

THE STORYFORMED WAY

Part 10: Life in the End

Questions for Personal Study

Read Revelation 1-3, and 20-22. What themes stick out to you?
What does Rev. 1.1-8 tell us about the purpose of the vision John sees?
Revelation tells the Story: God loves and frees us by the blood of Jesus!
How are you being freed from sin right now? How does that lead to love?
Do you think much about the return of Jesus? Why or why not?
What part of Rev 21-22 makes you the most excited for eternity?

Questions for Study in Community

How does life in community prepare us for eternity? Why is it so hard?!
What do you imagine it being like to be finally home, fully known by God?
Reflect on the Lewis quotes below.

Questions for Staying on Mission

If God's rescue mission includes the cosmos, how should we live now?
How does knowing the end free you to sacrifice and serve today?
What are your plans for next Sunday, May 2? Scattering?

C.S. Lewis on Heaven and Hell

"There have been times when I think we do not desire Heaven, but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our hearts of hearts, we have ever desired anything else..."

"Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation . . . at last to be summoned from inside would be both glory and honor and also the healing of that old ache."

"All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it—or else that it was within your grasp and you have lost it forever..."

"Joy is the serious business of heaven."

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The Whole Story

Today we come to the conclusion of our study of the Story-line of the Bible. Our goal over the last 10 weeks has been not just to get the story straight, but also to understand what it means for us as we live 2000 years after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Bible, from start to finish, is telling the True Story of the World. It proclaims, "This is what life is all about, this is who God is, this is what it means to be human, and this is how humanity relates to the God who created and redeemed it." While the Bible is full of commands, instructions, historical stories, character studies, and eye-witness reporting, the main point remains quite simple: God saves sinners.

Michael Horton, in his book Gospel-Driven Life, writes: "The power of God does not lie in programs, strategies, self-help formulas, seven steps to a better life, or political reform. Like someone trapped in a burning building, we cannot rescue ourselves. *There is no hope inside of us!* There are no inner resources or possibilities - no Archimedean point at which we might pry ourselves open to God and begin to climb the stairway to heaven. Our whole nature is in bondage to sin, so we cannot even repair our condition by an act of will. *Our only hope lies outside of us, from the God who rescues us in his Son!* Paul said that he was 'not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...' (Romans 1.16)."

Horton reminds us that the Story of the Bible is primarily a Rescue Story. It is primarily about how God has, in his sovereign freedom, chosen to save us from the corruption we have brought into his perfect world and the righteous judgment we deserve for our rebellion and idolatry. The great surprise of the Biblical Story is that God chooses to rescue us by becoming one of us, in his Son Jesus Christ, and taking upon *himself* both the corruption of the creation and the judgment we each deserve! The Story of the Bible is Gospel: it is the "good news" about free rescue from corruption and judgment into fellowship with God through the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Every page of the Bible points to and proclaims this incredible message!

Not the End of the Story

The entire Old Testament points forward to the coming of Jesus Christ and God's great rescue mission. The first four books of the New Testament tell the story of Jesus, intermixed with theological reflection and commentary on how the early disciples of Jesus came to understand what it all meant. The rest of the New Testament essentially looks back on the person and work of Jesus, drawing out the implications of his Rescue for the people he rescued!

But one book in the New Testament does something different. Rather than look back at Jesus' incarnation, his death, and his resurrection, the book of Revelation is a forward-looking account of the end of the Story. One of Jesus' closest friends, John, has a vision in which he sees into the heavenly realm, and is enabled to see how the Story turns out in the end. We know by looking at the cross and resurrection that the victory has been won: sin has been forgiven and done away with, and people can be reconciled to God right now. But the book of Revelation reminds us that God's rescue of a people is going somewhere, it has a purpose, a final end where the Story finds resolution. This week we look at the end of the Story.

The Scope of the Story

In Revelation 21-22, John is given a glimpse of the conclusion to the great Story that God has been weaving since Genesis 1. The first thing that stands out is that John sees a new heavens and a new earth. Back in the first chapters of Genesis, we see God going to great lengths to create a place full of the splendor and beauty. He creates out of nothing all that is, and each piece of creation reflects God's glorious goodness, his loving kindness, and his great care for the people he places as the pinnacle of that creation. God's goal has always been a physical world full of his glory, cared for and cultivated by the people he loves. Though that was corrupted and put in bondage as a result of human rebellion (Rom 8), the end of the Story reminds us that God fully intends to restore the cosmos to that order of perfection! God is not scrapping this world, but "making all things new." In rescuing humans through Jesus, God is also rescuing the creation, restoring it as a place for humanity to dwell and enjoy forever. As John Calvin said, "There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice." In the end, God restores this world for us to live in forever, removing every bit of damage and decay, and remaking it into the perfection we all long for!

The Goal of the Story

The second thing you notice in these last chapters of Revelation is that God not only restores the world for us but creates the world as a massive temple where he comes to dwell *with* us! The end of the story is not humans "getting out of here" but God restoring and renewing the world so that he can come and dwell here, with us, forever - just as he intended in the Garden of Eden! The *goal* of the Story has always been that we get God! We will experience the fullness of friendship with God of which right now we only have glimpses! He will be present among us, his glory will be our light, we'll enjoy unhindered access to his throne, and all the former things - tears, pain, mourning, and death - will be personally wiped away by God himself!

Living the Story in the In-Between Time

The most important reason to have clarity about the end of the Story is that we always live in light of our projected futures. We make decisions today based on what we think tomorrow, next week, or next year will be like. We are living light of the future. Revelation teaches us we must live this life as those who "conquer." This is the word Jesus uses in Rev 1-3 to describe those who remain faithful to him during the time between his first and second comings. In this context, to be one who conquers means to be one who holds unswervingly to the hope of the Gospel, resting their salvation on the perfect work of Jesus, and clinging by faith to all that they've been given in Jesus. This is real hope - a solid confidence that in Jesus nothing in life is wasted, and that even our pains and sorrows are working in our favor and will one day bring him glory as they are wiped away. Paul says it well in Romans 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

This great promise of the future brings up one other important factor: final judgment. God is going to eradicate the evil of this world, but only for those who respond in grateful trust to Jesus' rescue. God will restore the world and come to dwell with those who love and long for his return. For those who have continued in rebellion against him, rejecting his free rescue, the end brings a final and just conclusion: those who have refused God's rescue will go on refusing it forever in the "second death." God will not force people who love wickedness to enjoy the recreated world and be in God's presence forever. For those who refuse his grace and mercy, God offers the only just reward for sin.