

## **The Rev. Billy Cerveny:**

Pray with me. Father, I thank you for the gift of your word. I thank you for the gift of tonight.

I ask you, Lord, that you would send your Holy Spirit, that you would fall in this room, that you would speak through my words, that you would speak in the spaces in between these words. You would open the eyes of our heart and you would bring your Scripture to life, Lord, that you would bring yourself to life, Jesus, that we would see you clearly. Thank you, Lord.

That you are who you say you are. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.

How we doing? Everybody good? Excellent. A couple weeks ago, I was preaching and I made a cultural reference to Spencer's, which was this store in the malls back in the day. How many people that came up to me afterwards were like, "Oh, I totally remember that." It's one of the things I love about being an Ortega and preaching here is that so many people in my own kind of age group that have all these cultural reference points that they can get along with or they understand. And this launched a conversation about being a kid in the 80s when we grew up with these feral childhoods where you had no cell phones, you know what I'm talking about, where you would leave the house at noon and you'd be on your cell phone, you'd be on your bike and your folks would have no idea where you are. By dinnertime, you'd already climbed through the window of an abandoned house and poked a dead dog with a stick under the Roosevelt Bridge or climbed on the railroad tracks down by Roosevelt Mall or something like that. That was our life. I remember one of my best friends back in the day at elementary school was my friend Hanes Johnson. And Hanes lived over in Ortega Forest and I'd always spend the night at Hanes's house and we'd wake up early in the morning, we'd watch the Incredible Hulk, eat some breakfast bars, load our pockets full of change, and we'd go back behind Stockton School and we'd jump over the ditch and we'd climb up on the railroad tracks. And we would spend the entire morning, which is incredibly unsafe, but we did this, and we would put change on the railroad tracks and it was like stand by me. And the train would come by, it would flatten all these coins. We'd find like one for every 150 we put down. We probably spent thousands of dollars doing this, finding old railroad spikes. But I remember walking with Hanes and we'd walk down these railroad tracks and looking down all the way at the end on the horizon, it would look like these railroad tracks that ran perfectly parallel to one another. It looked like way in the distance they would come together and touch.

And it was this thing, I remember going and thinking to ourselves, "Hey, let's go to that point."

And Hanes and I would get on the railroad tracks and we'd run down the railroad tracks and it would probably take us about 30 minutes to get there. And we finally got to that part of the railroad tracks where they came together and guess what we found?

They were just as far apart as they ever were. And of course, we realized, "Oh, I was an optical illusion."

And it's funny, I've thought of that story so many times as an adult because it's such a perfect metaphor for so much of my life, those railroad tracks, so much of what I've gone through and I bet for you as well.

Here's what I mean, that so much of my life is marked by this overwhelming sense of incompleteness, right?

There's this lack of resolution that we all carry and that we're not what we're supposed to be.

I thought, "I'm not where I'm supposed to be or I don't have what I'm supposed to be." And when we feel that way or we experience that thing, it produces all kinds of anxieties.

It produces all kinds of insecurities or all kinds of fear or shame and we just long for the tracks to come together in our life. We long for those things to resolve.

We long for it. So much so that everything about my life becomes dedicated to try and bring that completeness and that resolution. And then one day I come across something that holds so much promise, something that tells me that I'm going to satisfy this and we all have our version of it.

Maybe it's the job that you thought you'd get that it was finally going to make everything okay. Or maybe it was the person you were married to or not married to.

Or maybe it was, you know, having a certain magic number in your bank account.

That that was going to finally bring the completeness and we run to that place on the horizon. And if you think if I could just get to that place, if I could just get to where the tracks come together, what happens when we get there?

The same thing happened to Haynes and me.

Those tracks don't come together.

We get there and we realize they're just as far apart as they've ever been. And I stand there and I realize I'm still incomplete.

I still feel this massive lack of resolution.

At least when I was 10 years old on the railroad track and I was with Haynes, I'd look at that place and I'd be like, oh, that was just an optical illusion. That's not real.

But as an adult, you know what we do? Oh, we just recycle like, oh, it's a we were just running towards the wrong thing.

If that didn't work, maybe this will.

And we begin to pursue these different things and we go through the cycle over and over again.

And it doesn't happen. You don't have to do that very long.

And soon as you get old enough, you realize that the world starts feeling very tired. You start feeling really tired and everything starts feeling unsatisfactory and worn out and you begin to ask this question. Is that all there is? Like literally everything seems empty. I mean, it's they're good things, but yeah, really.

And we read our stories today that we read the power of the gospel.

That's what it's saying is that's not all there is.

The gospel is the Christian message is for people who have spent their life trying to find that place on the on the horizon.

And what Jesus is saying is that's not where it is. It does come together, but not the way you think it is.

We were reading the book of Revelation just earlier, Chapter 21, which is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture.

I love it because it's the punchline.

Everything you read to the left of that in the Bible, it all comes together here.

And what it does is it promises it offers us a new future, but it's the kind of future that also gives us a new present.

I want to take a minute. I want to unpack this a little bit. The book of Revelation is probably one of your lesser read books of the Bible because it's really confusing. It's the last book in the Bible. It's really powerful, but it's very difficult to read and understand because it's written in what's called apocalyptic literature. It's a genre of writing. What that means is it's written in a way that's really symbolic.

It's a lot of metaphors and you're reading it like what is this talking about? But why we read it and why it's so important is that it talks about the end times. It talks about when Jesus comes back. It talks about the new heavens and the new earth. It talks about Satan being defeated and all of that. And Chapter 21 is where we are in this story. Like I said, it's the culmination.

And what's happened here is we've seen in the book of Revelation, it's the fall of Babylon has already happened.

All the corrupt nations of the world and all the false religions that were there to prop them up, they've all fallen.

Jesus has come back. He's defeated Satan. Judgment has been executed and God is calling all of his people to him. It's the moment that we've been waiting for since page one of the Bible or at least page three where the fall of man happens. Where Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden. John the Apostle John, he has this vision and he says this.

There I saw verse one. 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.

If you're familiar with scripture, this is creation language.

He's reaching back and he's grabbing from Genesis one. It's echoes of Eden that it's he is God is recreating the heavens and the earth and it's not like the first one.

It's not like the original version. It's greater. It's permanent. That which was sown perishable is being raised imperishable.

And God is there and it says the sea was no more.

Now, anytime that you read about the ocean, especially in scriptures or anytime when you read about the ocean in scripture, the he to the Hebrews. This was a arid desert land and the ocean was terrifying.

So anytime you read about the sea, it's always an image for chaos. So what the scripture is saying is he's saying that the sea was no more. Order has been restored.

Verse two, when I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem coming down, coming out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And behold, 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.

Again, it's echoes of the Old Testament, this holy city that's coming down. This isn't just the greater Jerusalem, though it certainly is. But if you read in the beginning of the book of Genesis where God tells Adam and Eve, he goes, go out into the world, exercise dominion. I want you to go be fruitful, multiply what he was sending them out. He said, go build the holy city of God.

And Adam and Eve, they failed miserably. And what we're seeing here is Jesus, the second Adam, where Adam and Eve failed. Jesus, the second Adam has come and he has built the city that they were supposed to have built. It's this powerful moment. And here it is coming from the clouds.

And it says that God created this holy dwelling and it's not just a dwelling for us.

It's where God will dwell with man. And again, echoes of Genesis. What did God do in Genesis? He walked with Adam in the cool of the day.

And here it's not it's not a plan B. This is plan A, resurrected.

And then after it says in verse five, and he was seated on the throne, said, behold, I am making all things new.

Now, what does this have to do with us?

We want to understand a scripture and how it applies to us and gaining insight to a Bible passage. It's a lot like shuck in an oyster. You got to kind of take your blade and run it around the

outside of it. And sometimes it's open a little wide and it's obvious. You're like, oh, that's where I'm going to go in. And it's pretty obvious what it means. But other times it's a little harder to understand and it seems really tight. And there's one one fail safe method for getting in that oyster. What do you do? You go to the back hinge, right? You go to that back hinge and it'll pop the oyster up. Here's the back hinge of scripture.

If you ever want to understand how to pop it open and get the pearl inside, it's like this. Count the number of times a single word is used in a passage.

And you look and you find whatever word is used the most often, that's what the passage is about. Or at least that word is the doorway to tell you more about what it's about. And when you read this passage in Revelation 21, the first five verses, there's one word it's used four times. Anyone know what it is?

The word new.

Talks about a new heaven. A new earth, a new Jerusalem.

All things new.

What's that about?

Let me explain it this way.

So there's two things that that most every major religion in the world have in common, and this is including Christianity.

The first one is this. It's that that that teaches that life is marked by pain and struggle. That we contend with failures, we contend with loss, we contend with heartache, we contend with things that break us in half. That's why we have religion.

And the second thing that all the major religions in the world boast of is that their grand solution to those struggles ultimately is this promise of an afterlife.

They promise that this isn't all there is. Every other religion that you will gain access to this afterlife if you live the right way, if you resist the right temptation and you persevere along the right line.

Now Christianity, we have that promise as well.

Except our afterlife, what we say is the only people that can gain access into heaven are those who are perfect.

Those who are absolutely sinless. So guess who that is? None of us. None of us.

Because all we all have hearts that are sinful. All like sheep we have gone astray. Scripture. Scripture tells us that.

And that's why we need a savior.

And that's why Jesus came and he lived the perfect life.

And it is his death and in his resurrection. He took the punishment that you deserve so he could give you the reward that he deserved.

And he gave you his perfection. And when he gives you his perfection he gave you his righteousness. That is what allows us to go into the afterlife. And what's a lot to walk into the presence of the Father.

To heaven.

By his perfection. That's why it says in verse six it says to the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life the eternal life without payment.

And the way we get that is how just through faith. Faith alone in Jesus Christ.

And the second major difference that we have between us and the rest of the world religions that promise an afterlife is this and then the words of Tim Keller he says it great. Every other religion treats the afterlife as a grand consolation.

What I mean by that is this it means whether you're talking about the Vikings Valhalla or you're talking about Buddhist Nirvana or you're talking about Islam's Jana the afterlife that they offer. It's an escape pod.

It's that I'm going to take it and I'm going to create distance between you and this painful story that you lived.

I'm going to take you and it's you're going to be in an afterlife that is so wonderful that's so full of pleasures it's going to make up for the life that you thought you should have had but you've never got this side of heaven. And now over time it's just going to create this distance and that will fail fall away. It is a consolation for the bad stuff.

That is not the gospel.

Revelation 21 when you read that the message of the new heavens and the new earth is not about consolation. It is about resurrection.

And those are two very different things.

Jesus is saying behold I am making all things new. What he is not saying in that passage is behold I am making all new things. He's not making all new things. What he's saying is I'm taking what is and I'm making it what it should have been.

I am reaching in and I'm drawing out the glory. I'm teasing it out. I am making it what it should have been.

That means that the their physical bodies the lame will walk the blind will see the broken will be hold.

But it also means your stories will be made new.

The things that broke your heart.

The things that make you walk with that spiritual limp.

The gospel doesn't did the afterlife heaven the promise of the new heavens and earth it does not distance you from your story it absorbs your story.

And like Sam wise from the Lord of the rings said he said it's where the sad things of this world will come untrue.

It's where the will become un-lonely. Where the broken things became unbroken.

Again what Keller said this means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater. You hear that.

Isn't that amazing. Think about that. The pain you experience now. The loneliness that some of you carry.

The fears that some of us contend with it. We aren't even aware of that just wake us up before in the morning and you don't even know why. That's not the end of the story.

Your brokenness doesn't get to write the ending.

Resurrection does. Jesus does.

Not only is the gospel not an escape pod. It's the resurrection of all the people that are in the world. It's the resurrection of all things. It takes the shattered hearts and the broken pieces and it makes them whole. It makes them what they should have been in some mysterious way. And I don't pretend to understand how this works. It reaches back and the brokenness of this moment makes the glory of the next even more glorious.

That is a salvation worth longing for.

That's where our railroad tracks come together. It's a beautiful hope and it's an ultimate hope. But what about now?

So what do I do? How does that affect me now beyond just saying, hey, do I just white knuckle it?

You know when you read the stories of the gospels and Jesus goes and he finds that he goes to the pool of Bethesda and he sees the paralytic on the mat and he heals the guy. You ever stop and wonder like what about the 50 other guys that were around there? Like they're like Jesus, what about me? Like what do you know what you think they do? Right?

Why did he just kind of select all click the heal button that everybody was fine?

I'm not God, but I can tell you I have a few ideas here.

What Jesus was doing in those moment is he wasn't doing a healing as a cure all. He was doing it as a sign.

And the sign that he was giving was three of them, I think.

The first sign is he is saying, I am who I say I am. I'm revealing the sign of the Spirit. I am. I'm revealing my true identity. I am this Messiah, but I'm more than the Messiah you expected.

I am God himself incarnate.

And the second sign of what was he was giving a sign of what was to come.

Jesus was healing the blind.

He was letting the lame walk. He's letting the deaf hear. And in those moments, what he was doing is he was standing in history and he was tearing back the curtain and reaching deep into the room.

To the new heavens and the new earth, reaching deep into Revelation 21 that we just read, grabbing those realities and slamming them down right in front of those people for all to say and saying, this is what's coming.

This is the reality of the new heavens and the earth. And he was giving people a taste of it.

And he was saying, can you see this is the heaven that's coming?

He's also displaying this kingdom that is coming.

But what he is also doing, he's saying, there is a kingdom.

That has come.

What does Jesus say so often in the gospels? The kingdom of God is at hand. What does he mean by that?

What he's saying is through me, through my death and my resurrection, when the curtain is torn, the realities of Revelation 21 that we just read are going to flow into your realities now.

They're going to reanimate the dead things.

They are going to knit together the broken things.

And in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit is poured out, behold, I am making all things new washed across his people. Second Corinthians chapter 517, what does it say? Anyone in Christ is what? A new creation.



It's a new reality now in you, in Christ. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit, a temple of the Holy Spirit. Flannery O'Connor wrote this story years ago called "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" in the pencil sketch of the plot. It's this young 12-year-old girl who lives with her mother and these two girls, these kind of irreverent girls from a local Catholic school come and stay with them. And one night she's sitting there looking, they're older and listening to them and they are mocking this nun at their school.

And this nun in an attempt to make, to keep them pure, to keep them sexually pure. What she's telling them is your temple, your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost.

And the girls were rolling their eyes like, "Oh, please, oh, please, accept this 12-year-old girl."

She had never heard that she was a temple of the Holy Ghost.

And the story implies that she had these deep, deep shame.

This broken image of her own body, that for something had happened to her.

And it had broken her and it was destroying her life. And for the first time she says, "Me? I'm a temple of the Holy Ghost.

I am something special. I am something unique. The Spirit of God would dwell in me."

And the scandal of that idea not only broke her heart in half, it renewed the way she thought of herself. It began to unravel her shame.

It began to unravel her self-image.

She began to see the glory that was brought, not because she had to be a holy thing, but because a holy thing came and had dwelled in her, making her a holy thing.

And listen, I don't know your story. I know a lot of your stories.

But I know we can all taste that.

We all have ways that we wish we were that were not.

We all carry shames that tangle us.

We all carry things that we wish we didn't have to carry.

The message of the Gospel is, yes, there's a future hope, a future glory that's come. It's the new heavens and the new earth where all things are made new, that what we were to be is now teased out to its ultimate reality.

But it's also saying it begins now.

And you've been touched by the Holy Spirit, and you are a holy thing. You are a new thing, and the Spirit of God dwells in you.

That doesn't mean this world isn't hard.

It doesn't mean that we won't encounter futility.

But it means we encounter those not in the same way that the world encounters it.

We encounter it with hope.

And while those things that were so hopeful in our life or seemed so hopeful and so pure and so good might drift away, there is a hope that we can keep pointing towards.

Remember that story I was telling you about walking the railroad tracks of my friend Hanes?

And I remember that was such a pure moment, but you know the sadness of that moment as I grew up.

I don't walk on the railroad tracks anymore.

I don't run down those things. I don't have those moments, and it's a sense of loss in that.

A couple years ago, I got a call that my friend Hanes had passed away. I hadn't seen him in years and years.

And I called his mom and through tears, I wish he was telling me his story. And they said they would like to have him buried. And I said, "Could I please do his funeral?"

And I said, "Yeah." And so we came and we gathered in the chapel, and his body had been cremated. And I remember we had read through Revelation 21, and I remember sitting there, and as I put his body in the ground, I thought to myself in that moment, thinking of Hanes, and I think into the promise of the gospel.

My friend was gone, but you know what?

One day I will stand with him again, and I will stand with him where the railroad tracks come together. They really come together.

We can get to the place that we finally, we always thought we could get to, and our hearts the place where you thought you could get to, the place where hope is realized, where God calls us home and says, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Amen. Amen.