

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 22
November 9, 2025
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
What happens when Death dies?

—Revelation 22:1-5

In this life, everything we know is cursed by death.

Well, *that's* a chipper way to start a sermon! But it's true. From the moment we were conceived the clock of our life started ticking. If we survive our mother's womb, we grow through childhood and youth into adulthood. Then comes middle age and finally what we call the "Golden Years." Along the way there is sickness, illness, injury, pain, deterioration, weakness, infirmity, stiffness, headaches, fever, stress, allergies, indigestion, forgetfulness, dementia. We feel it in ourselves, and we see it in others. We watch our loved ones go into decline. We can joke about it. "I'm not as young as I used to be!" "Growing old isn't for the faint of heart!" But in spite of our lighthearted comments, it's really not a laughing matter. The young *may* die. The old *must* die. Our life may last only a few hours or days, or it may last for long decades and many years, but ultimately God's judgment *will* be visited on each one of us: You are dust, and to dust you shall return. You think you have a choice? You don't. You think that by eating right and exercising you can cheat Death? You can't. In this mortal life, Death has the last word.

But what happens when Death dies?

The world we live in is infected through and through by death. We see it on the evening news—shootings, automobile accidents, overdoses, wars, destruction, man's inhumanity to man. But even if we lived in a land where every human behaved perfectly, we would still be surrounded by death. It's all around us. The coyotes that roam our streets and canals and hills are looking for something to kill. The vultures that circle in the desert sky are waiting to feast on rotting meat. Food spoils. Milk goes sour. The value of the new car drops like a rock when you drive it off the lot, and ultimately, inevitably, it ends up on the scrap pile. The computer becomes obsolete. The cell phone screen gets cracked. Forests burn. The wind blows, and trees are uprooted. Once-new buildings fall apart. Everything material, *everything* is deteriorating! "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:20-22). Decay is all around us. Death is everywhere.

But what happens when Death dies?

There's a reason Death reigns in this world. It is a consequence of sin. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Death at every level is separation from God, the Source of life. Death is the ultimate slap, the ultimate, in-your-face proof of the emptiness of our material lives, and our utter helplessness in the face of our own mortality. I have sinned, so I must die.

But what happens when there is no sin? What happens when Death dies?

Imagine a place where there is no sin and therefore there is no death. No—scratch that!—because you can't. As hard as we try to imagine, we cannot begin to imagine such a place because it is so far outside the realm of our experience that we can't even begin to conceive of what it's like. I don't have anything to reference. I've never known anything but death and decay. That's why we hold on so tightly to this life; it's all we know. It's the best we can do. But what we cannot fathom or imagine, God reveals to us. Scripture says, "No ear has heard, no eye has seen, no mind has conceived of the things God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9,10).

This is the revelation God gave to St. John, the apostle and evangelist. What we cannot begin to imagine, Jesus permitted John to see. At the end of the first century A.D. it looked like Death was winning. The Roman Emperor Domitian had declared open season on Christians, many Christians had lost their lives for Jesus, and John himself had been exiled to a little island off the coast of modern-day Turkey called Patmos. There on Patmos one beautiful Sunday, Jesus rolled back the heavens and permitted John to enjoy just a glimpse, just a little peek, at the glory and beauty of that place where sin and Death are no more, and that's the Revelation John shares with us.

Jesus starts his Revelation to John by encouraging the suffering churches. When times on earth are very dark for Christians, Jesus lets us see that he is very much in control. He walks among his churches and holds Christians in his hand. When we finally reach the last chapter of the Bible he reveals this beautiful climax of perfection, the culmination of everything that Jesus has purchased for his people with his blood. Just as Pastor Pufahl shared with us last week in his beautiful and encouraging sermon from Revelation 21, today in Revelation 22, we see exactly what happens when Death dies.

The angel showed me the river of the water of life, which was as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. ² In the middle of the city's street and on each side of the river was a tree of life that yielded twelve kinds of fruit. The tree yields its fruit every month, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations.

So what is heaven like? Let's be clear what we're talking about. You'll remember that Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), but at the end of that day Jesus' body was lying in a rich man's tomb and the thief's body somewhere else, probably in a pauper's grave. But their *souls* were together in paradise. That's where our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Christ are right now: their souls are with Jesus in paradise, they rest in Jesus in perfect bliss, they are waiting for the resurrection. But that's not what John sees here. The revelation John sees is still in the future, when Jesus returns on the clouds of heaven as Judge of all the earth. At the end of time all the dead will be raised to life to stand before the Judge. The ungodly and unbelieving will be cast into the lake of fire to be tormented forever; for them Death will never die. The righteous, who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, will hear our Lord Jesus say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance" (Matthew 25:34), and we will be welcomed into the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. That promised new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, will be a real, physical place, just like the Garden of Eden was a real, physical place. Just as Adam and Eve were not ghosts floating around in some paradisaical dreamland, you and I and the multitude of saints and martyrs will live in paradise restored.

In paradise restored, the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. It is the fountain of youth: drink and live forever. The tree of life is watered by the river that flows from God's throne. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned against God, they were cast out of the Garden of Eden, and they could no longer eat from the tree of life. Now, access to the tree of life is restored. Eat and drink and live forever.

John's revelation continues: ³ *There will no longer be any curse.* There will be no more separation between God and his people because Death is no more. No more decay. Nothing deteriorates. *The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city. His servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face. His name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will no longer be any night or any need for lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.* No more shadows. No more darkness. Only basking in the eternal presence of God and in his light, reveling in God's power, celebrating Jesus' victory, the ultimate fiesta, the party of parties, the banquet to end all banquets, and the feasting and the celebration will never end. God wins, and all God's people win with him!

Back in June of this year, Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, married Lauren Sanchez in Venice, Italy. The event made world headlines because the couple spared no expense for the wedding. Cost is no object when you have billions of dollars to play with, and you can buy the best the world can offer. The extravagance was unparalleled.

Put this into perspective. If that's the kind of lavish, headline-making celebration you can buy with American dollars and worldly influence, what kind of lavish celebration can be bought with something that is worth not billions but is of *infinite* worth? Heaven is the celebration of Jesus and his bride, the Church, an extravaganza that has been purchased with nothing less than the blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, who poured out his holy, precious blood on the cross—blood of *infinite* worth, the blood of God himself—to forgive your sins, to clothe you with wedding garments for the feast, and to buy your seat at the eternal banquet table. Is there any comparison? You will live with Jesus because your sins are forgiven, and for all eternity, Death has been swallowed up in victory.

There's one other feature about heaven that I want to call to your attention. A wise, elderly Christian stood up and asked this question: "What is the only thing in heaven that is man-made?" Everybody scratched their heads and looked at each other and wondered, "What could it be?" Heaven is the new creation of God, it is the home of righteousness that God has prepared for his people. God is the author of heavenly perfection. What in heaven could be man-made? Finally, he told them the answer: "The one thing in heaven that is man-made is the wounds of Jesus." How true it is! Only those wounds on Jesus' hands and feet are not the scars of defeat but the marks of victory. They are the price of our salvation. They are the Lamb's gift to the world, as he willingly was nailed to a cross for our redemption. They mark the cost he paid for you to enter heaven.

What happens when Death dies? Then all that's left is life. There is only life. Life with God. Life together with God's people. Perfect life. Glorious life. Undiminished life. Inconceivable, incomprehensible life. Life that's waiting for you. Life that never ends. Amen.