

Sermon Transcript from March 20th, 2016 New Creation: The King Comes Back Pastor Josh Porter, Bridgetown Church

With that in mind, if you've got your Bible, go ahead and open to Revelation 21; the end of the story of God. On a long enough timeline, the survival rate for everyone will drop to zero. And, faced with this realization, the great thinkers of the world have been seized by madness and despair. Even the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes, is filled with this dire refrain: life is futile and then we die.

Albert Camus wrote a series of essays called "The Myth of Sisyphus" that begins with this assertion that the only serious philosophical question one might ask is whether or not to kill themselves. He then went on to liken humanity to the Sisyphus of mythology who was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again forever. Roll, repeat, forever.

So, where are we going and what are we doing? This, apparently, is your life and it's ending one moment at a time. No amount of passport stamps or Instagram followers or education or notoriety or money or family or friends can save any one of us from the inevitability of death. So, where does our collective and individual story end?

If you've been making your way through our shared reading plan of the Bible, you know that, only a few books in, we've seen enough violence and death and despair that, left unresolved anyway, might fuel a measure of hopelessness for us as well. And, while it's true that the story of the Bible becomes something of a tragedy only three chapters in, the story doesn't end as one. So, with that in mind, let's get to Revelation.

We've spent the last month framing the Bible as a story. It's not an encyclopedia of truth, it's not a scattered, disconnected and decontextualized volume of doctrine, but the Bible is a story. The Bible is actually a library of writings, both human and divine, that together tell a unified story which leads us to Jesus. And thus far, we've seen the story play out this way in six specific chapters.

God establishes a kingdom and He creates humanity in His image that they might share in His rule and His reign over the good world He's created. Humanity, however, blows it and rebels against the King in order to pursue their own kingdom on their own terms. But God is unwilling to abandon His kingdom project. He chooses a man, Abraham, and his descendants, Isaac, Jacob and Israel, to join him in beginning the kingdom anew.

And you know the story. Israel, like Adam and Eve, fails. And then Jesus comes and He succeeds where Adam, Eve, Israel, as well as you and I, have all failed, and God's kingdom is inaugurated once again. The mission to spread that kingdom to the world continues on in the Church. That's you and I. But, of course, the story has to have an inevitable ending, and that's where we are this evening.

Let's look at Revelation, one of the Bible's strangest books. And then we're going to spend some time talking about how we understand the Bible's ending in the context of the Bible's story. Makes sense so far? Thank you, the audible voice right there. Thank you. That's very helpful.

Now, a bit of background. The book that we call Revelation was authored by one of Jesus' disciples called John. He's been, at this point in the story, exiled to an island called Patmos, not unlike Tom Hanks. His island didn't have a name that we know of. And John is writing to a small community of Jesus-followers in Asia Minor and they're suffering terribly beneath the heavy foot of Roman persecution. So, to the suppressed band of disciples of Jesus, the world is big and evil and scary and they have been left to face it all alone.

So, on this island, John experiences this incredible vision about the persecution the Church was facing at that time, and then he has a bit about the ultimate fate of the cosmos. So, in drafting this letter to them, John reveals to his readers that, nestled behind this empire of cruelty that's looming ominously over the Church of the first century, is someone called Satan; the old snake who first led Adam and Eve astray. For John, this little church in Asia Minor has been woven into a cosmic spiritual battle as old as the universe itself.

And, to these shivering disciples of Jesus comes a letter of revelation which says, "Jesus will triumph and His faithful followers will enjoy and share in His triumph."

So, with that said, look down at Revelation 21 where Jesus' ultimate victory comes to fruition beginning in verse 1.

Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea [or chaos and evil]. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautiful dressed for her husband. 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. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

"He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

"He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.'"

Skip down to verse 22.

Revelation 21:22, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Let's go just a tad further. Skip over to chapter 22 beginning in verse 3.

Revelation 22:3, "No longer will there be any curse." – think back to Genesis – "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever."

The final two chapters of the Bible speak beautifully of the fate of the cosmos. A world restored to the goodness of the Garden, brimming with potential. Humanity reigns with God and in God's loving presence forever, just as it was meant to be in Genesis 1. And evil and suffering and death are no more. Of course, the idea of ultimate recreation isn't exclusive to Revelation. We get several mentions of the fate of the cosmos throughout the Bible story. Some brief and some are quite detailed. So, let's look at just one of those detailed examples.

Turn to the left a big chunk to Isaiah 65. Now, Isaiah 65, during what we've been calling chapter or section or act three of the meta narrative Scripture of the story of God, the nation of Israel gets sent into exile and, during that time, a prophet called Isaiah speaks of a coming Messiah. And not just that, but of the ultimate destiny of mankind. So, once you get to Isaiah 65, look down beginning in verse 17.

Isaiah 65:17, "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more."

Skip down to verse 23.

Isaiah 65:23, "They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants

with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,' says the Lord."

And the motif of recreation carries on through the New Testament prior to Revelation. In 2 Peter it says, "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells."

In speaking of Jesus' return to His Father, Luke writes in Acts, "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."

Though this vision of the new creation is the climactic conclusion of the last book of the Bible, most of Revelation is not concerned about the future at all. What it does give us is a glimpse into God's purposes throughout history. Purposes leading to this conclusion. It's the getting there that's tricky. So, for the sake of context, let's do a bit of recap and framing of our last few weeks moving through the meta narrative Scripture and the idea of the Bible as a story.

I have something in mind that I think at least helps me and it might help us wrap our heads around the arch of the Scriptures. A well worn trope of hero-centric storytelling is the character arch. A term that refers to the journey or the inner transformation of a given character over the course of his or her story. Now, in the Bible's story, the protagonist is God, so He's already perfect in His character and unchanging, at least in that sense, from the story's outset.

But, God does experience a journey. God does have an arch in the story of the Scripture. So, for the sake of an analogy, imagine just several great heroes of fiction. Whether it's Marty McFly or John McClane or Harry Potter or Sarah Connor or Rocky Balboa or Luke Skywalker. In each of these respective stories, these protagonists are normal, likable, every day people, but often down on their luck or in a bad place in their lives. They're simply not the type for whom everything always works out. And they're confronted with an obstacle.

And since we like them – we, the audience – and we believe in them and their character, we root for them. And eventually, our hero will be brought to their lowest point when it seems like all is lost and the audience will lean forward and hope against hope that they overcome. And the story's drama is born out of our hero in the face of opposition and our hope for their victory. And, in archetypal fiction, the hero often overcomes said odds and the world of the story is forever changed because of it. This is called an "arch."

And in many of these stories, the hero or the heroine is ultimately united with their love by the story's conclusion. Now, I don't know if you guys know this, but the Bible isn't Die Hard or Back to the Future. But, there is something for us here about the journey of a hero that helps us wrap our minds around the arch of the Bible. The way our story begins is not with a down-and-out hero in the making, but with a hero of unimaginable power.

In Genesis 1, God crafts the cosmos out of chaos and then He creates humankind in His image to share His rule over the world. Our hero is introduced in this sort of idyllic scene that very quickly transitions to conflict as the kingdom rebels against the King. And, as the story continues, our hero doesn't always get His way. It becomes increasingly frustrating for the audience as the project continues to spiral downward, further and further from the portrait painted in Genesis 1 and the expectations there established.

But, even from these initial moments of decline, God promises a hero, a hero to come. A son of Eve who He says will crush the head of the talking snake of Genesis 3, who will overcome the enemy of death, though this snake will strike the rescuers heel.

But, even from these moments of decline into further decline, the story moves along and God eventually focuses on a character called Abraham, assuring him that, through his descendants, this king is going to come and the good world that we saw at our story's opening is going to somehow be restored through the lineage of this king. And, if you know this story, the line of ensuing kings that follow shows no sign of this promises snake-crusher, the hope for the world.

As you're reading, you get to David and you're thinking, "Oh, this guy's pretty awesome."

Maybe it's him. He seems like he's got something. He likes to dance naked. That's weird. But, other than that, it seems like he's got something going on."

And then you read further and you're like, "Oh, no. He's an adulterer and a murderer. I guess that's not going to work."

And then you get to the next guy and you're like, "Oh, maybe it's this guy. He seems alright. No, it's not him."

And then the next guy you're like, "Oh, he's awful. It's not him. It's not him."

And on and on and on through the story. Things get so bad that the entire nation of Israel is in utter decline and this horrifying empire of Babylon comes in and drives them in terror and agony from their nation and their home into exile. And there's no kingdom, no king and the plan has failed. But then, in this season of hopelessness, this nutty group of people called "prophets" appear and they haven't given up hope on the idea of a coming king to restore the world to God's vision of a garden brimming with potential to share with humanity.

And then when we get to the New Testament it opens by introducing us to our hero in a brand new way: Jesus of Nazareth. Not a glorious king, not a bronzed warrior, but a refugee baby turned peasant stonemason in some obscure town called Nazareth. And, if you know that story, Jesus, an actual person of history, is not unlike many of our archetypal heroes of fiction. We, the reader or the audience, are drawn to Him and yet, not everything lines up for Jesus. In spite of being loved by many and doing good for everyone, Jesus is also despised and rejected and ultimately finds Himself at what seems to be His lowest point when all is lost; executed by the Roman empire as a common criminal.

And you're reading and thinking, "This is the king?"

But, not unlike some of our best stories, the story doesn't end there. Our hero defeats death itself, is victorious on a cosmic scale. Jesus is resurrected from the dead, foreshadowing the resurrection of all the dead and demonstrating His power and authority over death itself. In fact, the story ultimately concludes with our hero restoring the goodness of the garden, where our story began, once and for all. Defeating the talking snake, once and for all. And our hero is united with His love, once and for all. In this case, our hero's love is His followers; the Church. And He is united with them here on earth in a creation made new.

And interestingly, Revelation does not offer a portrait of God's people suddenly transported out of this world to live a spiritual existence in heaven forever. This is a very modern conception of the future and life after death. The Bible seems to tell a very different story, one that scholar N.T. Wright describes as "life after life after death."

What we often think of as heaven is not the end of the story. Our world made new and us living in it in corporeal, physical bodies is the end of the story. And, on the misunderstanding of an escape to heaven, Craig Bartholomew comments, "John's depiction of salvation is not one of escape from earth into a spiritualized heaven where humans should dwell forever. Instead, John is shown, and shows us in turn, that salvation is the restoration of God's creation on a new earth. In this restored world, the redeemed of God will live in resurrected bodies within a renewed creation from which sin and its affects have been expunged. This is the kingdom that Christ's followers have already begun to enjoy in foretaste."

So, to imagine humanity's role in creation as one of ultimate escape up to heaven, renders the Bible's narrative nonsensical. If our hope and future is to go somewhere else, then the Bible is no longer a unique interpretation of the universal history of the world. Consequently, it no longer has much to say at all about humanity's active involvement in history now. But, lucky for us, that's not how the story ends. And, obviously, a tremendous amount of debate surrounds the exact timing and the sequence in regards to the end of the story, but all followers of Jesus agree on the following four elements:

Jesus' return, resurrection, judgment and new creation.

As promised, the snake-crushing King Jesus will return and, like Jesus, every one of us will be resurrected from the dead. Jesus will judge the world and this will be wonderful for some and horrifying for others. And some of us, myself included, at least at times, are

uncomfortable imagining Jesus as the judge of the world. But, it is a reality clearly stated and reiterated many times over by Jesus Himself.

In Matthew 12, Jesus says, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken."

That sucks.

In Matthew 7, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out many demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you: Away from Me, you evil doers.'"

In Matthew 25, Jesus says, "When he comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne: all the nations will be gathered before him: and he will separate the people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."

The sheep, who are representative here of Jesus' faithful followers, will inhabit the new heaven and the new earth and the goats, representative of those who reject the way of Jesus, will go to destruction. And in Hebrew – in Hebrew thinking, anyway – judgment was more than the simple courtroom paradigm that dominates much of our thinking. Instead, judgment was the restoration of shalom, this Hebrew idea of goodness and wholeness and peace and completion. And destruction is more than just punishment, it's the eradication of evil and evil doers from God's healed world.

The cosmos itself, however, will not be destroyed and made again from scratch, it will be restored. This is an important distinction. It implies a certain amount of continuity and familiarity with the good in this world and what we know about the good in this world and the age to come. Rather than an incomprehensible world of clouds and endless hymns. Human beings were meant to enjoy God in full and good context of life within God's creation. When God set out to deal with sin and with all sins ruinous consequences, He set out to destroy the enemy of creation, not to destroy creation itself.

Creation will be redeemed. And this restoration and redemption of the cosmos will be comprehensive in scale. The whole of humanity and creation itself will be purged of evil and suffering and death and every wrong will be undone in both the context of humanity, the physical and the spiritual realms, the environment, the animal kingdom, everything.

A comprehensive redemption reminds us of the story in which we find ourselves. The broadness of the story in which we find ourselves. Often many of us, myself absolutely included, lapse into a sort of individualistic understanding of salvation apart from the full creational and relational context in which we were created to live. So, in that paradigm, the whole of the Biblical story and the way we relate to Jesus revolves around me. You know? Me and Jesus. Me and my salvation with Jesus. Me and Jesus in heaven. You know?

And yet, God intends to save and to restore not me only, but creation itself. A comprehensive redemption also implies that human cultural development and work will carry on in the age to come, it won't just stop so we can hang around on some clouds. We will be loosed to continue the work of stewarding and developing the world as God first saw fit, now released from the bondage of sin.

This is a wonderful story. And, you know, for all the understandable and totally justified confusion surrounding the Bible, at its heart, we find very clear and beautiful narrative and a very familiar story arch that speaks to the human condition and answers our most existential dilemmas with beautiful resolve. The trouble is getting there. And that trouble is named "death." It's death who removes us from the story before it achieves resolution. And, according to the entire story of Scripture, death is the consequence of rebellion against God.

So, we will die. All of us. But, disciples of Jesus commit the entirety of themselves, flawed, messy, screwed up though we may be, to the one who has conquered death. And it's only in Jesus that our hopes for human history and for the whole world and for ourselves and for the people we love, it's only in Jesus that all those hopes are brought together in the

future of God's coming kingdom so that we can look at the future and find not an empty void or the darkness of death or some unimaginable utopia in which we will never have any part. When we look to the future, we imagine and crave the return of the King. The day when evil and suffering are banished for good and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Death is the complication in the story and Satan who, in the words of Jesus, comes to steal, kill and destroy, is the antagonist who rouses her. Ever since Genesis 3, sin and evil have run amuck in God's creation and the wages of sin is death. I think most of us have spoken with death in ways big or small. We've either been dragged over the broken glass of horrific tragedy in our lives or at least been exposed to it, or we've simply scrapped our knees or broken our bones. These small reminders of our frailty. Harbingers proclaiming that we are perishable. And, one day, a head that aches will become a brain that goes dark altogether.

Now, myself in my 30s, I am a pastor now rather than this full-time musician fellow I once was. So, I have to do what I can do maintain my punk rock credibility. So, I have, as one of the means of doing so, set about to master the art of skateboarding. Now, I've never been an accomplished skateboarder of any sort in my life before, but I figured what better time than now?

So, I've bought myself a skateboard and started skating around town and I've been joining Gerald every week to go skate at Skatechurch. But then, last week, this happened to me.

Why? Moe, can you play it one more time? Pay attention. This is important.

Obviously, I'm okay. Here I am. It was no brush with death or anything like that. In fact, my friend that was filming me, he was so frustrated with me. That was like the twelfth time I tried, by the way. He just sat there filming at me like, "Get up. You're okay."

I got a concussion and I was dizzy for like a day and I think I'm ready to try again now. I understand what I did wrong. I know how to fix it. I love the reactions. Peter, did you see that? Did you see what I did wrong? Was it my weight on the back leg or something like that? I did everything wrong. Well, you know, you've got to start somewhere.

So, I was in the emergency room after having passed out a couple times in the car on the way there and – what good is a helmet if you hit your face? It doesn't make any sense. And the doctors, they were like, "Oh, you're fine. You have a concussion."

I got to sit in the futuristic, 2001 head CT thing. They were like, "Oh, you're fine. Man, we've seen all kinds of crazy skateboarder stuff while we were in here."

And they were like, "Are you a good skateboarder?"

But, they started talking to me about head injuries and brain bleeding and other, better skateboarders with bigger, grander aspirations on obviously bigger and more impressive, scarier ramps, who fall and they break and they die. And, you know, I was obviously okay but they were just saying, "Yeah, it's amazing. You hit your head a certain way and you could just die like that."

It turns out that your head is quite fragile. But, I've also seen death a bit closer than some mild concussion. You know, a few years ago, my dad was in an ICU for weeks and doctors are just shrugging and saying, "Who knows?"

And then, a few weeks after that, I stood in front of a crowd of hundreds at his funeral and said, "My dad has died."

And I remember the pastor that was praying at that same funeral, his horrifying words echoing in this old sanctuary in Georgia. And he was saying, "God, we know that you are sovereign over death. We know that you are in control. God, we know that this was your will."

And on that same stage, just minutes after that, I stood there and I said, "No. This is not God's will. Death is not God's plan. It is not God's will. It is not His intent. It is not His best. For followers of Jesus, death is an enemy. An enemy whose parade of affliction and misfortune and sorrow defy God. Death happens against God's will in rebellion and

defiance of God's will, but not for long."

Most of us, I think, have spoken with suffering in ways big or small. You know, I've lived something of a charmed and privileged life myself. But, quite frankly, between you and I, over the past five months or so I've been stumbling through one of the most unpleasant and inexplicable periods of anxiety and sadness that I've ever known that I'm trying to figure out with and get help from people who are trying to figure it out with me. And my missional community is currently in this chaotic storm of complication and broken relationships and, as we speak, navigating the fracturing of one of our most dearly held friendships with no redemptive conclusion yet in sight.

And that's just my own charmed little world. You can throw a rock and hit someone who has suffered more than I have. And I try not to bother with the disgusting vulture of the news media often, but when I do or when I come up against the news media, they always happily and readily provide me with some story of an abused child or a battered wife or a severed head or a missing person and chaos reigns and death towers over us as this hulking inevitability. But, not for long.

Soon, death will be put out for good along with his friend evil. And no longer will the news media bury us under stories of suffering and despair. Where now in the world our clothes and our coffee and our chocolate often come on the bloodied backs of human slaves, where materialism drains our lives of enjoyment, where pornography tangles the brains of children and where children are trafficked to make pornography. Where now in the world we are bombarded with images of men's heads sawed from their bodies, of stories in which foster children are bound and entombed in freezers, of mass shootings as casual and frequent as sporting events, of infants beaten and violated, of cancer and HIV and car crashes and miscarriages, or hurricanes and tsunamis, or war crime and pedophilia.

There is coming a day when Jesus, the serpent-crushing King of the world will say, "No more of this. No more of this."

And, more than a personal escape to the clouds, God's ultimate end is the complete and utter undoing of every wrong and every evil. And God's ultimate purpose in creation is that the world, once created good, will be utterly restored to goodness. A place in which "on earth as it is in heaven" is finally answered and answered in full.

The story of the Bible concludes with a portrait of the final perfection of all humans striving toward beauty and truth and goodness. A portrait of a world where every tear is dried, where every one of us knows God face to face and knows in full that we are His and He's ours. And this vision invites us to become responsible actors in God's story. Not just a passive audience. We're no longer capable of running from the responsibilities and the agonies of human life. Instead, we all take our share in the struggles and the anguish of human history. And yet, with confidence that what gets committed to Jesus will find its place in the final kingdom.

And our work in the meantime concerns not only the spread of the Gospel and the bringing of others into God's Kingdom, but it also concerns the renewal of culture. The cultural mandate that we talked about in Genesis 1 that opened the Scriptures to rule and to reign as those who represent God to the world, it continues to apply and will continue to apply. God has designed us, the Church of Jesus, to be an instrument of renewal and reconciliation in the world.

And though we can never usher in the completion of God's Kingdom ourselves, only the return of King Jesus can bring that about. Even so, our obedience in the here and now matters. Our effort and worship, our good works, our faithfulness to Jesus matters. And no, we won't heal every hurt, we will not correct every injustice nor remove every evil. But, we are called to become active participants in the bringing of God's reign and God's rule to earth now.

We are ambassadors of the coming kingdom in our families and in our workplaces, in our schools and our neighborhoods. We act as a sign of the kingdom that's here, but of the kingdom that's also on the horizon, yet to come in full. There's three distinct times in the final chapter of the final book of the story of God in which Jesus repeats, "I am coming soon."

And John, Revelations author, concludes his letter and concludes the Bible itself with this, the only appropriate response: "Amen."

YEAR OF
BIBLICAL
LITERACY



Come, Lord Jesus.

Let's pray.

