



Revelation 22:12-21
 The Story
 The End of Timeⁱ

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So today we draw to a close the series that we have been in since the second Sunday of September, called The Story. Next week we will begin a new series that will look at the famous “I am” statements of Jesus. In this series we will gain a deeper understanding of who Jesus is, based on his own self-disclosure. But first, today, we finish up with The Story. All good stories have a sense of movement, a direction in which the story is going, with a main theme or point that is communicated and which is usually driven home in the final conclusion. And it is no different in the story God and Creation. **This is the story of God’s story...of His story...of History, and we, along with the rest of creation across all time, are a part of it.** There is a beginning, a middle, and an end to this story – at least, the created part of it. Today we find out about the end of the story.

First, to recap the last 30 weeks: This has been a chronological walk through the narrative of the Bible. We started with Creation out of nothing, including the formation of humankind in the image of God. There’s something different and special about humankind and there’s a special relationship between humanity and God as a result. God chooses to reveal himself to us in a variety of ways, including through a particular relationship he establishes with the Israelites. Their charge is to live in faithfulness to God, to be a light to the nations and the world around them about what it means to be in relationship with the Holy Creator of the Universe. But sin gets in the way, becoming an obstacle in the relationship we have with God.

So, at God’s command, part of that relationship involved atoning for sin, through the sacrifice of a spotless lamb...a lamb without blemish. This sacrifice became a central part of their worship, because this is what God asked for. It was the price God established that would be paid for the sins of the people of Israel as they sought to live out their part of the covenant God made with them. God upholds his covenant and never forsakes them, even though they are oftentimes completely unfaithful in return.

But over the course of a couple thousand years or so, we see Israel at times

be strong and courageous and living for God, and at other times – probably more than half the time, in fact – the Israelites got sideways in their relationship with God. Generally speaking, as their leadership went in their personal relationship with God and in the leading of God’s people, so went the nation’s relationship with God as well – at least, on the whole. But God promises that a leader will one day come, in the lineage of David, who will be Israel’s savior, their Messiah, who will be completely faithful in following the call on his life, and will establish a Kingdom that will last forever.

And “along comes Jesus,” who’s earthly father, Joseph, is a direct descendant of King David, fulfilling one of the many prophecies about this coming king. Over the course of Jesus’ 3 years of public ministry, he gains a wide following and anticipation that He is in fact the long-expected Messiah who would bring restoration to Israel. What the people of Jesus’ day didn’t anticipate is that Jesus had a bigger vision for himself as the Messiah, both in terms of who would be a part of this Kingdom and also in terms of what he would do on behalf of the Kingdom.

Because Jesus doesn’t fit in their little boxes of what the Messiah should be and what he should do and who could be a part of His Kingdom, and what the kingdom values were about, Jesus ends up crucified. The biggie, the thing that literally put the nail in the cross, was his claims of divinity: that no one came to the father through him, that hearing and doing what he teaches builds a foundation that won’t wash away, that he existed before the foundation of the world, that he could forgive sins in the same way that God does, that he’s the light of the world, and so forth. All of this was more than the religious establishment could handle...they considered it blasphemous, and he ends up on the cross.

But even *that* is actually part of God’s Story – part of the bigger story than the people of the day envisioned – as Jesus becomes the once for all and final flawless, sacrificial lamb to atone for sins, paying the final price that God himself required. God himself took care of the sacrifice through His son Jesus. In fact, Jesus told his followers he would be killed...he said that he himself lays his life down, that no one takes it from him. So this is all in the providence and will of God.

But because God's vision continues to be bigger than anticipated, Jesus has victory over death as he conquers the grave, giving hope and the promise of a Kingdom that really would have no end, just as the prophecies said. And so the disciples of Jesus went out into the world with this message of the resurrection of Jesus, and the hope that it gives, and rather than fading into oblivion like the followers did of every other leader who ever claimed to be the Messiah or the Son of God or anything remotely close...rather than fading away, they start growing, and spreading, and this movement of Jesus-followers ends up being the world-wide church that we know today.

The Church has survived and thrived for 2,000 years, with roots going back long before that in the nation of Israel. But it begs the question: **Where is this all headed?** Will this just continue on in perpetuity until we humans blow up the earth in nuclear war, run out of natural resources, or get hit by a ginormous asteroid?

Well, we get one letter from the disciple John to a number of churches, that focuses on the end of the story. Presumably, it was particularly intended for the churches in the seven cities that are named in the third chapter. From there, it became widespread and well-known. We know this letter as Revelation. By the way, it's not "Revelations," with an "s" on the end. It is Revelation, singular. **It's one revelation that God gave John about the end of time – thought it's not the end of the story.** The story continues on in the eternal presence of God.

So, what exactly does Revelation say about the end of time? As mysterious as the Book of Revelation is, its main message is actually very simple. Vernon Grounds, the former president of Denver Seminary who passed away a few years ago, shares this story that puts that simple message best. I shared this with you over four years ago, but it's worth telling again. Plus, some of you don't remember it, and many of you weren't here four years ago. He writes: "A friend told me of an incident that happened while he was in seminary. Since the school had no gymnasium, he and his friends played basketball in a nearby public school. Nearby, an elderly janitor waited patiently until they finished playing. Invariably he sat there reading his Bible. One day my

[seminary] friend asked the janitor what he was reading. He answered, 'The book of Revelation.' Surprised, my friend asked if he understood it. 'Oh, yes,' the man assured him. 'I understand it!' 'What does it mean?' Quietly the janitor answered, 'It means that Jesus is gonna win.'"ⁱⁱ

That's the best understanding of Revelation I've ever heard. And: **If we let this simple theme – “Jesus is gonna win” – be our lens through which we read and interpret Revelation, we're going to get out of it everything we need to know in our walk with Jesus.** In the midst of the angels, the trumpets, the horses, the “woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and a crown of 12 stars on her head,” the dragon with seven heads, the beast that comes out of the sea, the beast coming out of the earth, the plagues, the bowls, the woman on the beast, the lake of fire...in the midst of all that strange stuff, there is one who stands victorious through it all, and that is Jesus. Jesus is gonna win.

But here's the thing: Even though Jesus has won the battle with death through his resurrection; and through faith in Him we will also have victory over death...in spite of that battle being won, it is clear in Revelation that there is still more of a battle to come. Or it's going on in the spiritual realms right now, or it's a little of both – it's happening now and it's in the future – which is what I'm kind of inclined to believe. In fact, in Ephesians 5, Paul writes, **“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 5:11-12).** Given this truth of spiritual warfare happening in our lives even now, it should not surprise us if some of the spiritual warfare depicted in Revelation is happening right now as well. There's a battle going on, even though Jesus has conquered the grave and the war is ultimately won.

And so Revelation depicts Jesus as a mighty warrior who brings the story of creation history to a close. This is not “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” as the hymn by Charles Wesley is titled. This is Jesus returning to kick some hiney! Revelation 19:11-16 reads: **Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and True, for he judges**

fairly and wages a righteous war. His eyes were like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. A name was written on him that no one understood except himself. He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. The armies of heaven, dressed in the finest of pure white linen, followed him on white horses. From his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod. He will release the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty, like juice flowing from a winepress. On his robe and his thigh was written this title: King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is not baby Jesus lying in a manger. ☺ And I don't know if you have a "theology of tattoos," but after reading about Jesus having this name written on his thigh, we probably ought to factor that into our attitude about tattoos. In fact, later in Revelation 22, the inhabitants of the city of God, the heavenly realms, have God's name written on their foreheads. So we're all getting a tattoo of sorts in eternity, and I'm sure that one difference between that tattoo and the ones people get here on earth is that our heavenly tattoo will look as crisp and clean after 1,000 years as it does the day we get it. Anyway, clearly, this rider on this horse is Jesus, and he's ready to do battle, to eradicate evil, to throw Satan into the lake of burning sulfur, and Revelation 20:14 tells us Jesus will even throw death and hades into the lake of fire, and John calls that "the second death."

In chapter 21, we see that those people whose names are in the book of life join Jesus in the "new heaven and new earth." John also describes a "new Jerusalem" which he calls the city of God. Here Jesus is depicted as a lamb, which should come as no surprise, based on the Old Testament and Jesus' title of the Lamb of God. And according to 21:27, those who join with him in his glory are those whose names are written in the book of life. There is no darkness in the City of God, there is never night...and the light that illuminates it comes from God, and from Jesus, the Lamb, who both sit on the same throne in the center of the city.

Chapter 22 tells us of a river that flows out from their throne, down the central street of the city of God, with the tree of life standing on both sides of the river. I don't know what that's supposed to mean except it's one tree

whose trunk spreads out over the width of this river, which flows underneath it. It sounds like something out of the Wizard of Oz, and clearly, when you get to this point, you are not in Kansas anymore. And notice that: **This is the same tree of life that we saw way back in Genesis 2.** The only other place that the tree of life is mentioned is in three Proverbs in the middle of the Bible. Otherwise, it's only in the beginning of "the story," and here at the end. So this is like bookends, bringing continuity from one end of Scripture to the other. We started with Creation and sin entering the world and distorting creation, and humanity being banned from the tree of life. And at the end of time it's a complete annihilation of sin, and a restoration of Creation, with the crowning jewel being this city of God, and the return of the tree of life. God is bringing everything full circle here. And 22:5 tells us that they God and the Lamb, who sit on this throne together, reign for ever and ever.

And then we get these words from Jesus in verse 12 and 13 that we read this morning, as the vision that God gives to John continues. And Jesus says here that he is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the Beginning and the End, and confirms that those whose robes are washed (in other words, those who have been cleansed from their sin) have the right to the tree of life, and may go through the gates into this heavenly city. Those who continue in the ways of sin are left outside the gates of the city. And we see a couple verses later, in verse 17, that there's an open invitation to come into this city. **"The Spirit and the bride [that's the Church] say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17).** There's an open invitation to come to the waters of the river. It's a "free gift of the water of life" This is the grace of God. It's not about earning our way into a relationship with our Creator, but it's not forced on us either. Anyone who wishes may respond to this invitation and take this free gift of the water of life that Jesus offers, and when we do that in this life, our names are written in the book of life.

And after some warnings about taking away or adding to the words of the scroll on which John has written this revelation, he closes with these words, which kind of step out of the Revelation as John responds to the vision he got, and gives a closing word of affirmation to the churches to whom he's

writing: **“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (Revelation 22:20-21).**

And so The Story comes to a close with these words. “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.” You see, in the end, it’s all about the grace of God. He doesn’t end with “Keep working harder” or “pick yourselves up by your bootstraps” or “Good luck!” It’s about the grace of Jesus, the one who reigns victorious over sin and death, who offers that victory to us, who invites us to drink of the living waters, from the waters of life at the tree of life, in the city of God, in this new heaven and new earth. I pray you would know the grace of the Lord Jesus deeply in your life today, so you’d know the Lord Jesus in the life to come.

But even as the Bible draws to a close its account of God’s activity in Creation and human history, the story of God’s work continues in our lives today, and continues on into eternity. And we have the opportunity to participate in that story now and eternally, as we keep living by the grace of Jesus Christ. And our faith is a response to what God has done and is doing: **He brings about creation, establishes his covenant, sends his son Jesus Christ, establishes His Kingdom (the Church) on earth, and brings it to its culmination in eternity.** (Those 5 “c” words sum up the story of the Bible, really.) So, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you, as you continue to live out His Story in your story, and may each of us always remember: Jesus is gonna win. Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today’s sermon correlates to Chapter 31 in “The Story.” We took orders for copies of the book, “The Story” at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for “NIV The Story Bible” at their website.

ⁱⁱ <https://bible.org/illustration/jesus-going-win>