

Intimacy

So good to see you guys this morning. If we haven't gotten the chance to meet, my name is Kent, and I'm one of our pastors here. If you're new, what **we generally like to do during this time** on Sundays is spend some time in the Scriptures, and see what they have to say about God and about what life is ultimately about. Sometimes we do that by walking straight through *books* of the bible, like we've been doing with the book of Matthew. And *sometimes*, like today, we look at a number of different passages that all touch on a similar *theme*. And today, we're going to be in a *few different* passages, but we'll at least *start* in that passage we just read, **Revelation 21**. So if you want to go ahead and turn there with us, you're welcome to.

If you missed last Sunday, or if you're just getting back into town for the start of the school year, we kicked off a **new series** last Sunday called *In Knoxville as it is in Heaven*. And the big idea last week was that **as cool as it is that we as followers of Jesus will get to go to heaven to be with Jesus one day when we die, that's actually not the primary focus of the biblical storyline. The primary focus is actually God's desire to bring heaven to earth. Which is why Jesus tells his disciples to pray for his kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven."** The story of the bible is actually a story about God bringing more and more of the realities of *heaven to earth*, and how one day he will do that fully and completely.

And so **the rest of this series** is going to be about how he wants to invite us, as his people, to participate with him in that effort. So we're going to spend the next five weeks unpacking a number of different ways that we join God in bringing heaven to earth. But the way we're doing that each week is by taking a look at *one aspect* of what *heaven will be like*, and then talking about how we "*practice*" for that aspect of heaven, in the here and now. Does that make sense? **So we're sort of reverse-engineering our lives with Jesus: looking at what life one day will be like, and letting that guide our lives in the here and now.**

So that's what we're going to do today, starting in Revelation 21. **Revelation**, if you're unfamiliar, is a book in the bible that talks *largely* about the *future* of planet earth: what life will be like when Jesus returns and makes all things new. **A lot of people just assume that this book is pure crazy, and that's because some churches and church traditions have used it to teach some downright crazy stuff.** But a lot of it is actually filled with incredibly *hopeful* images and imagery about what one day will be. And we're going to

look at one of those passages today. So pick it up with me in Revelation 21, focusing in on v. 3:

*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.*

So among the *many* things Revelation tells us about the state of the world one day, it tells us here that God will be and will dwell *with* human beings. When you read through that verse, there's a lot of *spatial* language in it. "Dwell," "with," and "among" are all *spatial* terms: they refer to God's physical *location* among his people. And what that language is *getting at* is the idea of relational *intimacy*.

The picture we're given of the new heavens and the new earth is a picture of perfect, unbroken, unhindered intimacy with God. One day, there will not be times where God feels distant or far from us, because his presence will be *with* us at all times. *That's* the reality we're headed towards as God's people. And because that's the reality we're *headed towards*, we learn to *practice intimacy* with God, in the present.

Now, I do realize that maybe *intimacy* feels like a weird word to some people for describing your relationship with God. Maybe when you think of the word "intimacy," the *last* thing that comes to mind is a relationship with God. We tend to talk a lot about intimacy with regard to a boyfriend or girlfriend, or husband or wife. And I think our society would often have us believe that those are the *only* relationships where we can experience any type of relational intimacy. But I would argue we were made for *relational* intimacy in our *friendships* too.

Because *intimacy is when* another person knows the worst and most embarrassing parts of you, and it doesn't change their disposition towards you. It's when someone "has your back." It's when you feel like you can spend time around someone and just be "you," without fear of what they might think as a result. It's when you can just *sit* with someone and not feel like you have to fill up every spare second of silence. It's when the other person sometimes knows you better than you know *yourself*. It's the first person you call or text anytime something goes incredibly right or incredibly *wrong* in your life. All of those experiences describe a type of *intimacy* with another person. So **this is actually the dynamic that we want** in our closest *friendships*, not just in our romantic relationships.

In fact, I can say that as a pastor, some of the most *unhealthy* marriages I have seen are marriages where one spouse expects the other to be the *only* person they have any relational closeness to. Because they end up smothering the other person in the process. We need relational intimacy with more than just one person. Because we as human beings were *made for* relationships. And not just *surface-level* relationships, but *deep, intimate* relationships. It can look a number of different ways depending on your gender or stage in life or personality, but we are all *wired* that way. *And when we don't want that with at least one or two people in our lives, usually there are deep-seated emotionally unhealthy reasons that that's the case.*

And the point the *Scriptures* make, over and over again, is that it is possible for us to have that type of relational *intimacy* with God himself. So the more I *tried to come up with a different word* for what we're talking about today, the more I realized *intimacy* really is the best word for it. Not to mention that some of the people I know with the most vibrant, enviable relationships with God I've seen—they tend to *describe* it as *intimacy*. So if you can get past any odd connotations that word might have in your mind, I really think that word best captures what we're digging into this morning.

If you look up the word *intimacy* in a *standard dictionary*, you'll probably find something like this:

Intimacy: a close familiarity or friendship; closeness.

You see, when we talk about *intimacy*, we tend to use *spatial language* to talk about it. We say, "I'm really *close* with that person." "We're have a very *tight* friendship." "We have a really *deep* relationship." We use the same type of language to talk about the *lack* of intimacy with somebody: "that person feels *distant*." "We're *not* that close." "Our relationship is really *shallow*." We often use *spatial language*. But of course that language is only *metaphorical*: we've all felt really *distant* from someone sitting right next to us or living in our house, and we've all felt really *close* to someone who is hundreds of miles away.

So when we talk about *intimacy*, we're *not so much talking about our proximity* to the other person—we're talking about how close we *feel* they are to us. We're talking about *feeling close* to someone at a relational level. And it's much the same way with God. *Us feeling close to or distant from God actually has very little to do*

with *his location*. God and his presence are everywhere, all around us. It has everything to do with our *perception* of his presence.¹

Because of Jesus, the Scriptures teach that we can now experience a relational **closeness with God via the Holy Spirit**. That it is actually *possible* for us to experience intimacy with God on a regular, everyday sort of basis. Too many people I know, including myself at times, feel stuck in this place of interacting with God as if he's an idea or a philosophy or a way of life, but not as if he's a person we can experience *friendship with*. Many of you are here about to start your first year, or another year, of college. Listen: you will not make it through college with your faith intact if God is just an idea or a belief system for you. You will actually need a vibrant, constant, *intimate* relationship with him.

So I want to see if I can get us headed in the right direction *towards* that today. So I know that when it comes to intimacy with God, **a lot of us** in the room would say we **have that already**. And a lot of us in the room probably would be honest and say we *don't*, or at least not regularly. But wherever you're at on that spectrum, I want to see if we can press in for more and better this morning on how we can experience *intimacy* with God. Sound good?

Now, **before we attempt to answer** that question ("how can we experience intimacy with God?"), we do need to acknowledge something very important. And that's that **there is no magic formula for intimacy with God**. There's just not. I can't stand up here today and tell you "if you do x, y, and z, you will all of a sudden, *automatically* experience true intimacy with God." I truly wish that I *could* say that. But I can't do that, because that's not how intimacy works.

But **that said, I do think** the Scriptures give us **some things we can't have intimacy without**. Some necessary *ingredients*. So think of it like this. Let's say you want to make a **cheeseburger**. To make a cheeseburger, you need some type of meat, you need some type of bun or bread, and you need cheese. Now, you can have all of those things, and still *not* have a cheeseburger (because you have to *do* something with all of those things, right?) Just possessing those things doesn't automatically mean you have a cheeseburger. But at the same time, it is going to be pretty impossible to have a *cheeseburger* without some *combination* of those things. I think it's similar when it comes

¹ I owe much of the thinking in this paragraph to a great article from Desiring God, titled "How to Have Intimacy With God." You can read it [here](#).

to *intimacy* with God. **The things I'm going to give you this morning aren't an automatic *formula* for intimacy, but I do think they are necessary *ingredients* of it.**

So let's **dive in** and see what they are. I'm going to submit to you this morning from the Scriptures that **intimacy is established by trust, intimacy is ignited by obedience, and intimacy is deepened over time.** Let's take each of those in turn and talk a bit about them. First...

Intimacy is established by trust.

This one I think we see really clearly in **Hebrews 11:6**:

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God (there's that spatial language again) must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

So the reality is that **you can't be relationally close to someone you don't trust.** Right? If you don't *trust* the other person, your walls are always going to be up. Your heart is always going to be just a little bit *guarded*. And *similarly*, it is impossible to experience intimacy with *God*, if you don't *trust* God. And I don't just mean "trust" him as in "trust him for salvation—I mean actually *trust* him like you trust another human being. Hebrews just said if we want to "draw near" to God—if we want to experience relational intimacy with him, we need what it labels "faith." **We need a deep-seated *trust* that God exists, and that it is a rewarding thing to pursue a relationship with him.**

Now I say that realizing that **may be a difficult ask** for a lot of us. A lot of us feel like we have ample reasons—maybe even some really *good* reasons—to *distrust* God. *Maybe we feel like we have counted on him to come through for us in some way before, and he didn't. Maybe we feel like we have counted on him to protect us from something before, and he didn't. Maybe we feel like we have trusted people who claim to represent God before, and those people let us down or mistreated us.* All of those things can do a number on our perceived level of *trust* in God.

And let me just say: in many ways, **I've been there.** I've *experienced* moments like that. I know how difficult it can be to trust God again, after any number of those things have happened. So if I can, I'd love to just offer to you what has helped *me* in those moments. What has helped *me* is **to reset on the things God has promised—and simultaneously let go of the things he hasn't promised.** I think at times in *my* life,

I've set myself up poorly by expecting God to meet expectations that *I had* for him, rather than expecting him to fulfill promises that *he has made*. And those are often *different* things.

At times, I've wanted God to come through in ways that he didn't *promise* to come through in. God never promised to provide everything I *want* for my life—he promised to do everything *he wants* for my life. At times, I've wanted him to *protect* me from negative circumstances. But God never *promised* to protect me from negative circumstances. He promised to be an ever-present help in the *midst* of those circumstances. At times, I've expected people who *belong* to Jesus to perfectly *represent* Jesus. But God never promised *that* either. In fact, on several occasions he promised how *imperfect* people would be. And sometimes, he said that people who *claim* to represent him actually *don't*. God's promise was simply that *he* would be perfect and trustworthy, even when *people aren't*. So I think it is worth asking the question, when we struggle to actively trust God: **am I struggling to trust because he has actually proven himself untrustworthy? Or because I've expected him to fulfill promises he hasn't made?**

And listen: *still, there may be times* where you feel disappointed or let down in your relationship with God. In fact, the *psalmists* in the bible actually experienced that a good bit. But when that happened, do you know what they did? *They* actually expressed their frustration and disappointment *to* God as a *form of trust in* him. Sometimes, pouring out your raw emotion—positive *and negative*—to God is actually a *way of trusting in* him. Let me show you what I mean from **Psalm 62:8**:

Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Now, quick bible reading lesson for you: *in Hebrew poetry* like this, often, the second line in a verse is a way of *clarifying* what the *first line meant*. So the first line is “*trust in him at all times,*” and the second line is “*pour out your hearts to him.*” (Like if I said “*prepare yourself for another Vols football season; we may not win many games.*” The second line clarifies what I mean by the first line. That make sense?) Okay, that means here, the psalmist is saying that **pouring out our hearts—our pain, our disappointment, our frustration—to God is often an expression of our trust in God**. Otherwise, why would we take those things to him?

So all that to say, **if you struggle with the “trust” aspect of your relationship with God, it might be worth starting by taking those things to him as a way of *building* that trust.** Because *intimacy* is established by *trust*. Okay, second...

Intimacy is ignited by obedience.

Once that foundation of trust is built, intimacy then starts with *obedience*. This one we could get from quite a few places in the Scripture, but I think **John 14:15-17** is particularly helpful. Jesus speaking, says this:

*“If you love me, keep my commands. And (meaning, **then**) I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you (there’s our spatial language) forever—the **Spirit of truth** (in other words, the Holy Spirit: God’s personal empowering presence). *The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”**

So follow **Jesus’ thought process** there: he says “if you love me, keep my commands (in other words, *obey*.” And *when you do that*, I will ask the Father, and he will send the Spirit to be *with you* and *in you*. That’s the language, again, of *intimacy*. Intimacy is ignited, it’s *initiated* by obedience to God’s commands. **You can’t experience intimacy with God without obedience to God.**

Now I’m aware, as I say that, that *obedience* has to be somewhere on the **top ten list of least favorite words** for the average American. But **for followers of Jesus, there’s really no way around it: obeying Jesus is part and parcel of a meaningful relationship with him.** As we align our lives with the things Jesus says life is about, we grow in depth of relationship *with* him as a result. *Intimacy* is a result of *obedience*. Now, obviously this doesn’t mean *perfect* obedience—none of us do that. But it does mean **you can’t have intimacy with Jesus while you’re walking in willing, knowing disobedience to him.**

I think it’s **easy to see this** in the way the bible talks about **prayer**. Prayer is one of the primary ways we experience intimacy with God. So let me ask you a trick question—I’m warning you that it’s a trick, so that makes it okay, right? You ready? Okay: does God *always hear* his people’s prayers? ~~You guys seem appropriately hesitant.~~ I think at least a lot of our *gut level* reaction is to say “yes, of course he does.” But if you walk through the bible, you’ll notice that there are quite a few things that actually *prevent* God from

hearing his people pray. *Unforgiveness* makes God not hear our prayers.² If you are *harsh towards your spouse*, he won't hear.³ If you are holding onto *unrepentant sin* or knowingly participating in injustice, he may not hear.⁴ **God does not hear prayers from people who claim to follow him and yet are knowingly disobeying him.**

And **maybe that seems petty** or spiteful to you on his part. But if you think about it, this is just how relationships work. Think about this way: if someone you were friends with did something that they *knew* hurt you tremendously, and then the next day wanted to just hang out and shoot the breeze with you, and pretend like none of that happened—what would be your response to that? Would you just be like “okay cool—yeah, let's hang out and pretend like nothing happened”? No, you'd probably *insist* that you both talk about what happened. ~~Unless you're an Enneagram 9, and then you'd literally avoid the topic until the day you die.~~

And I think it's **similar with God**. The biblical understanding is that every sin is a sin *against* God. When you create the entire world, and you create it to work and function and thrive a certain way, anything that people do to *break* and *corrupt* that good design is a personal offense to you. When we are actively sinning against him, and we just want to talk to him like that's not a thing, God correctly says “yes I would like to talk—I would like to talk about *one thing* specifically. And once we talk about *that*, we can talk about other things.” **Because obedience is a necessary ingredient to intimacy with God.**

So **if** you're here this morning, and **you feel “distant” from God**, I'd say a couple things. One, sometimes a relationship with God just *feels* that way. Sometimes we *feel* like God is distant even when he's *not*, and there's not a specific thing we're doing wrong—it's just that we live in a fallen world where we don't get to experience the fullness of his presence 24/7. But second, I do think it's at least worth *asking* if there *is* any *legitimate* reason that he feels distant. If *maybe* he feels distant because we have boxed him out from the one area of our life he most wants to press in on. Make sense?

So second, intimacy is ignited by *obedience*. And lastly...

² See Matthew 18:21-25.

³ 1 Peter 3:7.

⁴ See Amos 5:21-24.

Intimacy is deepened over time.

Lastly, intimacy with God is deepened **as we invest more and more time** and effort into our relationship with him. Simply put, there is no *microwaving* meaningful relationship with Jesus. Galatians 6:6-8 says it like this:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

So that passage just compared a relationship with Jesus to “sowing.” As in, sowing seeds into the soil and waiting on them to grow. We’re talking about *gardening* here. Now think about what that involves. Gardening is a *time-intensive* process, is it not? **If you do not have time and patience, I would not recommend gardening as a hobby.** But that is the metaphor that Paul uses to describe a relationship with God. **Sometimes, intimacy with God looks like enduring in doing the same things, over and over again, and waiting to see it bear fruit as a result of all of that.**

To put it another way, **do not underestimate the power of repetition** in the Christian life. Every new year at City Church, we do a series called *Formation*, where we talk about how practicing the same things over and over again, over time, *forms* and *transforms* your relationship with Jesus. It is by far the least sexy thing to tell people about spiritual growth, but a lot of the time, feeling *close to* God has to do with your willingness to, in the words of Galatians 6, “sow” and “not give up.” **Sometimes growing in intimacy with God looks like putting in consistent time, over long amounts of time, to develop that relational closeness.**

And again, this is **just how relationships work.** Generally speaking, you don’t meet a person one day and say “I’d really like to have a deep, meaningful, long-term friendship with you,” and then wake up a week later and expect it to have already happened. Relationships (at least *quality* ones) take *time*. They take effort. They take energy. And generally, they require making *time* with that person a *priority in your schedule* on a regular basis.

Sometimes we like to talk a lot about the **difference between “quality time” and “quantity time.”** And there is a difference between the two. But there’s also often a *connection*: **quality time happens inside of quantity time. If you want a deep relationship with someone, you’re going to have to make being around them a priority in your life and your schedule.** *Quality* time is generated by *quantity* time. If you don’t believe me, try *rushing* all your time with people you care about, and see how it goes. **“Hey I’ve got three minutes between meetings—let’s spend those three minutes in meaningful conversation and eye contact. Go!”** It doesn’t work like that. To experience *quality* time and closeness with people, you actually have to put in a good bit of *quantity* time.

And if you want to experience relational **intimacy with Jesus**, it will require putting in some time. It will require making time *with* him a regular, frequent, prioritized reality in your life. **I think it’s easy for some of us to look at previous generations of followers of Jesus who had daily personal “quiet times” or “devotions” and think that’s old-fashioned, or that’s legalistic or unnecessary. But do you know why most of them do that? Because they knew that quality time happens inside of quantity time.** They knew if they wanted a vibrant, intimate relationship with the God of the universe, it was going to require putting in some *time* to develop that relationship.

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So **in summary**, intimacy with God is **established by trust, ignited by obedience, and deepened over time.** Like we already said, it’s not a magic formula. Those three things doesn’t necessarily or automatically lead to intimacy with God. But growing in those things will absolutely help point us in the right direction.

So we’ll just **wrap up here**. There may be some of us in the room that hear all of that and go “wow—it kind of sounds like intimacy with God takes a lot of *work*. That sounds like a lot of things to *work* on.” And there’s a lot of truth to that. Intimacy with God—just like intimacy in any other relationship there is—*does take* some work. I don’t know of any meaningful, long-term relationship I’ve had that didn’t require some effort.

But I would also call your attention to the fact that **Jesus has already done** the *heavy lifting* on this one. Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection has already laid the foundation that makes intimacy with him possible in the first place. **Your *sin*—the *main barrier* between you and intimacy with God—has been addressed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It has been torn down and taken care of, once and for all. The only thing left for us to do is to firmly plant our feet on that foundation, and build intimacy upon it.**

Let's pray together.