

Apocalypse Now?
***When Heaven is a Place on
Earth***
October 3, 2021

Good morning, everyone!ⁱ

If this is your first time with us or your first time in a long time, you should know that we're near the end of a five-week series called *Apocalypse Now* ...

... in which we've been looking at what Jesus and the Apostles – the earliest Christian leaders who continued the movement He began ...

We've been looking at what they all had to say about “the end times.”

And what we've seen so far in this series – and I'm going to give you a very quick overview so, if you want to know more, go to the media

section of our app and website where you can watch, listen to or read anything you've missed ...

Anyway, what we've seen so far in this series is that with so much turmoil in the world these days, even non-religious people are wondering if "this is it."

And there *are* a lot of things happening that appear to line up with what Jesus and the Apostles said.

However, since the beginning of Christianity, there have always been seasons in which things appear to line up – and yet Jesus hasn't returned.

Plus, it could be that what we're witnessing these days – at least here in the U.S. – is the "end times" of a nation, not the end times of the world.

That's what we talked about in the first week of this series.

Of course, one of the things that has many Christians on edge these days is "the vaccine" – because there are some similarities between how it is being mandated and a passage in the New Testament Book of Revelation concerning the "mark of the Beast."

And so, in the second week, we took a closer look at that book – which is actually a letter written to first century Christians who were being forced to choose between worshipping Jesus and worshipping the Beast otherwise known as the Roman Emperor.

And we saw once again, the importance of understanding that what's in the Bible was God's Word to someone else before it became God's word to us.

And if we want to properly discern what it

means to us, we first have to discover what it meant to them – especially when it comes to prophetic writings.

Then, last week, we focused on what Jesus and the Apostles had to say about His return and the two predominant ways that theologians have understood the sequence of events.

And we saw that the reason we're have so many different viewpoints is because we're asking a question that Jesus and the Apostles never intended to answer ...

... which is “how do all the puzzle pieces fit together in the end?”

Instead, they focused on how to live *in the now* knowing that there is an end – that Jesus is coming back and “this present Age” will be over and “the Age to come” will begin.

So, that's where we've been and what we've

been talking about in this series.

Again, if you missed any of it, check it out online.

Now, what we're going to talk about today is that *Age to Come* – “the end game of the end times,” i.e., where it's all going *after* the end of this Present Age ...

... whether that end is next week or next year or next century.

And I have to tell you that of all the topics I ever get to preach about, this one is near the top in terms of my own personal excitement and passion.

What I'm going to speak about today, in my opinion, is truly one of the most amazing, incredible, and exciting teachings of Christianity.

And the more I have come to understand it ...

... the more I understand why the Apostle Paul once wrote:

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” 1
Corinthians 2:9 (NIV)

And what God has planned for those who love Him in the “Age to Come” is the sum total – raised to some exponential power (if that were possible)

- Of all the highest hopes and dreams
- Of all the deepest longings and desires

That we humans have held in our hearts since the beginning of time.

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” 1
Corinthians 2:9 (NIV)

It's one of the greatest promises in all of Christian faith.

A Puny Vision

Unfortunately, however, very few people think of it that way.

In fact, what most people believe concerning “what God has prepared” is simply *not* that exciting or motivating.

If you were to ask the average person on the street, “what is God’s ultimate plan for those who love him?” most people would say that ...

- That it has something to do with Heaven

- That it's some kind of disembodied spiritual existence where you float around on a cloud somewhere strumming a harp and attending an eternal worship service.
- Or that maybe it's somehow being subsumed into the person of God Himself, whatever *that* means.

And what really bugs me about that vision of “the end game” is that people hear it and think, “Well, if that’s where it’s all going, I’ll take a pass because even though it’s not perfect, I kind of *like* some of the stuff on this earth.”

“And I don’t think I would enjoy what God is preparing.”

By the way, I’m not talking about people who *aren’t* Christians thinking and feeling this way because many *Christians* think and feel this way.

Last week I mentioned that the two most urgent teachings I heard after becoming a Christian as a teenager had to do with ...

- Sex: “don’t do it until you get married.”
- And the return of Jesus: “it might happen at any moment, so be prepared.”

... which is why so many of us secretly hoped that Jesus wouldn’t come back until we had gotten married and had sex!

A lot of you told me later you had the same thought as a teenager.

But honestly, it was more than that. I wanted ...

- To enjoy hanging out with my friends
- To keep playing in my band
- To see the world.

- To have a family and career.
- To contribute in some way to the world.

As a young man, I wanted to experience what it meant to be a *human* and *actively* alive, not a *spirit* and *passively* alive – which is what I wrongly believed God’s end game to be.

So why is it that people who love Jesus imagine that what He is preparing for them is going to *do away with* the experience and desires of this life, instead of *fulfilling* them and even *exceeding* them?

The answer – at least part of it, I believe – is that people simply do not understand what God’s vision is and what God’s plan is *both for them and for this world*.

And a big reason people don't understand is because preachers and teachers have focused so much on the "salvation of individual souls" and "the spiritual dimension of reality."

Not that those things are unimportant, but I think we may have overdone it.

I think we've unintentionally (or even intentionally) communicated that "humans are *spiritual* beings having a *physical* experience" and, therefore, "the spiritual part is the most important part because it's the part that's going to last through all eternity."

Have you ever heard a preacher or teacher say that?

That might preach well but it's not biblical.

Humans, according to the scripture, are *physical beings* who have a *spiritual dimension* that was breathed into them by God at the creation of the world.

And “the end game” (or whatever you want to call it) doesn’t make sense unless it somehow addresses that physical reality.

I also think that people don’t understand God’s vision because preachers and teachers have talked so much about what happens after death ...

... that most people think “dying and going to Heaven” is the point of being a Christian.

And yet, there is not even one passage in the Bible that talks about “going to heaven” after you die. Not one.

That doesn’t mean the Bible has nothing to say about what happens to people after they die. It just means that “going to heaven” isn’t the way biblical authors thought about it.

The way they thought about it – what they

looked forward to after death – was being with Jesus.ⁱⁱ

But even then, that wasn't the end game.

See, the big payoff for being a believer ...

- Isn't just that you escape eternal judgment after death – as good as that is.
- And it's not only what happens in your heart and soul now – as good as that is.

The big payoff is – well, let me put it like this:

God's plan for believers is not eternal "spirithood" in a non-physical dimension called Heaven. Our eternal destiny is life on this planet (and maybe even others) as it was intended from the very beginning ... but even better!

The big payoff if you're a believer is that you are going to get to live ... *forever* ... *in the flesh* ... in

the Age to Come – in the physical world that will exist after Jesus returns.

Context: The Big Story

And that only makes sense because the *end* of a story has to have some continuity with what comes *earlier* in the story. It has to take place in the context of the whole.

And what God is going to do at the end of *history* works the same way. The end will have continuity with and be in context of what He intended from the very beginning.

Let me show you what I mean.

This is the Big Story of humanity (in four-and-a-half minutes) as the Bible tells it.

1. In the beginning, God created us with a purpose: “as my eikons, extend shalom.”

I like that word “eikon” because it communicates so well the idea that human beings are intended to be little images or representations of God himself ...

... which is exactly what Moses writes in Genesis 1.

*God created humans in his image
[i.e as His eikons].*

*In the image of God [as His
eikons] he created them.*

*He created them male and
female [so everybody is part of
this].*

*God blessed them and said, “Be
fertile, increase in number, fill
the earth, and be its master.”*

Genesis 1:27-28 (GW)

In other words, “Take the great thing I have done; take this world that I have created – a

place of flourishing, fulfillment, peace, joy, harmony, abundance and prosperity (which is what is meant by the Hebrew word “shalom”) – take *that* and increase it.”

“Work, play, love, worship, plan, create, share, teach, care for one another in such a way that the world becomes better than I’ve already made it.”

“As my eikons – creatures made to reflect Me and represent Me – extend shalom.”

Of course, you know how the story goes ...

2. We failed. And shalom, instead of being extended, was broken.

Adam and Eve, the Bible says, chose to ignore God and to make little gods of themselves (a pattern which continues to this day in all of us and in the entire human race).

And their sin – our sin – caused a terrible thing to happen.

Instead of shalom growing and expanding, it was broken.

And the world became a place of disease, destruction, and death. Even the eikons – you and me – were (and still are) broken.

But God, who loves us and loves His creation, didn't give up on us or it.

Instead, God took on flesh and became a man – Jesus of Nazareth – who not only taught us the ways of God and the plan of God, but also fulfilled the cosmic demand for justice in his death on the cross.

See, whenever property is destroyed, justice demands that someone pay for it. Someone had to pay for the destruction of the world and the eikons.

And Jesus did that on the cross.

But God took it even further. He did an amazing thing.

3. He planted the seed of “shalom-restoration” in the resurrection of Jesus.

When God raised him to new life in a new kind of physical body that can never die, His resurrection was the initial act in God’s reclaiming and re-creating the cosmos.

Paul describes it like this:

*Christ has indeed been raised
from the dead, the firstfruits of
those who have fallen asleep.
1 Corinthians 15:20 (NIV)*

John, in the Revelation writes that ...

Jesus Christ ... is the faithful

witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Revelation 1:5 (NIV)

The idea of firstfruits and firstborn here means that Jesus is the first in a long line of what God is going to do for the whole world and for those who love him.

Point being ... the restoration of shalom *literally and physically* began with the resurrection of Jesus.

And the rest of the biblical story is that ...

4. God will complete the restoration of shalom when Jesus returns.

The Apostle Peter put it like this:

He [Jesus] must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his

holy prophets. Acts 3:21 (NIV)

He was reflecting the words not only of those prophets but of Jesus himself, who said:

*Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne ..."
Matthew 19:27-28 (NIV)*

The renewal and restoration of God's universal shalom will be completed when Jesus comes back.

So that's the overarching story.

- We were created to be God's eikons, extending His shalom.
- But we failed and everything got messed up, including us.

- But Jesus, in his resurrection from the dead began the process of restoration which will be completed upon his return.

The End Game

The question, then, is ... *what will that final restoration look like and for what purpose?*

Well, let me tell you a story.

When I was in high school, my father started a business rebuilding old pianos.

Every so often, he would rent a big truck, and I and a few of my friends would spend a whole Saturday driving all over the Washington, D.C. metro helping him haul these huge upright pianos back to our garage.

He'd pay like \$50 for what seemed to be nothing

more than pieces of junk.

- They were out of tune
- Strings were broken
- Keys were broken
- They looked bad and they smelled worse.

But he would go over those old pianos and little by little he would fix whatever was wrong.

- Sometimes he'd replace strings
- Sometimes he would put in a whole new set of strings better than they had back in the day it was built.
- Sometimes he would have to put pins in.
- Sometimes he would actually have to rebuild the soundboard.

And then, after he'd made the inside right, he'd strip off the old finish and repair the woodwork. And then he'd re-stain and varnish it.

And when he was done the result was incredible. It was like a *brand new* piano.

But, of course, it wasn't.

It *was* that same old piano we'd hauled into the garage weeks before, but renewed, restored, and regenerated – made even better than it was in the beginning.

And all that work he did didn't change the purpose of the piano.

- We didn't try to cook with it.
- We didn't wash clothes in it.
- We didn't burn it to heat the house.

Instead, that renewed, restored and regenerated piano did what a piano was meant to do in the mind of whoever invented pianos, but better than ever.

It made beautiful music that would fill our house whenever my mom played it – until he sold it and then the process began all over again with another piano.

That's what's going to happen to our world, friends. This is where it's all going.

This broken-down, out-of-tune, bad-smelling creation and its creatures are going to be renewed, restored, and regenerated so that everything can finally be what it was meant to be in the mind of the Creator.

And I mean that quite literally.

Those who have chosen to believe in Christ and receive his salvation (whether living or dead)

are going to be physically renewed and regenerated so that we can be and do what those created to reflect the glory of God were originally intended to be and do.

John writes ...

We are children of God, and what we will become has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him ... 1 John 3:1

i.e., what happened to Jesus in his resurrection is going to happen to us, too.

So ...

Let me reveal to you a wonderful secret [Paul writes] ... we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown.

For when the trumpet sounds,

those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed.

For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.

Just like what happened to Jesus.

Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:

“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” 1 Corinthians 15:51-55 (NLT)

And this renewal and the end of death goes beyond what happens to humans.

On that day, Peter says:

... God will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.

*But in keeping with [God's] promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.
2 Peter 3:12-13 (NIV)*

And the author of Hebrews adds ...

*We are looking for the city that we will have in the future.
Hebrews 13:14 (GW)*

And all of these – the heavens, the earth and the city – are what John writes about in the Revelation:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, because the first heaven

and earth had disappeared, and the sea was gone.

Then I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, dressed like a bride ready for her husband.

I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "God lives with humans! God will make his home with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them and be their God.

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There won't be any more death. There won't be any grief, crying, or pain, because the first things have disappeared."

*The one sitting on the throne said, "I am making everything new."
Revelation 21:1-5 (GW)*

Wow!

God's purpose at the *end* of the story is the same as it was at the *beginning*. The endgame is not eternal "spirit-hood" in a non-physical dimension called Heaven.

So, if you're a believer in and follower of Jesus, rejoice! Your eternal destiny is ...

- Life in a renewed, restored, and regenerated body ...
- On this planet ...
- As it was intended to be from the beginning ...
- But even better!

Implications

Now, that's the big picture, friends.

And I hope, I hope, I hope you will get that *truly biblical* vision in your head and get rid of the sad and puny and boring one that most of us have acquired along the way.

But I want to drill down just a little bit more and give you six practical implications of what we've just heard; five statements that I think accurately describe where it's all going.

Here's the first one:

1. There will be continuity between the “stuff” of this age and the next.

The Apostle Peter wrote that there will be a great fire and a melting of the elements but, in the meaning of the original language, that's not the same thing as total destruction.

The earth and everything that humanity has created will be exposed so that it can be judged, so that it can be fixed and set right; the junk – the irredeemable stuff – will in some way be melted off and disappear.

It's kind of like when you remove the faded, cracked varnish on an old piano. The purpose (and result) isn't the destruction of the piano. The purpose (and result) is to reveal the good, healthy wood underneath.

I think that implies some very practical things about what this world is going to be like, such as the fact that there is still going to be “time” in this world.

There will still be water and light, plants, trees, air, sound, food, as well as flesh and blood.

2. Another implication is that the next age will feature the best of human culture.

One of the great insights that comes from reading the whole scripture and looking at the end of the story in context of the beginning is observing the “restoration of paradise takes place not in a garden, but in a city.”

Remember, the setting of Genesis takes place in the garden of Eden, but all the prophecies of the Age to Come are speaking of a city.

Well, what happens in a city?

It's what's happened in cities since the beginning of time.

Humans create culture through ... art, trade, cooking, eating, designing, building, transportation, community, politics, innovation, music, commerce, worship, leadership, entertainment, communication, entrepreneurship, sports ...

... pretty much everything that humans do.

That's what happens in a city and that's what is going to happen in *this* city – this renewed creation - except that this time it will be done ...

- In a way that enhances shalom
- In a way that enriches relationships
- In a way that reflects the love and care of God.

Another implication – and this is explicitly stated in the scripture – is that ...

3. Evil and the curse of sin will be gone.

And if you want to understand what that might be like, think about this:

- What would the world today be like if there was *no evil at all* – at any level?

- What if every inclination or thought to do something wrong or think higher of yourself and lesser of others was met with a simple: “nah”?
- What if you and I and the rest of humanity simply had no interest or attraction to sin?

If you can imagine that scenario in *this* world, then you have some idea of what God has in store for the next one.

And then ask yourself ...

- What would life be like if the curse of sin was removed from this world?
- If the natural calamities that destroy life and property never happened?
- What if disease and death simply never occurred?

- What if graveyards literally became just beautiful gardens as we sang about earlier?

If you can imagine what that would be like in this world, then you have some idea of what God has in store for the world to come.

The fourth practical implication is that ...

4. God's presence will be visible.

Over and over again, the scripture makes clear that Heaven is where God lives, while earth is where people live.

But one day, those two dimensions are going to be joined when the city of God descends to this earth.

And when that happens, there won't be any more questions about "where is God?"

That dull mirror through which we perceive His presence and activity in *this* age will be broken, smashed, and removed completely. And we'll finally see Him face to face.

Another implication is that, in the Age to Come ...

5. We will be the same people ... but with better bodies!

What God has promised us is resurrection, not reincarnation.

That means I won't come back as someone else or something else. I'm going to be raised as Rick McGinniss with all the junk removed.

All the stuff that drives everybody crazy, thank you Jesus, will all be taken out. What's going to be left is Rick McGinniss, cleansed and purified and perfected by the grace of God.

I will still be me and you will still be you.

But remember what we read earlier? John wrote that ...

*We know that when Jesus
appears, we shall be like him
1 John 3:1*

After his resurrection, people could recognize him. They knew it was Jesus.

But he had some different things about him.

He had the ability to enter and leave rooms without using the doors or windows!

He was able to “ascended” into heaven – he could go back and forth between the physical world and the spiritual world.

There were some aspects of what his body was after his resurrection that were not there before

and that's going to be the same for us.

Plus, as John also wrote, no more pain, no more death.

Same people ... better bodies.

Sounds like a great slogan for the Age to Come.

Finally ...

6. We will be given responsibility as co-creators with God (just like now!)

We're going to help God run the universe (whatever that means).

We're going to get to use our gifts, talents, and abilities to develop the renewed, restored and recreated heavens and earth.

Bakers will bake, teachers will teach, singers will sing, builders will build and so on and so

forth ... all without the effect of sin's curse.

It's going to be great. It's going to be awesome!
It's going to be incredible!

That's what it's going to be like – well, at least *some* of what it's going to be like: *shalom restored so that we who follow Jesus can be and do what the eikons of God are meant to be and do.*

Here's the bottom line, friends:

- God isn't content with merely saving souls; God wants to save bodies too.
- And God isn't content with saving individual human beings. God wants to save social systems and economic systems too.

The whole world belongs to God, and the whole world has fallen.

And so the whole world needs to be redeemed – every last person, place, organization, and program; all “rocks and trees and skies and seas”; in fact, every square inch.ⁱⁱⁱ

When Jesus taught us to pray “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven” he was serious because that literally is where it’s all going.

One day, that prayer – a prayer which has been prayed by millions for centuries – will at last be answered.

God’s Kingdom *will come* on Earth in all of its fullness, meaning that everything that happens on Earth at that point will be completely 100% according to the intentions that God has for his creatures and his creation.

Conclusion

Now, with that kind of a vision in front of us – a vision that I think is a little more motivating than floating around on a cloud or going to church through all of eternity – with that kind of a vision, the obvious question is ...

If that's what's coming ... if that's where God wants this all to go ... what are we still doing here?

One of the reasons that God is delaying the Parousia – the kingly return of Jesus, Peter writes, is so that more and more people can be saved.

“The Lord’s patience means salvation.”

And with that in mind, I want to offer some of you the opportunity to say “yes” to what God has done for you in Christ, this incredible salvation not only of your soul but also your body and everything else in creation.

And I want to do so with the words that are part of the closing of the book of Revelation (this is the big point of Revelation):

The Spirit and the bride [the church] say, "Come! [Come to Jesus]"

And let him who hears say, "Come to Jesus!"

Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

Revelation 22:17 (NIV)

Friend, if you're looking at your life and looking at this world and saying, "there's got to be more, there's got to be a better way" ...

Guess what? That is the thirst of a "broken eikon."

That's the Holy Spirit of God saying to you right

now, “come to Jesus.”

And that’s this church saying to you, “come to Jesus.” That’s the people around you who have already heard this message and received it saying “yea, come on, it’s great.”

The water of life is yours for the taking friend.
It’s free.

Would you pray with me?

Father in Heaven, what good news this is that you have not turned your back on your creation and those created in your image, that one day you are going to take all of it and renew, restore and regenerate it.

You’re going to completely restore shalom to this world so that we can be and do what your eikons are meant to be and do.

And you invite us to be part of it all; to

experience a resurrection from the dead into a new body and into a new world – this world, the way it was intended to be. What a vision, what a plan!

And God, you offer all of this to us for free because Jesus has done all the work in his death and resurrection. All we need to do is to confess, repent and believe.

So God, some of us are going to need to say this to you right now:

I confess, God that I am a broken eikon. I do not reflect your image. I do not reflect your character. I do not do your will. I am a sinner in need of restoration. I need a savior.

And I repent God – I change my mind about thinking I can live my life without You. I change my mind about thinking You are the enemy, that you're the problem.

And God, I believe that You loved me so much that you became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and you came to Earth to live the life I should have lived and die the death I should have died.

And then you rose again to new life on the third day so that I, too, could have new life – not only in This Age but in the Age to Come.

What a plan, what good news! Thank you God for saving me.

In Jesus name, amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ This message is an updated version of a message I did called Kingdom Come on October 3/4, 2009

ⁱⁱ <https://bibleproject.com/blog/new-heaven-new-earth/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Plantinga, Engaging God's World, p. 95-96