christ," praise God that there is some continuity between our personhood before knowing Christ and afterward. Wouldn't it be difficult to explain Christianity if every time someone came to believe in Christ he would turn into a totally different person, and you thought, "Where did they go?" To be a new creation in Christ is a restoration, a transformation, a renewal into the image of Christ. So the new heavens and new earth will have some degree of continuity with what has been. The earth and heavens will rejoice at the return of God. The ending of the Bible is a fulfillment of God's original intention in the Garden of Eden, made possible by the atoning work of Christ. Some from all nations redeemed, streaming into the City, a life of worship and meaningful activity together.

I want to close with three applications. They are very different from each other. This is a sermon where I think there could be 1000 applications, but let me give three. The first may seem utterly unrelated to you. The first application that I want to set before us gently is that we renew our commitment to the distinctive practice of Christian burial. What does this have to do with the new heavens and new earth? In fact, it actually has quite a bit to do with it. The ancient world knew two opposite modes of disposing of the dead. Ancient Greeks and Romans burned the bodies. On the one hand, they believed in the immortality of the soul, but they thought the body was evil or corrupt, and it was burned up. On the same continuum, for different religious reasons, Hindus burned bodies and released them into a Karmic Cycle, reflecting their beliefs. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Egyptians took tremendous care to mummify the bodies, and they wanted to preserve the corpse. We actually have corpses of the great pharaohs. You can look at Ramesses. He doesn't look like he did, but his body is still presently preserved. So, you have very different religious motivations for burning bodies and for preserving them. In the midst of these alternatives in antiquity, Christians came forward with a very different burial practice. It was distinctively Christian to lay the bodies in tombs with loving care. The bodies were treated with respect and honor because the body of human beings was seen as created by God, bearing His image. The bodies of believers affirm the centrality of the incarnation, that God came to earth as a man with a human body. Laying bodies carefully in the grave reminds us that the Spirit has indwelt these bodies and made them vessels of honor. Ultimately, the example is of Jesus Himself, who was buried with loving care, His body laid in the tomb in the sure, certain hope of resurrection to a glorified body and a new heavens and new earth. Let me be very clear. God does not need the body in order to give us a glorified body. You can die in a plane crash, you can be buried at sea. God is not limited. You can be incinerated in an accident. God is not limited by that, let me be very clear. But let me also be clear that it is a distinctively Christian practice to care for those who have died, and to model in

our celebrations at funerals or memorial services the distinctive Christian hope of resurrection. The first cremation that took place in the United States happened in 1876, and it was accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin and Hindu scriptures. Very few people had this practice until recent times. In 1962, five percent of Americans were cremated. By 2000, it was twenty-five percent, and that has only increased today. Again, let me be very gentle and clear. I am not condemning anyone who has practiced this, but most of the arguments I hear for cremation reflect the changing values of our society. Those arguments are that it is cheaper and more efficient. Those are not good motivations for discipleship decisions. If anyone in this church desires an honorable burial and feels they can't afford it, I would hope that you would call the church. That should not guide our practice. Christians distinctively hope in a bodily resurrection. We model that in our funeral services.

My second application is very different, but equally important. You and I are called by this biblical vision of the end to renew a godly stewardship of this world. Christians should be leaders of those who care for the environment, because we are the only ones who believe that God made it. We should love it. God made it, and God said: "This is very good. I love what made." Christians should be in the leading edges of those who care responsibly for this world. Jesus said in Matthew 5:5:

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Paul says the promise to Abraham and his offspring would be that he would be heir of the world. The Lausanne committee for World Evangelization published a paper a few years ago which said powerfully:

"Popular Christian eschatology has a destructive and negative view of creation, whereas a biblical view is for an eschatology that rids creation of sin and evil and seeks a holistic creation."

This is the biblical teaching. A very concrete application of this, and I've been doing this all week, I've been looking around at everything around me with new eyes: "What if this is going to stay? What if this is going to be renewed? What if the work that I do and that you do matters in the end and is not destroyed, but just refined? Paul says our works will be tested with fire, and what remains will endure.

This leads to the third and final application of this sermon and this whole series. It means that as a church, as Kenwood Baptist Church, we are called to live now, albeit imperfectly, and reflect the image of God, renewed in Christ, in all areas of our life. This means that we have been reborn in Christ, and that we must grow in holiness and conformity to Christ. In our whole fall series, beginning next week, we will talk about holiness. We will be talking about holiness because we need it. I need it; you need it. but you see the church, and Kenwood Baptist as part

of the body of Christ in the world, lives in between the beginning of the new creation. Do you believe that the new heavens and new Earth have actually started? They have begun. It began with Jesus Christ bursting forth from the grave, and every time someone receives Him as Lord and Savior, they are remade and renewed, and that process is unstoppable. It is beginning, and we live in between that beginning and that full consummation of all things while we live in the middle of those times. As a church, we are called to embody and carry out a new kind of culture, a new alternative reality to the violent and deathly formations and practices of the society around us. This means we don't quibble with those that don't know Christ over their views on this issue or that. It means that we have got to devote ourselves to reflecting what has really begun, to modeling it in every area of our life. The church displays God's rule, participates in His mission to flood the world with His divine presence. We are called to display, in our life together as the body of Christ, the promised future of the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells. That is a heavenly calling. It is also an earthly calling that God gave us in the Garden of Eden that sin has ruined. But now, Christ has satisfied the plight of you and me and our sinfulness, and that means that your work matters. That means that your music matters. That means that the expression of your creativity matters. That means that your business dealings matter. It means that the way you care for your flocks, herds, camels or whatever you deal in matters. Let's repent for forgetting half of the ending, and let's begin to live in this world as a people who know and live out that the new heavens and new earth have begun, and all peoples are invited to participate.

Amen.