

## “The Good News in Revelation: On Earth as it is in Heaven”

Revelation 21:1-7, 22-26; 22:1-7

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Today we come to the close of our series on the Book of Revelation, a book that has confused and confounded people for generations. We’ve learned a bit about Revelation, its author (John of Patmos), and the circumstances surrounding its writing (it was sent to seven churches in Asia Minor).

- We’ve learned this letter was written to encourage these Christians to remain strong in their faith in the face of persecution.
- We’ve heard the promise that the world’s injustice will be met with God’s judgment, which will vindicate the persecuted and oppressed.
- And we’ve learned of God’s final victory over evil, over the Devil, which was accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and, that we best resist evil not by “fighting fire with fire,” but with the spiritual arsenal of prayer, fasting, worship, love, and faith.

Now we turn to the final scene of Revelation as we listen for a fitting end to the story.



Most of us recognize a good ending to a story. When I think about good endings, one of my favorites has to be from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Just about everyone knows this story about poor, misunderstood Dorothy Gale, who runs away from her Kansas home in search of a better place. She goes through a series of adventures in the Land of Oz only to discover by the end, “there’s no place like home.” At the end, she realizes that despite all the misunderstandings and conflicts she had at home, it was only there she was truly loved, truly understood, truly cherished for who she was.

This is a good ending for the story.

In the last two chapters of Revelation, we get an ending to the story God has been weaving for humankind and for the entire creation.<sup>1</sup>

- We journey through life, constantly struggling against the evil we find, both within us and without.

- We long for a place where conflicts end, where we can live meaningfully and experience true peace, with ourselves and our neighbors.
- We want a place where we can love and be loved for who we are, for who God made us to be.

What we discover on our journey of faith is that we cannot get to that place on our own. Because of sin, we cannot save ourselves. But there is a Savior, and his name is Jesus. He has made it possible for us to return home to God through his death on the Cross, which atoned for our sins. This is the story of God’s relationship with humankind. And in these last chapters of Revelation, we are presented with the vision of what happens at the end of the story.

This is a hope-filled vision God relates to us through John of Patmos. All those themes about enduring persecution, receiving justice, and God’s final victory over evil, all of them come together in a picture of new heavens and a new earth. We go home to be with God for all eternity. But what does that look like?

We get a picture of this in the Revelation 21 and 22:

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, the 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, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them... See, I am making all things new’ (Revelation 21:1-3, 5).

This is God’s future for all Creation—new heavens, new earth. What does it mean, new Creation?

- ***For one thing, it means God does not destroy the earth to make way for a new one.*** The picture here is one of re-creation—taking what is and making it new. Some have asked, why would God destroy the

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<sup>1</sup> The last chapter of The Good News of Revelation is entitled: “A Better Ending to the Story.” This is the source of the idea for a good ending. Larry Helyer and Ed Czerwinski, *The Good News of Revelation*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 87.

Creation God pronounced as good at the beginning? Answer: God would not. We may get the idea from songs and some scripture passages that God finishes off planet earth and starts over again. For example:

- The last verse of Amazing Grace has a line that says: “The earth will soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine.” That certainly sounds like the end of the world.
- And in 2 Peter 3:10, we read: “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.”
- On the one hand, this certainly sounds like the end for planet earth. But God’s fire in the Bible is more often described as a refining fire. The elements to be dissolved are those that have no place in the new Creation. The purpose of God’s purifying is to disclose sin and evil in order to do away with them in advance of the new Creation. The author seems to expect this as he writes in 2 Peter 3:13: “but, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”
- Instead of destroying this Creation and starting over again, what we see is that the new Creation comes out of the old. The voice from the throne in this scene is the voice of God. God speaks and says, “See, I am making all things new.” God did not say, “See, I am making all new things.” Rather, God is making (or remaking) this creation in an act of renewal, of purifying, refining, perfecting the old.

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- **Another insight we glean from the new Creation: It means heaven is not the last stop on our journey.**

I know most of us, myself included, usually think about going to heaven when we die. But dying and going to heaven are not the same as Resurrection. Now, it is true that our souls go to heaven to live with Christ when we die. It is also true that God will raise us to the same kind of Resurrection life God gave to Jesus. So, we look forward to life in heaven and life in the Resurrection of the dead. New Testament scholar and author N.T. Wright calls this “life **after** life after death.” Here’s how it works:

- At some point in God’s future, Jesus returns. God brings heaven and earth together in an act of re-creation. That’s what Revelation 21 depicts.
- The dead are raised into this new Creation. The souls of those in heaven are given new bodies; those still alive on earth are transformed “in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,” (1 Cor 15:52) as the Apostle Paul puts it; and, all those who died in Christ will be resurrected and given new life in new bodies.
- These bodies will be like the body of the Resurrected Jesus—they are fit for the new Creation. This is the only way for God’s people to dwell with God for eternity.
- This may seem like a new way to think about God’s future for humankind, but it is consistent with New Testament teachings about life, death, and resurrection.

It is also in line with the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) scriptures about God’s future for humankind. We hear this, for instance, in Isaiah 65:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight (Isaiah 65:17-18).

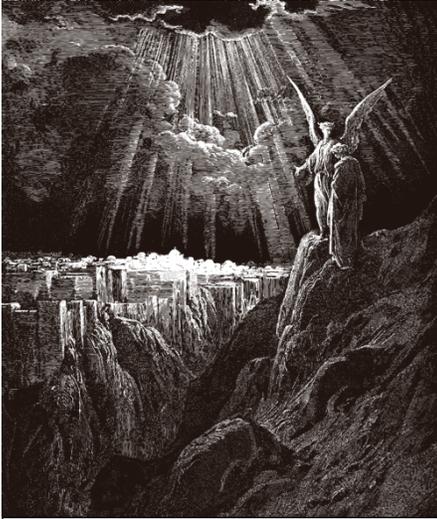
In Revelation, we read that the God will be at the center of everything, and God will remove all that is negative in human life:

“...he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

In the new Creation, there is true shalom. Shalom is the Hebrew word we translate as “peace.” Shalom is this and much more. It is not simply the absence of conflict, but a condition in which everyone has what they need; all are provided for, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. In shalom, human beings live the life God intended for them from the beginning.

This is not just for human beings as individuals, but for all to whom God gives new life. In Revelation, these are described as “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and

languages.” (Revelation 7:9). For them, and for us, there is renewed life together, in community, with God and with one another.



*New Jerusalem, Gustave Dore*

- ***This may be one of the biggest surprises to come out of God’s future for humankind: Eternal life with God is like a living in a city.***

Some religions portray eternal life as being in an eternal state of spiritual bliss or as being in a garden. But Christianity is unique—we will live in the city of God, the New Jerusalem, with God at the center of it all. We do not go back to the Garden of Eden. Rather, the garden comes into the city:

- “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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).
- Here is Eden redeemed. Human beings, who once lived in right relationship with God and with God’s good Creation, are now remade, re-created for life together in the city of God. There, all are healed (the leaves of the tree [of life] are for the healing of the nations).
- And Christ will be all in all.

Here is the last bit of good news in Revelation:

- There really is no place like home. God is preparing a home for us, and we don’t have to go far to get there.
- God’s home, God’s new Creation, is the new heaven and the new earth. They come out of the old heaven and the old earth, which are not destroyed but remade to be the way God intended them from the beginning.
- God’s future is one of total reconciliation among peoples, the healing of the nations in Revelation 22:2. Maybe you remember the old Coca Cola commercial that zoomed in on a crowd of people standing on a hill; one by one, they join together in song: “I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.” Here, in God’s new Creation, God does just that. Humanity is harmonized with the will of God, and all live in right relationship with one another...with Jesus...in the city...the community of God’s own making.

This is God’s future for humankind.

So, what do we do in the meantime? If Revelation, and the rest of the Bible are any guides, we live by faith in the God who made us.

- We persevere, we hope in God’s justice, and we remain confident of God’s victory over evil and Death.
- We live like we are already in the new Creation because, after all, we are being transformed by the Spirit of God who lives in us, even now.
- We worship God in thanksgiving and praise for that is the response of the faithful to the love of God given us in and through Jesus Christ.
- We do works of help and healing because that’s what Jesus did, knowing that somehow, what we do now matters in eternity.

Finally, we pray without ceasing for God’s reign that is coming into the world. It began with Jesus and will be complete when Jesus returns again. When that day comes, we will rejoice for the fulfillment of the hope that is ours in Jesus; a hope for God’s future we can remember every time we pray these words: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

May it ever be so. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

If you want to know more...

There are some wonderful books on Revelation that discuss the theology as well as the symbology of John's vision. Here is a list of books I found helpful in preparing this sermon series:

Larry Helyer and Ed Cizewski, *The Good News of Revelation*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014). I used this work for the main themes of the series and some of the commentary. The authors also provide a fictional story to illustrate how the word of Revelation might have influenced the Christians who were being persecuted by Rome.

Frederick W. Schmidt, *Conversations With Scripture: Revelation*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005). This book describes the three main ways to Revelation (Myth, Roadmap, History/Context) I described in the series, including the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code, Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Revised and Updated by David A. Desilva, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019). Takes the stories and symbology from the Old Testament, along with first century history, to provide a theological and historical/contextual approach to Revelation.

Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder, The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, (New York: HarperOne, 1988). Peterson's reads Revelation more as poetry than history. The result is a thoughtful and prayerful approach to God's message to the church with emphasis on how we can respond—through faith and prayerful living.

Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation responsibly, Uncivil Worship and Witness, Following the Lamb Into the New Creation*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). Provides a theologically grounded reading of Revelation and counter argument to the "Left Behind theology of popular imagination.

Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993). An in-depth theological reading of Revelation drawing deeply on the witness of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, in the series: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989). This is a very detailed, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, commentary on Revelation, also setting the book in the historical context of its times.