



THE KINGDOM

THE HOPE OF THE KINGDOM

Sunday 4 July 2021

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Movies with bad endings really bug me. Like where the hero dies or it doesn't work out happily ever after. Shakespeare wrote at least 10 tragedies - 'Romeo and Juliette', 'Hamlet', 'Macbeth'... I know kids study them at school today but wonder how popular they were at the time? Or more recently, 'Titanic': the ship sinks and Jack freezes to death. How can such depressing movie make so much money?! Other great films like 'Pay It Forward', 'Seven Pounds', 'The English Patient', 'Braveheart', 'Gladiator' - in all of these, the hero dies. Maybe the worst of all is 'Toy Story 3'. Who didn't cry at the end of Toy Story 3?!

95% of all stories are happily ever after stories. They end in love winning the day, justice being served, the villain getting defeated, the war being over, suffering being healed, the storm being weathered, and the lost making it home. These are the endings we *want* and *assume*.

Why is that? It seems there is something so deep in us across all time and all culture that we want to be true of life: that this mess called 'life' is not all we were made for, not all we can expect or look for; that it doesn't have to end in defeat, that justice is done; that there is another world awaiting us free from the curse, free from death or mourning or crying or pain. It is so deep, the hope of redemption, the hope that it is not the end - and I would say: the longing for Heaven.

I had planned in this final message to explore different world views on the afterlife and why the Christian vision of heaven is the most compelling and how you should seriously get ready for it. But then earlier this week a young family close to us at church came about as close as you can come to losing a father and a husband; and it struck me: this longing for more to life, the hope of Heaven, is way more a matter of the heart than the head. Just like pain and

sorrow is a matter of the heart (and I think these are connected), the hope of Heaven and the sorrow of the heart as we go through life - no matter how mighty we are, no matter how attractive or wealthy or celebrated or connected or loved we are, or how many followers we have on our social media accounts - we slowly (and sometimes quickly) lose it all till all that is left is coming face to face with our own mortality or the mortality of those we love the most. That's what makes this real. And then whatever it is that God is going to do next is not an academic exercise, is it. Everyone in the room who has lost a spouse or parent or child knows this. It's either faced with a deep hope, or a deep uncertainty.

So sure, we could talk about the various kinds of worldviews from escaping the cycle of reincarnation in Hinduism, reaching enlightenment in Buddhism, to the nothingness of Atheism, or the non-material reality being the only true existence anyway of Plato, to the most common view of progress today: that we will create our own kind of 'utopia' on Earth. But none of these are near the Christian view, and I would say none offer hope.

How does the Bible explain how the will and way of God is ultimately fulfilled at the end of time? What is the Christian hope in the face of pain and mortality?

The early Christians did not believe that the world was getting worse and worse, and that their hope was to escape it altogether for a disembodied existence in 'true reality'. But neither did they put their hope in human progress: they also did not think the world was getting better and better under its own steam, and that we can create our own heaven on Earth.

Rather, they believed in what they saw in Jesus and what He taught: the return of Jesus and the restoration of life, the redemption of their bodies, and full adoption or inclusion into God's family. This is their hope. Paul would say in Romans that the Spirit was the down payment, the first sign on what was to come. He says:

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. 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.
(Romans 8:22)

They waited patiently in hope for God to do to the whole cosmos what He had done at Easter. These were people of resurrection life: that the same God who physically raised Jesus from the dead was revealing in Jesus what He was going to do for them and all of creation. That God was going to deal with the curse of death, deal with hell, deal with evil (in fact this has already begun on the cross), and then there would be a new age of the kingdom fully revealed. And that is expressed in Revelation 21 and 22.

Lets read a portion of it now:

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. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." (Revelation 21:1-8)

Revelation is a kind of literature that elicits two responses in people: (1) some people avoid it and (2) some people obsess over it. I understand both reactions, because it's rich and complex. Rich with symbolic images and numbers that have multiple meanings, mixed metaphors pointing to a reality that no one can fully conceive. The vision that John received: is it a code? Is it about that particular time? Or is it about all time? It's wrapped in specific context and human language and a particular time in history, but it's not contained to that time because it is saying something vital about the end of time and describing something you can't ever do justice trying to describe. But it's a cryptic vision of hope of - so today let me briefly give you 5 signposts it points to:

(1) A recreated life

(verse 1: coming down, recreation minus the curse, I am making everything new)

Heaven is not an alternative destination we exit to, but it is the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer: "your kingdom come on earth as in heaven". Heaven is not a disembodied state on a cloud somewhere - it's creation in all its glory. All creation, Paul says, is groaning and waiting for the renewal and redemption of the physical. God created the heavens and earth and it was good. God is making all things new, minus one thing: no more curse. That means that the world is not some disposable container that, once consumed, you throw away... It is still front and centre in our vision of the kingdom.

(2) A connected life

(verse 2: a city and a bride)

John is mixing his metaphors here. There are two key images: a city and a bride. A holy city coming down - Heaven is like a city. And what is a city? It's an incredibly dense community

of people who know each other; it's a place of relationship, of great diversity. In any city there are all kinds of people and nations. And this city is like a beautifully dressed bride: someone who has been made ready. Every bride looks beautiful. The groom maybe spends half an hour getting ready for his wedding - but the bride: hair, makeup, jewellery, flowers, and the dress... And as they walk down the aisle, all the blemishes are covered; they are magnificent and ready to be joined to their husband in covenant commitment and to become one. This is the same image Paul uses of the church being the bride of Christ, and this holy community is that bride - joined to, dwelling with, face to face, all bathed in His glory.

These two core images of Heaven in Revelation are, in essence, community and beautiful intimacy with God and together. And repeated here (and a dozen times through the whole story of the kingdom) are some of the most central aims of God of, "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 will be their God": *Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.* (Revelation 21:7)

Friends if I can just add one last thought here: we live in a society and culture that is rampantly individualistic, and that seems to be increasingly transferring into Christians thinking that their relationship with God is better found apart from the church. But Heaven is a community, and you are saved into a community as a community. There is something about being that community now which reflects what is to become of us.

(3) A tearless life

(verse 4: a world that is not under the effect of the curse of sin, death, mourning, crying or pain)

As I said last time, we already experience a kind of hell on earth now. Inside God's good creation, hell is already growing like a cancer. So, as Tim Mackie says, "the plan of God in the gospel is to get the Hell out of you and ultimately out of his Good creation forever." Hell is pictured outside the city walls, in a lake of fire, and in its absence so is its curse. I can't imagine this but I do long for it, personally: to live free from the curse; and I cannot imagine what it will be like to know a world without it.

(4) A needless life

But it is also a world that is not under the temptations of the curse. The imagery that John uses later in the passage to describe Heaven is really framed in his capacity to put language to the vision: *The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone.* (Revelation 1:18-19)

There was no CGI, no Pixar, no technology, no electricity, no buildings over two stories - but he understood the precious stones in the breastplate of the high priest, he understood

that gold was coveted, and so he uses the most treasured of things in his time to describe the glory of Heaven as best he can. In the new world coming, the things we most covet now will just be common building materials - there won't be need of 'stuff', no pursuit of wealth - all that will matter is being in the glory of God. Can you imagine a world where the only real treasure is the glory and presence of God and where the relentless pursuit of 'stuff' ends...?

(5) A purposeful life

In Revelation chapter 22:3-5: *No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*

The citizens of the kingdom will worship and serve the King forever. For some reason my image of this seems to quite incorrectly land on some kind of perpetual Hillsong conference; clouds and harps and while we worship in some form will be central. This is the renewal of all God's good creation, with God at the centre. God made work before the fall, so there is going to be a redeeming of work, a redeeming of art, of creativity, of pleasure. All the things that were designed to be good by a good God, all redeemed to be an expression of worship and glory to God - but mostly a redeeming of union with God minus all the distortion of guilt and shame. Can you imagine a world where God's throne is at the centre of all life? Where every person has stepped off their 'throne' and put Jesus at the centre? A world where people do not live through the lens of greed, or self-centeredness?

The Christian hope is the hope of a renewed and redeemed earth and life, fully connected as community, with God at the centre, free of the curse, and without pain and sorrow and need. A world rich with purpose and worship and delight and fulfilment. That, friends, is the Christian hope.

Now lastly:

Who is in this city?

Barna Research, a few years back, explored people's views on 'afterlife' and found that 75% still believe in an afterlife. Most described it as a heaven or hell. Interestingly, though, less than 1% of people thought they or their loved ones would go to hell.

The last part of the Revelations passage lists a kind of person whose life is lived in a manner that consigns them outside the city, in the lake of fire - which is about as big a contrast as you can get to what is happening inside the city. I cannot end this series and miss offering you the promise and the warning of Revelation and, indeed, the gospel of the

kingdom: the warning is that Revelation was written to struggling churches and Christians facing severe persecution to give in to the pressure and walk away from faith. Repeated nine times in the letter are the words, "to the one who is victorious..." or 'prevails' or 'endures' - that they stand firm in their conviction, faith and hope. This matters because persecution - or perhaps in our context, suffering or discomfort or even inconvenience - reveals what's really there: where your allegiances really lie. The warning is not, "you must have a perfect record, never compromise, and never make a mistake." Paul called himself the best of all sinners. No, the warning is about the fundamental orientation of your heart, which is revealed by your resolve about King Jesus, and to choose which king you serve and put your hope in: King Jesus or something / someone else. Please don't take lightly this warning of scripture. But we end on the promise:

To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.
(Revelation 21:6-7)

Who is in the city? The thirsty.

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.
(Revelation 21:17)

To the thirsty is offered the free gift of the water of life. Take it today, because you don't know if you have a tomorrow... Where is your hope today? If you stare tragedy in the face this week, there will be shock and grief - but, past all that, do you know who is holding you? My hope is that you will know the hope of Jesus, both for this life and the life beyond. That hope is not wishful thinking. It is firmly grounded in the reality of a risen Jesus. All the heroes of the movies I began with, died - and that was that. But Jesus conquered death itself. Death has lost its sting and it points us all to another world coming: a city to call home. May you know this King and receive this King today.