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The Story: The End of Time Revelation

If you know me at all you know that I love to go to the movies. In my defense, I don't watch movies for escapism, I love to really think about what's going on in the movie, what it says about our culture, what it has to say about humanity, and maybe even what it has to say about God. Movies are, of course, a visual medium. And I'm afraid that nowadays we are all too impressed by all the flash and spectacle of a movie and overlook what may be the most important part of any movie: the story.

Though, no matter how visually impressive a movie may be, just about no one can overlook whether a movie has a satisfying ending or not. I know this strikes a chord in just about all of you, because you can think about a movie that you've finished and you're like, "What on earth was that just about?" How many of you have seen 2001 A Space Odyssey? Okay, so there's a film with lots of ambiguity, but the meat of it seems to be this tense interplay between the deadly AI Hal and our protagonist Dave. Remember? "Open the pod bay doors please, Hal." I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that." But then there's that ending. Dave slips into this portal like he's tripping on LSD, and on the other side of it is a giant floating baby in space. What on earth? What is it supposed to mean?

I bet that some of you feel that way when you're reading through The Story. Pastor Mark talked last week about the end of the Apostle Paul's life, fighting the good fight, and The Story makes lots of sense to us up to that point. Then we get to the book of Revelation, and I bet some of you out there are like, "What on earth is this?" Jesus has a sword coming out of his mouth? Thighs of bronze? This is the end of The Story?!

For a long time I felt like that too, but it bothered me that there would be any part of the Bible that I couldn't understand, especially the ending. And let me tell you, The Revelation of John is probably the book of the Bible that takes the most elbow grease, the most investment on your and my part to understand, but once you do, once I did, I have to say that it may be the most rewarding, most inspiring book of the Bible, because at its root the book is about one thing: hope.

What is your hope? Do you ever think about that? When your life is at its lowest, when you've lost a loved one, when you're going through a divorce, when you're ill, what do you fix your mind on to get you through? Maybe it's seeing and being with your family, maybe it's getting through another day until you can have a vacation,

but for some of us the hope that gets us through another day is heaven. But I would bet that even then, for most Christians, our notions of heaven are too weak. We have fuzzy notions of clouds and white robes and a giant worship service that stretches on eternally, and maybe along with that there will be no more pain, but I think in the church today we have lost a grand vision of what the end of The Story will be.

So this morning/evening I want to do my best to spark your imagination and inspire you to be people of heaven. To be honest, my soul is aching because there is so much to say about heaven and about how we live in light of that wonderful place, and I only have a few minutes to tell you about it. And I know there are so many more questions, because this was one of the biggest topics brought up by your Fearless Questions, and I'm grateful I get a chance to talk more about it later this summer. But as I share what God's Word has to say about heaven today, I hope to make you hungry for this place, hungry for more.

Let me tell you a little bit about the book of Revelation. John probably wrote this book late in the first century, around the mid-90s AD. During that time, the emperor Domitian was ruling, and Domitian encouraged emperor worship. So in some places, there were temples erected and cults formed around worshiping the emperor, who was considered a god. They would say that Emperor Domitian was the lord and savior of the people of Rome and that he reigned supreme on the throne. In fact, in some places you could not buy or sell unless you confessed your fealty to the emperor. Is that ringing some bells for anybody? So for the churches, there was this intense pressure to acknowledge, with the rest of the Roman empire, that Domitian was lord. Their livelihoods were at stake, their comfort, and even their lives, for many Christians lost their lives during this time. And so John receives this vision which he calls a revelation, a revealing, of what is actually going on. Is Domitian really in charge? Or is there a different reality at play here? A heavenly reality?

A lot of what John is doing here is relieving the tension of what the ending will be to the Story. I know some people who will flip open a book and read the ending before they'll buy it because they want to know that things turn out all right! Well John is accomplishing this for the churches when he writes Revelation. He's saying, "Hey guys, I get that things look a little rocky right now, but here's how the whole thing ends." Because the story—their story, and our story—is not finished. So John flips to the end of the book, so to speak, and says, "Here's where all this is going."

So without further ado, let's get into this text. We're reading from Revelation 21:1-4.

"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. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully 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."

What will our eternal state be? What is the end of The Story?

If you see references to heaven in popular culture, you usually see lots of clouds. Everything is depicted as super bright and glowy, maybe there's a fog machine running all the time. Somebody's playing the harp. Heaven is up there, out there. And usually, when you get to heaven, you're kind of ethereal, like ghosts or spirits, right? Or maybe someone has told you that heaven is one un-ending worship service and we'll sing hymn after hymn after hymn. At the risk of sounding unspiritual, to be perfectly honest, none of this sounds interesting at all. In fact, we would identify with this cartoon once we got there. [put up cartoon] Somehow, over time, in churches and in culture, we have robbed our imaginations of heaven's allure. Paradise doesn't seem so amazing, and part of the reason is because we have separated heaven from the resurrection.

John says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away," the point being that there will be a death and resurrection of all of creation, including ourselves. And if we want to get an idea of what our eternal state will be like, we have to begin with the resurrection, particularly the resurrection of Jesus. Scripture calls Jesus the first fruits of those who rise from the dead. When we look at Jesus, we see what we who put our faith in him will be like.

And what is that like? Jesus' body was ordinary, but different. The disciples didn't notice it glowing or luminescent, right? And Jesus ate food with the disciples after he was resurrected. Spirits don't eat food, bodies do. Recall that Jesus even bore the marks of the cross on his body, marks that his disciples could touch and feel. Jesus' resurrection body is a far cry from the disembodied image we get of our eternal state in popular culture. And yet, it was a different body. Jesus could walk through walls. The disciples had a hard time recognizing him. He could disappear and travel great distances instantly. In Jesus' body, the realms of the spirit and of our realm come together. That is what resurrection accomplishes.

So when we talk about the new heaven and new earth, and our place in it, we are talking about a very real place with very real bodies. But it will be renewed. "I am making everything new!" God says. There will be food, there will be community, and I daresay there will be adventures, and places to discover, even culture to experience, music to listen to, and more. It will be at once familiar to us, and at the same time utterly new.

Does anybody here have a bucket list? You know, a list of things you want to do before you die? I have a friend who went through a study of heaven, and he came

out the end declaring that he would never make a bucket list. Why? Because the idea behind a bucket list is that after you die you will never get the chance to do certain things again. But my friend realized that if you truly believe in heaven as the Bible depicts it, then a bucket list is unnecessary. Death is not the end of our chance to do things. Rather, our resurrection is the beginning of truly experiencing life.

This is the place we were meant for. Every time our heart thrills at a glimpse of beauty in our world, when we see a rainbow, or stare at Rainier on a clear day, or see a face of pure joy on a child, our heart is actually yearning for heaven. Our hearts yearn for redemption. This is, after all, the point of The Story. In the beginning, there was perfection—perfect peace, perfect communion with each other and with God. That peace was destroyed by sin, and now we can hardly imagine a world without the shadow of sin cast across us. But that is the ending; our world, more than restored—renewed, resurrected, redeemed. That's the end of The Story. That's exciting!

John says, "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." Every corner of the new heaven and new earth will be permeated with the presence of God. The Story is a story of God seeking out this promise from the beginning, a promise to be with us. We were separated from God in the garden by sin, and all the way from that time, through Abraham's story, through Moses's, through David's story, through the Kings, through the prophets, through that Scarlet thread that leads to Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, and on through the story of the early church and the Good News of Jesus' Spirit present to us, all the way to the end of The Story here. It was all about God being able to dwell with his people, face to face.

If that doesn't seem exciting to you, then I pray that God may reveal more of himself and his character to you, because if you recognize God as the ultimate source of all that is good, all that is life and love and joy, then you will realize that ultimately it is with him that you want to be. Heaven will only be as incredible as it is because of this promise that John reiterates: God will dwell among them.

There's more. Listen to John's beautiful words here, "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." Everything that is wrong about our world will be made right. If you read Scripture, you'll realize that God never promises that we won't experience pain in life. In fact, he promises the opposite. Jesus tells his disciples in John 16: 33, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." In this world, we will have trouble. We all know this. We all experience this. I hear stories every day that break my heart, stories of families being broken apart, of painful, slow deaths, of sudden, unexpected deaths. We shed tears, and God sees every one of them. But take heart, Jesus has overcome the world. His promise is that he will be with us, that he will wipe those tears away, and

that all that is wrong will be made right. Scripture tells that all the pain we experience, all the cumulative horrors of history, all the wretched side-effects of sin, will seem like the distant pains of childbirth when we get to heaven. It's worth quoting at length from my favorite chapter in Scripture here, as Paul declares in Romans 8, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies."

This is what we hope for, what we long for. This is the end of The Story. Thousands of years of history lead up to this point. But we're not there yet. You and I, we're still watching The Story unfold. So, we wait. The question we are left with, is how do we wait? What does it mean to have this hope of heaven, to live in the space of time between the cross and heaven?

I think one of the most obvious things we do is to hope. Romans 8 continues, "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." People of hope live their lives ordered around different desires. People of hope may mourn now, but they do not despair because they know mourning will come to an end. People of hope fight the good fight because they know what the ending to The Story, to our story, is.

But we also see God on the throne. The most reoccurring image of the book of Revelation is of God on the throne. John reminds the churches, and us, that it may look like Domitian is on the throne, it may look like the bad guys are winning, but the reality is that God is on the throne.

I haven't been able to confirm if the story I'm about to share is true, but it's so beautiful that I want it to be true. Do any of you know who Jim Elliot was? Maybe you know Elizabeth Elliot, his wife? Jim Elliot was a missionary to the Auca people in South America, and on January 8, 1956 he was brutally murdered by those people along with four other missionaries. Years later, his wife returned to that people and the same men who murdered Jim Elliot came to know Christ. Long after that, one of the women of the tribe had the opportunity to travel to the United States. While she was here, she was taken to a performance of Handel's Messiah, which, naturally, she'd never heard before. Handel's Messiah, as you may know, is famous for the Hallelujah chorus. When the performance came to this part of the music, the woman seemed shocked. Later, when she was asked about his reaction, she explained that it was not the first time she'd heard the song. She shared, "The day that I watched the missionaries be speared to death, we saw tall men in white robes on the other side of the river. They were singing this song." The angels of God, seeing the taking of precious life, also saw the throne of God. The horror of death, the stain of sin, did not blot out the glory of God on the throne, so much so

that they were able to sing, "Hallelujah, hallelujah, For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever." As we wait, may that be our song... may that be our vision.

Finally, as we wait, let us be people of heaven. Jesus taught us to pray to our Father, "Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That is not only our prayer, but it is our work. We who hope for heaven, also play a part in bringing the present into the future. We are called to practice heaven, to practice the eternal life now, by the power of the Spirit. So, wherever we are, as we have the Spirit of Jesus in us, we bring heaven with us. We wipe tears, we relieve pain, and we fight death.

As people of heaven, we anticipate one day having a feast with Jesus. When we celebrate communion, we not only remember Christ's death and resurrection that made a way for us to be with him for now and eternity, we look forward and practice that communion with him. John in Revelation says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb." I extend that invitation to you now. If you are someone who puts their hope in Christ, to one day be with him forever, then this feast is for you. "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life."