

God Never Gives Up: The Return of the King

Rev 21:1-7, Isaiah 60:1-3, 11, 18-19

Good morning! Welcome to First Pres! It is great to be with you today. We've been taking a high altitude, big picture overview of the Bible Story, and today we come to the end. Have you assumed that the Bible ended 2000 years ago? Actually, the end of this story is not in the past, it is still in the future. We are living in the Bible story today and still looking ahead to the end.

What is the classic ending line for a story? "And they all lived happily ever after!" Right? That is the way we want stories to finish. The end of this sprawling true story of God and his relationship with people is essentially that we can "live happily ever after." Live—the end of the story is life, not death. Happily—it is a *good* ending, full of joy and meaning and purpose. And ever after—it doesn't end. In fact, the end of the Bible story is actually a new beginning of an even better story. Today we're going to briefly review the whole Bible story and then we'll see 3 things to know about the end of the story that show what a very good ending we have waiting for us.

The Bible is made up of 66 different books, written by dozens of human authors. There are many different kinds of writing—history, poetry, law, prophecy, wisdom literature and more. Even though it was written over a span of maybe 1500 years—despite *all* of that it tells a unified story. There is a narrative arc that runs through the Bible from beginning to the end. That Big Story of the Bible is in some ways more important than any of the individual parts that make up the Bible.

You can sum up the Bible's big story in just 4 words—God Never Gives Up! God Never Gives Up! Say that with me! Over and over through the Bible we see how people turn away from God and create huge messes due to their rebellions—but every time God still seeks to rescue them, seeks their best, and is always looking to bring us back into the close relationship with him that we were made for.

Let me give you another 4 words to help you remember the main points of the story: Creation, Rebellion, Rescue and Completion. C.R.R.C. Creation, Rebellion, Rescue and Completion. The story starts before time or space even existed. God spoke and everything leapt into existence. Everything—all of heaven and earth, everything that is. It is his *Kingdom*—and he created it all Good. So we know that God is incredibly powerful, he is jaw droppingly creative, and he made it all Good. He made us, and he gave us a job to do—to be his image in the world and to take care of that creation on his behalf.

But then came the bad news. Rebellion in the Kingdom. People decided to do things their own way rather than listen to God's good rules. God made us for the purpose of love—to be in a loving community with God at the center of it. Tragically, the first people (and every one of us since then, with one key exception) have chosen to turn away from God, to try to set ourselves up as the ultimate decider, to make up our own standards for living. It has been, to put it mildly, a disaster.

But—God never gives up. He has been working his rescue plan from the garden forward—all through the Old Testament until finally God himself came in the person of Jesus. He came to teach and heal and to show us what God is really like. If you want to know what God is like—look at Jesus. God in Jesus defeated evil. At the cross he opened the way for us to be with God. He even defeated death and rose to life. Jesus came to launch his kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

Jesus left his followers—left us—with a mission. This is what Pastor Chris talked about last week. We are called to tell people about God's kingdom breaking into the world and to reflect his love out into the world. God even sends us his Spirit to help us do it. You see—the Bible story is not a made-up story—it is real. It shows us the *ultimate* reality! And it is not a long ago, once upon a time story. No, it is still going on right now. We are part of it! We are living in it and we get to be part of God's solution—we can join in his rescue mission.

Finally, the Bible looks ahead to Completion—to the time when God's rule is fully present with us, when all evil and all of its damage is gone, when death is no more. It points us ahead to the time when at last ALL of God's promises are fulfilled completely. The Bible begins with God's good kingdom, it is ruined by our rebellion, Jesus comes announcing the Kingdom

and opening the way for us to be with God. Then he sends us out to spread the good news of God's Kingdom. Here at the end of the Bible we see into the future--the end of the story, when God's kingdom is fully here, when the King comes back to rule in person.

What do you think of when you think of heaven, or the afterlife? I bet you have a very specific picture in mind. Our culture hammers this idea into us—clouds, angels, harps—right? Boredom. A truly endless church service. There is a Far Side cartoon that captures this really well. A guy is sitting alone, on a cloud. He's saying, "I wish I brought a magazine!" THAT would solve it!

When our daughter Gracie was little she decided to read the Bible for herself. She slogged along and read a chapter a day and eventually got all the way through! One day we looked in at bedtime and she was crying. We asked what was wrong. Between sobs she told us that she thought heaven sounded boring. The idea of spending an eternity in some kind of church service saying holy holy holy sounded awful! I had a hard time disagreeing. For her the "ever after" didn't sound like it was happily. In fact, it didn't even sound that much like life! At the time the best I could do was to say that God invented fun and love and laughter, and so being with God in heaven will be great even if we can't imagine the details right now. My answer missed the ACTUAL end of the story which is very good news for us. What I didn't do was point her to our scriptures today. The actual Bible story is very different from our culture's picture of heaven. In fact, the Bible tells you nothing about clouds and harps or halos or wings. The end of the Bible story is not everyone going away to heaven, it is just the opposite. We read it today—it is heaven coming down to earth. It is up there coming down here.

Take a few minutes to read the last 2 chapters of Revelation, chapters 21 and 22, and see for yourself. Today we read from the beginning on chapter 21-- the new creation. When God makes all things new. He is making *all things* new—not making all new things, but making everything new. Renewing everything, putting everything right. The picture is of the New Jerusalem coming down from Heaven to Earth. The end of the story is this fusion of a renewed heaven and earth, together at last. Ever since the people rebelled back in Genesis, God's space has been heaven and earth has been this place of rebellion and brokenness. Jesus brought healing and wholeness. He started God's kingdom invasion and then sent us out to carry on his

work—he sends us out to colonize earth with the life of Heaven. At the end of the story everything will be healed and put right at last. The renewed heaven and renewed earth come together. *Both* are God’s space. God will live WITH us—look at verse 3- God’s home will be with people and he will live there.

Both Revelation and our first reading from Isaiah repeat that God will live with his people. There is no temple in this new Jerusalem, because they don’t need one. The temple is the place you go to meet God—but now God lives with them—the whole creation is now God’s temple! There won’t be any sun or moon because God’s presence is their light. There will never be night—it will never be dark because God will ALWAYS be with them!

That is the first thing to know about God’s kingdom—about the end of the Bible story-- is that is *with God*. That separation from God—the sin-- that began clear back in Genesis with Adam and Eve is finally and fully healed. If you want to be with God, he wants to be with you. That is the good news of salvation that Jesus came to announce. We can at last live in that loving community with God himself, Father, Son and Spirit, right in the middle of it. This is what humans were made to do.

The second thing to know about God’s kingdom is that it is physical. It is not on clouds or in some solely spiritual realm. We will have physical, resurrection bodies. There will be plants and rivers and buildings and animals and art and culture and creativity and most of all—love. Tom Wright likes to say “Heaven is important, but its not the end of the world!” In fact, the end of the story is that heaven and earth merge into one new creation. Our world continues, renewed and restored and put right, into eternity. Our efforts right now matter for this future life. As Wright puts it, what we do now lasts into God’s future. Our painting, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor—ALL of those things will last into God’s future. They aren’t just ways of making our world today a little less awful, we are building for God’s kingdom. Our lives and our work today will make a difference in eternity.

Finally, the third thing to know about this end of the story kingdom is that it is filled with Joy. This is where I let Gracie down all those years ago when she was worried about being bored in heaven. Our life with God is not boring, it is not tedious, it is AMAZING. Look at what

our text says—God will wipe every tear from their eyes. What a tender, intimate, loving picture! God will be so close to you that he will personally wipe away all your tears. Death will be no more! Death will be conquered and gone at last! Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. All of that will have passed away.

In the new creation people won't just be sitting around either. We'll have important, meaningful work to do. Later on in that chapter Revelation says that all people will bring the glory and honor of all the nations into the holy city. What does that mean? It means that all kinds of people will be offering God their best—they will give glory to God by what they do—maybe it is art or music or stories. Maybe it is great workmanship. Maybe it is creative inventions. Maybe it is the fruit of the land. Maybe it is managing others. In fact, we're told that God's people will reign forever! WE will be reigning with God! Our ultimate goal is not sitting around on a cloud—it is working and ruling and taking care of God's very good, renewed creation. It is living with God and enjoying his company. It is a joy filled world where whatever your true hearts' desire is, you can follow it to God's glory. It is a never-ending adventure.

The end of the Bible story is actually not the end—going into a kind of frozen in amber perfection. No, it is the beginning of the Great Story that God has always wanted for us. Pastor Eugene Peterson points out that while John's great final vision here in Revelation is climactic, it is not an ending. It is a fresh, new beginning full of promise. The Bible ends with a new start.

The end of the Chronicles of Narnia have a great description of this. The great lion Aslan—the king-- tells the children that back on earth they'd been in a railway accident. He said "your mother and father and all of you are--as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over, the holidays have begun. The dream is ended. This is the morning."

Then Lewis continues: "the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of the stories. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had been only the cover and the title page: now at last they were at Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read and which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Friends, THAT is what the end of the Bible story is—the start of a glorious adventure and love story that we can't even imagine. What a wonderful, inspiring end to look forward to! And while we are here, we are not just treading water. Peterson says that in our lives now, as we are being changed into Christ's likeness, we are already participating in the new creation. As God's will is done in our lives now—as his kingdom comes on earth in our little circles of influence—we are being shaped by him. Jesus is lighting up our lives, just like he'll light up the New Jerusalem later. We can start living into God's future right now, right here and all along the Wasatch Front.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you! Thank you for our lives, for rescuing us, for letting us join in your rescue mission. Thank you for building your Kingdom and your new creation through our work today. Lord use us and inspire us to do the things you call us to. Send us out in your great adventure! In Jesus Name we ask it. Amen.