

God Will Make All Things New

[INTRODUCTION]

I recently heard someone say, “we live with the often unspoken understanding that the *end* gives the final shape to all things. For all the drama of a good sporting match, the game is ultimately shaped by the end and who comes out on top.” We say things like, “All’s well that ends well.” “It will all be worth it in the end.” “He who laughs last laughs the loudest.” “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings.” Each of these familiar sayings understands that the end gives the final shape to all things.

God’s story, contained in the Bible, is the true story of the world. It’s a story in four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Re-Creation. It’s a story that ends in life. It’s a story of hope.

The main story of our culture is called secularism. It’s a story that says that what is real is only what we can taste, touch, and measure. It’s a story that ends in death. It’s a story of despair. If you understand the main story behind our culture, it makes sense of the widespread fear, anger, and anxiety of the last few years.

The end of each of these stories gives final shape to the lives of those living in these stories. So, which story are you living in? You can tell which story you’re living in by how the story impacts your everyday behavior and expectations. In Revelation 21:1-4, the true story of God ends with God’s declaration, “I am making all things new!” How does that end shape your everyday behavior and expectations? Honestly.

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[LITERARY CONTEXT]

Before we look at our passage, some brief context. The book's title, Revelation, means "that which is revealed." What is primarily revealed is the resurrected King, Jesus Christ. As the book opens, the apostle John is given a revelation of Jesus. His hair is white, like wool. His eyes are like a flame of fire. His feet are like polished bronze. His voice is like the roar of many waters. You don't want to mess with this Jesus.

This revelation is given not to help us figure out if the Russian invasion of Ukraine means Jesus is coming. Rather, this revelation is given to comfort and encourage a struggling and suffering church. They need to remember that Jesus is the conquering king, sovereign over human history, and that he will come again and make all things new! This revelation is given to the church then, and the church today, for hope and encouragement.

Revelation is structured as a series of repeated visions. Each cycle gives a slightly different perspective and covers the time between Jesus' first and second coming. The final cycle is found in chapters 20-22. In chapter 20, we read of final judgment. The book of deeds and the book of life are opened. Those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. Which is the second death. This awful picture of death is contrasted with the eternal life enjoyed by those whose names are written in the book of life. That's chapters 21-22. As we look at Revelation 21:1-4, the overall message is that God will make all things new! Let's look at our passage in more detail.

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God Will Make a New World (Rev. 21:1)

In verses 1-4, John *sees* two things and *hears* two things... First, what John *sees*. Look with me at verse 1.

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.

John sees a new world. The reason he sees a new universe is that the first heaven and first earth has passed away.¹ In 2 Peter 3, we're told the old world will pass away through fire. Likely, not a fire of destruction but one of purification. A fire that renews *this* world.

A fire that transforms *this world* into new kind of world. Like how our bodies will be transformed from perishable, dishonorable, and weak bodies to imperishable, glorious, and powerful bodies (1 Cor. 15). So, this decaying and corrupted world will be transformed into a glorious and imperishable new world. This earth will be made new and yet retain all its beauty and goodness. This means that our future existence is not disembodied and unearthly.

What John sees is the consummation of God's promise in the prophet Isaiah.

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. (Isa. 65:17)

God will make a new world. Isaiah goes on to describe this new heavens and earth in very physical terms. Build houses. Plant vineyards. Work. Wolves and lambs grazing together. Resurrected physical bodies living in a new physical earth is very different from popular views of an afterlife where we float on clouds and play harps.

Chris Morpew, in his book *What Happens When We Die*, asks us to "Imagine you're hanging out at home one day, when suddenly there's a knock on the door. You open it, and find your friend standing there with this ridiculous grin on her face, like she's got incredible news that she's bursting to share.

¹ G.K. Beale with David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 464.

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“Hey,” you say. “What’s up?” But at first, she’s so excited that all she can do is beam at you. After a long silence, you finally lose patience and say, “What? What’s going on?” “I’m going to the greatest place in the entire universe,” she says, “and I want you to come with me!” “Oh, ok. Great!” you say. “Where are we going?” The words come out in a gasp, like the very thought of it makes her short of breath: “The waiting room—at the dentist!”

“Wait—what? Why? Is there something wrong with your teeth?” “What do you mean?” She tilts her head, confused. “Why would there be something wrong with my teeth?” “Well, isn’t that why most people go to the dentist?” “I’m not going to the dentist,” she says. “I’m going to the waiting room.” “Why?” “Because it’s wonderful!” she says, voice choking up. “It’s all clean and sparkly and shiny, and the people who work there wear these cool white outfits, and all day you get to just sit around, thinking, ‘Isn’t this great? I can’t believe I’m in the waiting room at the dentist!’” A single, joyful tear streams down her cheek. “Doesn’t that sound amazing?”

Does that sound amazing to you? Of course not. The point is our vision of God’s new world is often anemic. What John sees is the restoration of *the world!* This physical world set free of corruption and decay. God reveals this immense vision of a new world to give you hope and encouragement. To shape your everyday behavior and expectations.

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God Will Make a New City (Rev. 21:2)

So, first, John sees a new world. What else does John see? Look at verse 2.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:2).

John sees a new city. Earthly Jerusalem was the city where God dwelt with his people before its destruction in 586 B.C. Yet God promised to create a new Jerusalem. A heavenly city comprised of people who trust in God's coming Servant as the prophet Isaiah revealed.

**Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city... (Isa. 52:1)**

Isaiah calls his readers to wake up and trust in the LORD. He will provide beautiful garments to be received by faith. Throughout history God calls people to faith and so gathers people to himself who are citizens of a new city. The writer of Hebrews says something similar. By faith OT saints were "looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." Through faith in Jesus, every believer is currently a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20-21). Now, John sees the revealing of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19) – the heavenly city. This new city comes down out of heaven from God to the new earth.

Prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. God uses the imagery of marriage to describe his relationship with his people. God designed marriage so that a man and a woman enjoy such an intimate relationship that they become as one. If anyone is in Christ, you are a new creation. You are now in a relationship with God so intimate that it is pictured best as a marriage. You are the bride of Jesus. This imagery also speaks to how God views those who are in Christ. A bride is beautifully dressed. God views you like a beautiful bride. In Rev. 21:11, the new city is described as "having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal." God reveals to John this new city – his bride who is breathtakingly beautiful.

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I suspect most of us don't feel like Jesus' beautiful bride. But living in God's story means learning to live out of your new identity. You are now a citizen of this new city. You are now the beloved bride of Christ. That's your core identity. That's who you are most deeply.

The problem is we all suffer from identity amnesia. We forget about our identity in Jesus and instead try to establish our identity based on our performance. If we perform well, we feel like we're good. If we perform badly, we feel like we're bad. Jesus gets us off the performance treadmill. But we quickly forget and jump back on the treadmill. So, you must constantly remind yourself of who you are in God's story.

One way is through prayer. One book on prayer has been helpful. It's taught me to pray every morning – and throughout the day – like this, “Father, at my core I am not a success or failure, a wealthy person or a poor person, someone who needs to be honored, a good person or a bad person. At my core, I'm not a good or bad husband, father, pastor, or friend. No, at my core I am a loved child of God. I have been clothed in Christ's righteousness, with full pardon from guilt and full acceptance from God. God calls me his beloved. That is who I truly am.”²

Learning to live out of your identity in Christ doesn't happen automatically. It requires we stop listening to the stories we tell ourselves and start listening to God's story. It's hard work, but as we practice over time it will begin to sink in.

² Kyle Strobel and John Coe, *Where Prayer Becomes Real: How Honesty with God Transforms Your Soul*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 138-139.

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God Will Make a New Intimacy with His People (Rev. 21:3)

So far, John has *seen* two things: God will make a new world and a new city. Next, John *hears* two things. Two things that highlight aspects of the new world and the new city. The first thing John hears is found in verse 3.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

John hears that God will make a new intimacy with his people. It’s a voice that speaks authoritatively – from the throne. God and man will be together in a new intimacy. Heaven and earth reunited. It’s the moment to which all redemptive history points! I’ve heard it said like this,

At the beginning of Genesis, sin and death enter the world, and God banishes humans from his presence. At the end of Revelation, God banishes sin and destroys death, and he lives among his people.

It’s hard for us to understand how different that life will be. In a sense, you can’t miss what you never had. But the fact that nothing in this world truly satisfies is a clue that we were made for another world. A world where God and man dwell together. That’s what our first parents lost. They had God’s visible presence. God walked with them in the garden. But because of rebellion, humanity lost God’s presence.

But God wants to walk with his people on earth again. He began his rescue mission by dwelling in a tabernacle with his people Israel. In Leviticus, he promises:

I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people (Lev. 26:11-12).

Yet, only Jewish priests could enter the Holy Place. And only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place – and then only once per year. Though God dwelt with his people Israel, access was severely limited. Sinful humans could not see God and live (Ex. 34:20).

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But as redemptive history progresses, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of a New Covenant with greater access and intimacy.

God's dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...forevermore (Ezekiel 37:27-28b).

Jesus is the mediator of this New Covenant. Through his life, death, and resurrection anyone – Jew or Gentile – who trusts Jesus is welcomed into God's presence. A New Covenant where the Holy Spirit is given as a guarantee, or foretaste, of greater intimacy to come. A New Covenant that is consummated when God makes a new intimacy with his people. John says it like this in another letter he wrote,

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

God's story ends with you seeing Jesus face-to-face. Now, you walk by faith. Then, you will have sight. Now, you see in a mirror dimly, but then face-to-face!

Spurgeon once said that it is one of the most natural desires in all the world, that when we hear of someone great, we want to see their person. When I was a kid, I remember standing in line for hours to meet the actor who played "Fonzie" on the TV show, Happy Days. As a teen, I remember paying my hard-earned money and standing in line for hours to see my favorite bands in concert. As a college student, I remember driving from Butte, Montana to Seattle, to see my beloved Seahawks play the New York Giants.

We want to see. God says that we will see him. He will make a new intimacy with his people. But here's the thing. In Jesus, God welcomes us into his presence now. Learning to be in God's presence now is part of living in God's story. And part of finding true rest. One way to cultivate God's presence is through prayer. I'm learning to pray every morning like this, "Father, here I am. I present myself to you. Before I do anything else I want to be with you." I'm learning not to use God to have life the way I want it. I'm learning to be with God regardless of what he has planned for me. Over and over throughout a day my heart goes back to its default – life on my own. So, throughout the day I pray, "Stop, John, this is not the way. Father, I present myself to you again. I want to be with you in this."

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God Will Make a New Human Experience (Rev. 21:4)

John has seen a new world, a new city and now John hears about a new intimacy with God. What else does John hear? Look at verse 4.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

John hears that God will make a new human experience. God will wipe away every tear. The implication is that we will have tears until God finally wipes them away. It's an important point. God never promises "no tears" in this life. Quite the opposite. The pattern for our lives is that of Jesus: suffering now, glory later. If you hear a preacher, or teacher, tell you that God promises "health and wealth" now, don't believe it. We will have tears until the former things have passed away; until God makes a new human experience.

When it comes to movies, my wife and I have very different tastes. She likes movies with a happy ending. I like movies that are more like real life – not necessarily a happy ending. Turns out, I am wrong. In the true story of real life, there is a happy ending. Life, joy, and love will have the final word. Tears, death, mourning crying, and pain will be no more because God will make a new human experience.

If you're like me, you may be thinking, can this really be true? I encourage you to be honest about your doubts. Also, doubt your doubts. Why does your heart long for eternity? Why do the stories we love most have happy endings? Perhaps it's true that God has put eternity in our hearts. In the final analysis, it all comes down to the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection, there is no gospel. There is no good news. The apostle Paul said it like this, "If in Christ we have hope for this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). But Paul had seen the risen Christ, and he knew that in the resurrection, all God's promises of a new world, a new city, a new intimacy, and a new human experience would follow.

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[CONCLUSION]

We live in a world marked by anxiety, exhaustion, fear, anger, alienation, and indifference. Given how the story of secularism ends, it's not hard to see why this is the case. But God invites us to live in a different story. The true story of the world. A story where God will make all things new. God reveals how the story ends to give his people hope and encouragement. That doesn't mean we're always happy. We live in a fallen world. So, it's right to grieve and lament. But we learn to grieve with hope. God reveals that he will make all things new so that it shapes our lives – so that it impacts our everyday behavior and expectations. What could be more radical in our culture than to be a people marked by hope?