

Humanity as a Blessed Covenant People

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[0 : 0 0] So this morning, I'd like us to turn to the passage that we read in Revelation, and I'm going to read just the opening four verses. There's a typo on the screen. It says verses 1 to 8. It should say 1 to 4.

Let me read these words. 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. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

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.

In looking at these verses together, we're going to be drawing connections with the very start of the Bible, because if you go back to the very beginning of the Bible, you see the creation of the first heavens and the first earth.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That's the world we live in, the universe around us, and the heavens occupied by the angels. And at the end of the Bible, you see the same thing's been mentioned again, but it's looking ahead to the new heavens, the new earth, and to the renewal of all things.

[1 : 1 6] And so in many ways, today we're going to be thinking about how the whole Bible fits together. And we're doing this in the context of a topic that we've been studying in our evening services called The Real Us.

And this is the last part of the series that we've done. As you may, those of you who come to the evening service will know, we've been working through this topic. I had a plan to do it in six parts, and two to form.

I spoke too much, took too long, and we've done way more than six parts. But we are going to finish it today. And the whole point of this series, if you've not heard any of it before, don't worry at all.

It's really very simple what we're trying to do. We're thinking about the fact that today, for many, many people, there's a strong emphasis on being who you really are. And so you look at music, movies, culture.

It's a dominant force in our society today. Being who you really are is seen as hugely important. And that ties in with lots of other things that we see in our society.

[2 : 1 5] Our sense of identity, the idea of being true to yourself, being the best version of yourself. These are things that we hear a lot, and it's influencing a lot of our culture today.

And we've been mentioning that in lots of ways that's brought challenges. And so you can see tensions among people where people's sense of individuality has come into conflict with another person's opposite sense of individuality.

And so that can make tension. It can bring disagreements. We've even seen it prompt lawsuits, tribunals, all that stuff's going on.

And at a larger scale, we've seen protests. And so lots of challenges arise because we live in a very individualistic society. And that individualism means that we struggle to cope with the idea of tolerance in a sense that people actually find it more difficult today to be alongside people who think differently from them.

Lots of challenges, lots of tensions. I don't need to tell you all this. It's right before our eyes in the news. Our series, while mentioning that, has not focused on that.

[3 : 29] Because what we're trying to actually say is that despite all these tensions and difficulties, thinking about who you really are is actually an incredibly good and incredibly important thing to do.

And so that emphasis on the real you, that's a brilliant thing to think about. It's a crucial thing to think about.

But the key question is, what is the real you? What are the ultimate explanations? Across our series, we've looked at who we really are.

And that's what we've been thinking about across our series. We've looked at the creation of humanity, the nature of humanity, the purpose of humanity. Humanity is the image of God. Humanity as male and female.

And we're going to conclude it today by thinking about this one. Humanity as a blessed covenant creature. Now, you might be looking at that and thinking, Thomas, what on earth does that mean?

[4 : 27] And what on earth are you talking about? Well, in order to explain this, we're going to just do something very simple this morning. We're going to explain the whole of the Bible, the whole of humanity, and the whole of history.

And we're going to do it before 12. That part's probably a lie. I never reached 12. But anyway, we'll aim for 12. What I'm trying to get at here is that as we're thinking about humanity, we actually need to think about how everything in the Bible fits together.

And as we think about how everything in the Bible fits together, it's teaching us more about how everything in history fits together. And how the whole of humanity fits together.

It's basically getting us to think about what everything is all about. And a key word in it all is that word there. The word covenant.

That's not a word we use very often. And it maybe seems like a strange word to us. It's a massively important word in the Bible. In many ways, it's the word.

[5 : 31] It's the concept that holds the whole Bible together. And we would recognize this more if, whether or not for the fact that in previous years, people would often interchange the word covenant and testament.

So when you look at the Bible, you've got Old Testament and New Testament. What we're really talking about there is Old Covenant and New Covenant. And so that concept of covenant runs right through the whole Bible.

And it's so incredibly important for us to think about. What does it even mean? Well, the whole idea of covenant is the idea of a relationship. And at the heart of what the Bible is about, and at the heart of what God wants, is a relationship with you.

A relationship with his people. But the word covenant tells us that that's a relationship that's not superficial. It's a relationship that is deeper and stronger and more important than anything else.

And the best kind of equivalent that we have of a covenant relationship is a marriage. Because in a marriage, a man is saying to a woman or a woman is saying to a man, I have a relationship with you that I have with no one else.

[6 : 46] And so there is a depth of commitment and of protection and of specialness to that relationship that's different to anything else.

So you've got relationships with loads of people. I've got relationships with loads of people. I don't relate to anybody the way I relate to you now. She's my wife. And it's the same for all of you. Family relationship is the same the way you look at your children, the way you look at your parents.

That's a relationship that's deeper and more special than the broader relationships that we have. And so covenant is expressing us to the idea that God wants a relationship with you.

God wants a relationship with his people that is grounded on the deepest level of commitment, that is rooted in the highest levels of love, and that matters more than even life and death.

That's the kind of relationship that God wants with his people. And again and again, you see the phrase in scripture, I will be your God and you will be my people.

[7 : 55] You see it loads of times, not necessarily in those words, but in some variation of those words. I will be your God, you will be my people. You will be my people, I will be my God. That's like the covenant phrase that comes up again and again and again.

And so humanity is created to be God's people. And that relationship is rooted in his covenant commitment to us.

So you go back to the very start of the Bible and God's making humanity. What's he making? He's making a blessed covenant creature. He's making us unique in relationship with him.

And it's captured in Genesis 128. It says God blessed them. God blessed us, blessed humanity. And that blessing is part of his covenant relationship with us.

So very beginning of the Bible, running right through the whole of the Bible, coming to the very end of the Bible, this theme of covenant becomes so, so important. And so what we see then at the beginning of the Bible is that as God enters this relationship with his people, he blesses them with various, what we could call, covenantal provisions.

[9 : 17] In other words, he's like, okay, you're my people. I'm going to give you this, this, and this. Okay? And so you see several things that God gives to his people because they're his covenant people.

And so, again, the illustration of marriage is quite good. You and I got married, and in the end, we ended up with the house that she'd grown up in, which was amazing for me.

She got my mixed tapes from the car in return. So we had a wonderful exchange there. But there was wonderful privileges, things that came with that relationship.

That's what you see in the Bible, and we're going to identify some of them together. These covenant provisions that God makes. I'm going to run through them. The first is land. And so in the creation, it says, And so you see that Adam and Eve placed in a garden.

It's a land, a home for them to live in. And it's beautiful. You see the descriptions of Eden. It's just, it's amazing.

[10 : 29] And that place is a real place. It's not a mythical place. It's not like a kind of fantasy. You see, it's just a physical, beautiful place for humanity to live in.

And so when God created the world, when he created us, he's like, look, here is land to live in. Here's a home for you. Second theme you see established at the start is family.

We've looked at this several times in our series. You see that man and woman are created. They're there to be together, to be united in marriage. And they're there to then procreate, to multiply, so that people will fill the earth.

So the idea is that this homeland, this Eden, is going to grow, and it's going to extend. It's going to fill with people. It's going to spread geographically. It's going to multiply numerically. And God's people are being built up as the earth is being filled.

And so this wonderful relationship of family is established. And so as humanity is made, we're not made to be alone, isolated, or individualistic. We're made to exist in relationship with one another.

[11 : 35] And as part of that, there's this inescapable interdependence between male and female, parents, children. Family is established.

Marriage between men and women, and then parent-child relationship as family extends. So land, family, these ones are fairly straightforward. The third is temple.

And you might be thinking, okay, that sounds weird. We've seen in our series, and we've seen maybe several times over the years, that the Bible gives lots of evidence to say that when God created the Garden of Eden, he didn't just create the first home for humanity to live in, and he didn't just create the first place for us to work.

He also created the first temple. And the important thing to recognize there is that when we say the word temple, we are meaning the place where God and humanity are together, and where we worship God.

Now, an important verse is verse 8 of chapter 3. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden of the cool of the day. There's two things that are important there. First of all, it's to say that the Lord is in the garden, so humanity and God are together.

[12 : 47] That's a temple emphasis in terms of Scripture. Secondly, that's important is that word walking, because it actually gets used again later in the Old Testament in reference to the temple.

So there's like a very deliberate indication there that this is temple language. There's lots of other hints as well. We've looked at these in previous weeks. If you want to ask more, you can ask me afterwards.

But just trust me, Garden of Eden was the first temple. It's the place where God and humanity are together. It's the place where God was to be worshipped, and that made it a special, a very special place to be.

Fourth thing that we see given at the start as part of this covenant relationship is the law. The Lord God commanded the man saying, You may eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge and good of evil.

You shall not eat, but of the day of it, you shall surely die. And so from the very beginning, there's clear expectations on humanity that there are things that we should do and not do as those who are made by God.

[13 : 53] And so this reflects the fact that we are made in God's image. God has a perfect sense of right and wrong, of justice, of truth, of good. And so our conduct, our lifestyle, what we do is to shape that.

And the law sets the boundaries for what that should look like. And so as God's covenant people, we're given certain duties, responsibilities, boundaries for the way in which we should live our lives.

And that's all captured in this idea of the law. Now, the law is a difficult word for us because sometimes, like, the law is... I was driving out of Marybank the other day, just past the quarry, and I saw blue lights behind me.

And, like, that's a 40 now, and no one ever does 40 there. I wasn't doing 40. And you're thinking, Oh, man, is that me? You know, thankfully it wasn't. It was an ambulance. And I just pulled over and it went past.

But, you know, when we're on the wrong side of the law, you know, we can see that word very negatively. Of course, though, we all, when we think about it for a moment, we actually realize that law is actually a really good thing.

[15 : 04] Law is a beautiful concept because it's just basically saying, Yes, there is such a thing as right and wrong. There are certain things that are wrong that should not happen. And there are certain things that are right that we should maintain.

As God's covenant people, he wants us to live within the boundaries of his law. So, as the covenant people were given land, we're established as a family, we enjoy God's presence in his temple, we are guided by his law.

And then the fifth one, is that five? One, two, three, four, five. Yeah, fifth one is kingdom. Again, we've looked at this in our series. The big point to be emphasized here is that God as our creator is our king.

Psalms 95 captures that. The Lord is a great God and great king above all gods. In his hands are the depths of the earth. The heights of the mountains are also his. The seas are his.

The sea is his, for he made it. And his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down and kneel before the Lord, our maker. God is king. He reigns over everything.

[16 : 11] And that makes sense because he's the creator. But the amazing thing about what we see in Genesis is that God then delegates a rule and a responsibility to humanity.

And we've seen that as we thought a little bit about the purpose of humanity. God places us in a position of authority and responsibility over the creation that he has made.

And you see that, I forgot to put them on the screen, but I'll just read the words from Genesis 1, 26, where in the creation of humanity, God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness.

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

And so when we're created, we're given an authority to rule, not instead of God, as though he's discarded, but under God as his vice regent.

[17 : 09] And so we've got these things being established in Genesis 1 at the very beginning. Land, family, temple, law, kingdom.

And all of these sit in the context of this concept of covenant. The fact that God is our God and we are his people, he gives us land. He establishes us as his family.

He is with us in his temple. He sets the boundaries for our lives in his law. And he empowers us to have dominion under his authority as his vice regent.

It all sits in the context of covenant. Now, you might be thinking just now, Thomas, okay, this is all a bit weird or a little bit obscure.

All these terms are things, they're very Bible terms, but they maybe seem a little bit unrelated to real life. If we stop and think about it, these are all things that we long for.

[18 : 10] We long for a home, a land, a place that's ours.

For many of us today, that land is our house. Our house, our garden, and maybe the community that we are part of.

That's something that's so important to us. And I think that's especially true when you live on the island. And your identity is just so interwoven with where we live.

Often you see that in cities. You know, people's, in many ways, they're living in that city because of the work that they want to be involved in or the culture that they want to be part of.

And their house is maybe secondary to that. It's like, well, I'll just find a flat. It's not ideal. It's costing me a fortune, but it means I can do all the stuff that I want to do. We're kind of the other way around, where it's like, our home means so much to us.

[19 : 18] And no wonder, because we live in such a beautiful place and we're able to have just this amazing privilege of a land, a home, a garden. We long for that. Family, we long for that.

The relationship of love that's shared between husband and wife, the amazing bonds of connection between parent and child, child and parent.

And in the extended relations of grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles. These are the connections that matter most to us.

These are the people that really matter. And so family becomes so important to us. Temple, you might be thinking, I don't long for a temple. Well, you long for something to live for.

You long for something to pour your life into. I do. I do. The idea of temple, that actually you're sacrificing yourself for something that's bigger than you.

[20 : 30] That's really what the temple language is getting to the heart of, to think there is something more important than me that I'm going to pour my life into. I'm going to pour my energy into this.

I'm going to give my resources and time, my talents. And I'm going to make that the thing that I pour my life into. And for lots of us, that might be our job, where we think, I really want to do well in my job, and I'm going to pour myself into that.

Sometimes it might be our family, it might be our land, our home, our house. It might be something else. It might be sport. It might be football. It might be whatever it is. And we all have kind of like micro-temples in our lives, and that's okay.

Things that we love, that we're passionate about, that we care about, that we want to pour our effort into. That's all good and appropriate. But very often, people can make a micro-temple into the massive temple that they live for.

And that can so easily happen, whether it's your holidays, your pension, your football team, your job, your reputation, your looks, whatever.

[21 : 35] We all, we all, I can, we can put that in the category of things that we long for because you can see all around us, all around us, people are pouring their lives out for something.

Law is something that we long for. I don't, I don't, I mean, as much as we kind of sometimes dislike that word, we actually love the concept.

And really, you know, this is where you think about, this is where you think about the most important things in life.

If somebody assaulted your child, you want law. You absolutely want law.

If someone rips you off when you're spending money that you spent years waiting for, you want law. Law is actually something that we crave, that things are, that right and wrong is maintained, and that, and that, that evil is called to account, and that we are directed towards a path that's healthy and good and true.

[22 : 56] And we want a kingdom. We long for that. And that's kind of has, has two levels in the sense that, that we actually, we, we long for, for leadership.

We long to be led well. And we also long for the privilege of carrying responsibility ourselves. And you see that in life, that, that's, that we want, we want to be given responsibility in our own particular spheres of life.

We want that measure of trust in place in us so that we can demonstrate our own level of responsibility and care to those that are placed under us.

And, and we want someone to lead us. And that manifests itself in politics, you know, where you see so many people are saying, look, this political movement is the answer. And people will push, push, push and push thinking, that's going to be the thing that fixes everything.

This is all stuff that we long for. It's not weird, biblical terminology. It's stuff that everybody around us, whether they believe in the Bible or not, it's everything that they're chasing.

[24 : 06] And so this is where we're starting to see that, that these concepts are starting to explain us. they're starting to explain how people behave.

They're starting to explain the dynamics of the history of humanity. It also explains how the Bible fits together.

Because these themes that are established at the start of the Bible, they run through the whole of the Bible. They're like threads that run through everything.

And I'm just going to give you some summary points. Don't worry if you're, if it's, don't worry if you don't, if it doesn't all make sense, it's fine.

It's just, this is just picking up some basic points. Some of the things I refer to aren't familiar, it's totally fine. But it's just, it's just to show you how all these things fit together. Covenant, as I said, is the big theme that you get in the Bible.

[25 : 12] And it comes up again and again in the Old Testament. There are some big covenant moments in the Old Testament. One of them is with Noah. And Noah's Ark.

There's a lot of covenant language there. The next one is with Abraham. Also, lots of big covenant language there. The next one after that is with Moses. When people come out of Egypt, given the Ten Commandments, loads of covenant language there.

And then the last one in the Old Testament is with David. Again, very important covenant stuff related to David. And so these are the big names running through the Old Testament.

And this is like a simplified version of it. It's a bit more complicated than this in real life. But this is still true what I'm saying. That in relation to Noah, there's a big emphasis on the land, on the world that's been made.

With Abraham, there's a big emphasis on family. He's promised a child and through his descendants, all the world is going to be blessed. With Moses, there's big focus on the temple and the law.

[26 : 25] The Ten Commandments are given and Moses is instructed to build a tabernacle that functions as a temple. And with David, the big focus is on kingdom.

He's established as the king. And so, what I'm trying to highlight there is that these big things that are highlighted at the start of the Bible, they are picked up again as you go through the key moments in the Old Testament.

Noah, Abraham, Moses, David. Now, all four of them have got something in common. They're all super important. They're all failures. Super important, failures. Everything in the Old Testament, every key figure, super important, failure.

So, Noah, important but failed. Abraham, important but failed. Moses, the same. David, the same. And they're meant to fail because everything in the Old Covenant is pointing towards the New Covenant, the New Testament, where everything is fulfilled in Jesus.

Now, it's 1158, so I'm fast forwarding. Basically, everything that's been foreshadowed here gets fulfilled in Jesus. Everything regarding the land, the family, the temple, the law, the covenant, the kingdom, it's all fulfilled in Jesus.

[27 : 39] And we might do a series next year that looks at that in a little bit more detail. The key point is that Jesus comes, he dies on the cross, he rises again, he does that in order to fulfill all the promises and purposes that God set out in the Old Testament.

And Jesus' work and mission culminates in the promises of heaven that are given to us in Revelation. So we come to the end of the Bible, we see a vision of the future for all of God's people, and look at what we read.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, that's land, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

Saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, that's family. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

That word dwelling place is actually the word for tabernacle, which is the word for temple, that's temple language. He will dwell with them, they will be his people, God himself will be with them as their God.

[29 : 02] It's a holy city that's pointing us to the law. No sin, you see more emphasis of that later in the chapter. And the voice comes from the throne, that's kingdom.

And all of it culminates in this promise here, God will be with them as their God, they will be his people.

You've already learned that that's the big covenant phrase that runs through the whole of scripture. God's purposes Now, why is all this important? So, it's showing you that the whole Bible fits together in amazing ways.

And it's showing you that God's purposes in salvation are far bigger and more wonderful than we imagined.

That his purposes, it just, everything fits together from the very beginning of creation to the new creation to all these themes running through it all. And I hope I've given you a glimpse of that.

[30 : 12] The way it fits together is just amazing. And for me, it's just especially amazing. As you know, I was an engineer before I was a minister. Everything has to fit together when you're an engineer.

And when you see it in scripture like that, you think, wow, it's incredible how everything ties in. But the big, big, big important point in all of this is that that whole theme of covenant, that whole theme of covenant, relationship, commitment, all of that, it's telling you one massive thing.

It's telling you that God wants you. He wants you as His people.

His to love forever. His to pour His blessings into forever. His to guide and protect, nurture.

and His, so that He can fill you with all the happiness and blessedness that He wants to pour out onto His people. And all the other stuff that we chase is an example of that and a glimpse of that.

[31 : 33] And so, looking ahead to Christmas right now, many of us, in 10 days' time, we're going to be in our homes, in our land. We're going to be with our family and we're going to be sharing such precious moments.

That's the stuff that we've poured ourselves into. That's why we're working our butts off every week so that we can have a lovely Christmas together. And that's where we're able to enjoy what's right and good in our lives.

And it only lasts a wee while. God wants you to have the full, full version of that forever.

God wants you and that applies to everyone because His great goal is for us to be His.

That's the real you. That's the real us. Amen.