

The Garden and the Gates

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, November 26, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 21:9-22:5; Genesis 2:10-17; Genesis 3:22-24; Ezekiel 40:1-4; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Ezekiel 48:35; John 7:38; Colossians 3:2
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:52:40 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

What Adam and Eve were shut out of was not God's presence — it was the tree of life. That tree, and the river that watered it, show up again in Ezekiel's vision of a temple nobody was ever told to build, and again in the last two pages of Revelation, wider and deeper every time. And the city the river runs through turns out to be the bride.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ A great deal of what we are sure the Bible says, it does not say. Matt called it “churchianity” — the stories we fill in around the text when we are reading early, late, or half awake.
- ◆ We do not have to guess what the death threat in Genesis 2 meant. We can keep watching and see what God actually did about it.
- ◆ God did not drive them out of his presence. He is with them, and with their children, a few lines later. He drove them away from the tree of life, so that they would not live forever in that condition.
- ◆ Ezekiel's river starts as a trickle from under a threshold and gets deeper and wider the further it goes from the sanctuary — the same shape as the one river that leaves Eden and becomes four.
- ◆ Holiness in the Bible is not the same thing as purity. A flawless sheep in a field is not holy; the moment it is given to God, it is. Holiness is belonging to him.
- ◆ In Revelation the water no longer flows from an altar drenched in blood. It flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb — because the sacrifice has already been made.

- ◆ John was writing to poor, outnumbered, frightened people, and what he gave them was not a strategy. He gave them their inheritance to look at.

► 0:52:40

Hope Chapel's long walk through Revelation was winding down, and Matt was candid that a great deal had been left on the table — “maybe in five years, if we do it again, we'll do all the other stuff.” So instead of pressing on, he went backwards, to two passages most of us skim, and picked up the things that usually get left on the cutting room floor. Then he brought them back to Revelation, so the last two chapters would read differently.

A verse that was not in the Bible

► 0:53:07

He started with a story he still finds embarrassing. Years ago, as a high school pastor, mid-sermon and enjoying himself, he ad-libbed a line: *didn't you know that prayer moves the hands of God?* He said it with weight. Then he asked the room which verse that was. The Awana kids did not recognise it. Someone tried Google. Five or six minutes later he told them they would revisit it another time.

Afterwards he went to Steve's office, hat in hand. “I think I just made up fake scripture.” Steve had heard the saying too — and confirmed it is not in the Bible at all. “I guess that's in the book of second opinions,” Matt said. What stuck with him was why it happened: he had heard the line in so many sermons, always nestled next to real scripture, that he had absorbed it as scripture.

► 0:56:55

Hence the point of the story. “It's important that the people I speak to are armed with a desire for scripture themselves,” he said — just because it is said from up front, and just because it is on the slide, look it up. He named two familiar examples of what he calls churchianity. There is no verse anywhere reporting that God changed Saul's name to Paul, though most of us would swear there is. And there is no account of God taking a walk with Adam and Eve — there is an account of him walking in the garden by himself, looking for them. Not that it did not happen. Only that the text does not say it.

1. What they were actually shut out of

► 0:58:02

Which is why he wanted to walk the garden story slowly. God plants a garden, puts the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of it, and then there is a detail that sounds like scenery:

“A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.”

GENESIS 2:10 ↗

Write that one down, Matt suggested — it will come back. One river goes in; four rivers come out, some of them enormous. The water gets bigger and wider the further it travels.

► 0:59:02

Then the command, and the threat attached to it (Genesis 2:15–17): eat of any tree but this one, for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die. There is no end to the theories about what that death meant. Matt mentioned a professor at UT about to publish on how ancient temple law always led with the maximum penalty — the way a highway sign posts the maximum littering fine without listing every lesser one. But his real objection to all such theories is simpler. We do not have to pause here and guess. We can unpause and watch what God does, and camp on that, because there is no higher authority on what God meant than what God did.

► 1:00:33

“Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever —” therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden... He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”

GENESIS 3:22–24 ↗

► 1:01:43

God does not even finish the sentence — as though the thought of them living forever in that state were unbearable. And notice what the guard is posted over. Not God. The tree. The popular version, that they were exiled from God’s presence, quietly assumes God was trapped inside the garden they were thrown out of; a few lines later he is with them, and with their children, and their children’s children. “What he kicked them out from was the tree of life,” Matt said, “because he didn’t want them to live forever.” It is as plain as day, and it is routinely forgotten.

2. Ezekiel’s temple, and the trickle that will not stay a trickle

► 1:02:21

He admitted up front that he is not especially at home in Ezekiel — once the cubits start, “for me it’s like, okay, let’s get through this.” No judgment for anyone who has skipped it. But there is good material in there, and it is hard to see Revelation without it.

“In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south. When he brought me there, behold, there was a man whose appearance was like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand. And he was standing in the gateway.”

EZEKIEL 40:2-3 ↗

Underline *very high mountain*, and remember the heavenly guide with the measuring reed. The temple he measures is nearly impossible to build — heights are given in only two places — but drawn from above it resolves into layers of squares, concentric rings of sacredness, gates north and south with an endless parade through them, and an east gate that closes behind the glory of God and is never used again. Nobody was ever commanded to build it. Ezekiel was commanded to describe it. And the city beside it gets a name (Ezekiel 48:35): *The Lord Is There*.

► 1:05:06

At the centre of all those layers is not the holy of holies but an altar — an enormous one, big enough to sacrifice on all day, every day, with curbs and gutters cut for the blood. And out from under the threshold beside it, water (Ezekiel 47:1-2). Not a flood. A trickle, barely enough to notice.

► 1:07:20

Then the guide takes him out and measures it, and it is deeper. Out again: wider and deeper. Again: wider and deeper still.

“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.”

EZEKIEL 47:7-9 ↗

“And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

EZEKIEL 47:12 ↗

► 1:09:31

So: a river that gets bigger as it leaves — “maybe so big it could conceivably split into four giant rivers. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen something like that.” Trees whose leaves never fail and whose fruit comes monthly. Leaves for healing. Water so alive it makes the sea fresh. Water that makes everything alive is a fair definition of living water — which put Matt in mind of Jesus’ line:

“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

3. Holiness is not purity

► 1:10:32

Before leaving Ezekiel, he stopped on those layers of holiness to define the word, and said he enjoys repeating this one. Picture a flawless sheep out in the wilderness — no defects, not even dust on it, super healthy. It is not holy. “It’s mundane, because it’s just standing there, it’s not doing anything.” The moment you hand that sheep over and it becomes the Lord’s sheep, it is holy. Or a perfect pair of tongs: the handle on point, the metal shiny, nothing whatsoever holy about them — until they are used in the sacrificial system in the temple. “These are the Lord’s tongs now. Now it’s holy.”

Purity is what qualifies the sheep to be offered; purity alone never made it holy or special. Holiness is the aspect defined by belonging to God, by being in his presence. And in Ezekiel’s vision it does not sit still at the centre: “the holiness at the centre seems to be flowing out, and it gets wider and bigger, and it seems to go everywhere.”

4. John sees all of it at once — and is told it is the bride

► 1:12:17

“Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”

REVELATION 21:9-10 ↗

► 1:13:34

After eleven weeks in apocalyptic imagery, Matt was not going to let the room get literalistic about masonry parachuting out of the sky — is it going to break any of the stonework when it lands, is God 3D printing something? The story itself tells us not to read it that way. The angel says what he is showing: the bride. So when the physical description begins — radiance like jasper, clear as crystal, a great high wall with twelve gates, an angel at each one and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on them, three gates to each compass point, and twelve foundations bearing the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:11-14) — do not quietly leave the bride behind. Israel written on the way in, the apostles holding up the walls, and the whole thing is a person. “This is a description of you, Church.”

► 1:14:37

And the machinery is familiar. A great high mountain. A heavenly guide, this time with a measuring rod of gold, working through gates and walls. Squares everywhere — “go read Ezekiel 40 to 48, you’re going to see a lot of squares.” Except this time the guide gives a height as well: twelve thousand stadia, length and width and height all equal, a vast cube (Revelation 21:16) — welcome, after Ezekiel gave us almost no heights at all. Ezekiel, Matt noted drily, was right to go all in on the detail. He knew a guy who did that.

► 1:15:46

“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day — and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations, but nothing unclean will ever enter it.”

REVELATION 21:22-27 ↗

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

REVELATION 22:1-2 ↗

► 1:16:54

Every sentence there is something you have seen before. Collapse all three visions on top of each other and one change stands out. In Ezekiel the water flows from beside the bloodiest, most massive, most impressive altar imaginable. In Revelation it flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And nothing is cursed any longer; his servants worship him and see his face, his name is on their foreheads, there is no more night and no need of lamp or sun, and they reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:3-5).

► 1:19:37

The tree that was guarded by a flaming sword is standing on both banks, unguarded, fruiting every month — leaves and fruit on a scale that could feed every nation on earth. The river that left Eden and became four, and that left Ezekiel’s sanctuary getting deeper the further it ran, is here at full flood. Ezekiel’s city was named *The Lord Is There*; John’s city needs no temple for exactly that reason — God himself is there, which is the same claim Jesus made about his own body when he said to tear this temple down and he would raise it in three days (John 2:19). He is also, Matt assumed, the real source of that living water. The life in the tree of life is really God’s life. It was never about the fruit — and all of this really cool stuff is found in one place, the New Jerusalem, which is, by the way, the bride of Christ.

5. Why this is the exact comfort those people needed

► 1:20:25

Then he asked who was being told this. Intimidated, scared, abused poor people, badly outnumbered, whose temptation was to cower or to cave. Why are we mocked? Why is our property taken, and when you call the police nobody even cares? Why are people dying? Why are we threatened and marginalised all the time? And John, relaying from God, hands them not a tactic but an inheritance — the glory that makes their present suffering worthwhile, the thing they get to meditate and dwell on: that when they live with Christ forever there will be no need of a temple because of his constant presence, no need of a sun because of his constant brilliance, and the bride herself is described as having the glory of God.

► 1:21:43

“This isn’t because it’s us versus them,” Matt said, and it is not stubbornness dressed up as faith either — “now that the persecution has set in, we’re going to be stubborn and dig our heels in.” No. The real motivation for why you can live through suffering like that is the glory of the Lamb, the radiance of God’s beauty, and the life that comes from one beautiful, sacred place only: God’s presence himself. In other words: stay faithful. It is so worth it.

We might not be as poor or as outnumbered, and we need the exact same motivation — and we are still the ones the apostle is telling to set our minds on heavenly things. If “set your minds on things that are above” has always sounded to you like an instruction with no content, this is where to start. The glory of the bride of Christ. Our anticipation of inheriting God’s own place. This is what we can fill our minds with.

► 1:22:50

He then looked at the clock, found himself finished twenty minutes early, and declined to pad it: “the only problem is I just have nothing else to say, so I’m not going to drag it on.” He prayed instead, and the prayer was the message in one sentence — that by the power of the Holy Spirit we would fill our minds with these glorious, wonderful things, the inheritance of the saints, the very presence of the Lamb, and be helped to hold fast to them.

Afterwards, the room kept going

► 1:24:27

Amy took the extra time and turned it back on the congregation — Matt had just said that meditating on the heavenly city, the bride, the wedding feast is a good way to be encouraged, and scripture also tells us to encourage one another, so could we do both at once, right now, while the prayer teams were up front? She primed it with her own: her husband’s dream of being in heaven, where Steve Hawthorne came by, and Deb was there, and they were all singing together, and there was a parade, and it was great. Surely there were others in the room carrying dreams or visions of what had just been described. Hard to say no to that.

► 1:26:21

Steve took her up on it, and started with a complaint about a song. They had sung it well that morning and he had enjoyed singing it, but it had an error in it: *every praise will be to our God*. No. The beauty and the glory God gives to his children is astounding, and he gives honour and praise to those who serve him well — if we suffer with him, we shall be glorified with him. Which is why the whole thing is outrageous and ought to be felt as outrageous: that humanity, a bizarre array of every tribe and tongue and people, is somehow combined into one person, and she comes out of heaven *having the glory of God*. That should not be.

He read the closing list of what is kept out of the city as an ancient way of saying everything inside it is marvellous — the way you honour something exalted is by naming what does not get in — and noted what does come in: the glory and the honour of all the peoples. He pointed at the mystery of Christ and his church in Ephesians 5, where even the beauty of sexuality as God framed it is pointing at something far more beautiful than any of us has ever seen. God's way is always a great surprise; he outdoes himself all the time. When the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with the woman widowed seven times, his answer was that they did not know anything (Matthew 22:23-30) — it will not be like that, it will be something surpassing that.

He set the bride deliberately against the other woman in the book: Babylon, the world system, judged for exalting herself, and contrasted page after page with this beautiful bride. That, Steve said, is how our workers in places where they simply kill you slowly keep going, and it is how the rest of us take being brushed off and laughed at in little ways — because of the glory, the honour, the praise that comes from God. *Look at my child. Look at my daughter. She thrills my heart.* And we are going to see his face, and see his joy. It is those who love not their lives unto death who come out wearing the glory of God. “There's nothing that you suffered that isn't going to be worth it. We've got big surprises coming — but it's all worth it. Keep faithful.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Genesis 2:10](#)
- [Genesis 2:15–17](#)
- [Genesis 3:22–24](#)
- [Ezekiel 40:2–3](#)
- [Ezekiel 48:35](#)
- [Ezekiel 47:1–2](#)
- [Ezekiel 47:7–9](#)
- [Ezekiel 47:12](#)
- [John 7:38](#)
- [Revelation 21:9–10](#)
- [Revelation 21:11–14](#)
- [Revelation 21:16](#)
- [Revelation 21:22–27](#)
- [Revelation 22:1–2](#)
- [Revelation 22:3–5](#)
- [John 2:19](#)
- [Colossians 3:2](#)
- [Romans 8:17](#)
- [Ephesians 5:32](#)
- [Matthew 22:23–30](#)
- [Revelation 12:11](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What is something you were certain the Bible says, that you later found it does not say? How did you come to believe it?
2. Matt refused to speculate about the death threat in Genesis 2 and said we should watch what God actually did instead. Where else do we argue about a text rather than keep reading it?
3. If Adam and Eve were driven from the tree of life rather than from God's presence, what does that change about how you read the rest of Genesis — and about what God was protecting them from?
4. Holiness is belonging to God, not being flawless. Where have you been working on the purity and missing the belonging?
5. John gave suffering people a picture of their inheritance and told them to fix their minds on it. What would it look like for you to actually do that this week, and what are your thoughts fixed on instead?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SAX4r6ETmY&t=3160s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.