

May 3, 2009 – “Snapshots of the end”

Good morning again... As a side note in her message a couple Sundays ago, Andrea posed the hypothetical question, “What if you knew how things were going to end in a given situation – how would that affect things now?” That's a really good question, one that I've been pondering the past few weeks. As Andrea brought up – what if you knew that the your wandering teenager would find their way, and come into a secure and vibrant relationship with God? Or how that conflict with a family member was going to turn out?

Or take questions related to work. A number of people here in our church own businesses or are in managerial positions where you hire people. What if you knew how that new hire was going to turn out ahead of time? Or those of you in the financial world... what if you knew what price a stock was rise to in 10 years?

Or here's a really deep question: The NFL draft was about a week ago, what if the Vikings knew without a shadow of a doubt that the players they picked were going to be immediate starters and guys that would finally lead the Vikings to a Super Bowl win. Or what if we knew that the Twins were going to win the World Series this year? There'd be no reason to fret over games that go wrong. Okay, okay... Forgive me, but I'm a guy, so I think about sports...

Unfortunately, we don't have complete assurance on any of those items. But, as we want to look at this morning, we do get assurance in the Scriptures about much of what the future looks like, about how things are be summed up at the end of the world.

We are in the final week of a sermon series called, "Living in the light of the end." And... also today we are finishing a string of 4 sermon series in which we've covered some of the major themes of the Bible.

We began this journey back in January, looking at the first two chapters in the Bible - Genesis 1-2. And today, we finish these major themes of the Scriptures by looking at the final two chapters of the Bible: Revelation 21-22. We'll just be reading a couple sections from those two chapters here, but as we do that, see if you can't pick up on any ways Rev. 21-22 mirrors images first introduced in Genesis 1-2.

Revelation 21: 1-9, 1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." 5 And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." 6 And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. 7 All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. 8 "But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." 9 Then one of the seven angels who held the seven bowls containing the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come with me! I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." SKIP HERE to Rev 22 (the rest of Rev 21 is these detailed descriptions of what the New Jerusalem will be like...

Revelation 22: 1-5

1 Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations. 3 No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. 4 And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.

PRAY

For the message this morning, I'd like for us to explore very quickly 7 Snapshots of the end – 7 pictures we get here in Revelation 21 and 22 that clue us in on what things will look like in the future, and then I'll add one final thought about how we can live in light of that...

So, the first snapshot of the future we get here in Revelation is that everything is new. Everything is new. There is a new heaven and a new earth. There is the New Jerusalem that is representative of the new creation as a whole. And just in case we were wondering, in verse 5, God speaks from the throne saying, "Behold I am making EVERYTHING new!"

The significance of this is not just that it's the opposite of old. This "newness" is a renewal, a completing of everything that was intended from the beginning... Remember how I asked you to look for things that pointed back to Genesis 1 and 2? Well, here at the end of Revelation – we get a snapshot of how God is going to bring everything full circle. It is all going to be renewed, and everything that God had meant from the beginning is going to be fulfilled.

Our second snapshot of the end points to one of the key pieces that is part of this renewal: that intimate relationship is restored.

In Genesis, we read about the close connection that Adam and Eve had with God. They walked with him in the cool of the day; there was unfettered intimate relationship. Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. Everything they needed was provided to them by God. And yet, later, that intimacy was broken. When Adam and Eve made the choice to turn away from God and listen to the serpent, that close connection was broken and they were banished from Garden of Eden – banished from God's presence. Suddenly, there was this chasm of separation between them and God.

But here in Revelation we see God fulfilling his long-spoken promise to restore intimate relationship. In verse 3, we read that *"God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them."* Another piece of imagery that's used here in Revelation is of us, as the church, being the Bride of Christ. Sometimes, us guys can have a little difficulty in relating to that picture – but whatever the case is... very personal, intimate connection with God seems to be really big deal, and is something that is part of this renewal God promises at the end.

Third, we see in the end that healing and comfort are complete. Verse 4 says that God *"will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."* Doesn't that sound good? It certainly isn't the reality of our experience right now – there is way too much death and sorrow and crying and pain in the here and now, but the promise is that there will be an end to all that brokenness. The fullness of healing and comfort will come, and it's going to be really good.

The fourth and fifth snapshots of the end are this: The thirsty are satisfied, and the wicked are banished. Let me re-read verses 6-8: *To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. 7 All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.* (There's the intimacy again) *8 "But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."*

These verses point to the stark difference between those that will experience the fullness of life at the end of the age, and those that will experience what is called the second death. Not only a physical death, but a spiritual one.

Now, I'm not typically a fire and brimstone preacher, but this section of Scripture certainly puts a bit of the fear of God in us, doesn't it? A fiery lake of burning sulfur doesn't sound very inviting to me... The good news is that God's invitation to the fullness of life is freely given – it's readily available. The only condition is that you and I be thirsty. We just need to acknowledge our need for God, and ask Him to fill us. This invitation here in Revelation 21:6 seems to echo what Jesus said at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount.

3 "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

4 God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

6 God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice (or righteousness) for they will be satisfied.

That's Matthew 5, verses 3-6. If God offers living water to anyone who is thirsty – why not ask for it? Why not acknowledge our need of Him and receive the Kingdom of Heaven, as Jesus promises?

The sixth snapshot of the end that we get in Revelation 21 and 22 is that worship is all-encompassing. Worship is all encompassing. This theme actually runs through the whole book of Revelation. Everywhere there are people in God's presence, their response is to worship. Here's an excellent example from Revelation 4 (8b-11)

*Day after day and night after night they keep on saying,
"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—
the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come."
9 Whenever the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the
one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever), 10 the
twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one sitting on the throne
(the one who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns
before the throne and say, 11 "You are worthy, O Lord our God, to
receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and
they exist because you created what you pleased."*

John Wimber, the early leader of Vineyard churches would often get asked – why are you guys into worship so much? His basic response was... "well it seems like that's the main thing we'll be doing in heaven, so we figured we'd get a head start practicing now!"

As I mentioned last week, worship is not just about singing nice songs to God – it's a whole lifestyle of surrender, of honoring God. In fact, in this Rev 4 passage, we see the primary posture of worship: to fall flat on your face – prostrate. That's the picture of worship we get in Revelation. Of course, I don't think that means that we literally have to lay flat on our faces to be worshipping God from the heart. But, I do think that that image gives us an idea of what the attitude of our hearts should look like: totally surrendered, wholly given over to God – praising Him, worshipping Him – letting Him know that we recognize that He is God and we are not.

Finally, the seventh snapshot of the end we find here in Revelation is that God (and we) reign forever! Listen again to verses 3-5 of Rev 22.

3 No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. (there's the worship again) 4 And they will see his face, (there's the intimacy again) and his name will be written on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.

God's original purposes for humanity included that we would be a genuine reflection of his image and an expression of his rule and reign upon the earth. In January, we spent several weeks looking at this passage from Genesis 1:

26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."

27 So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."

From the place of the renewed original plan... the plan where the Lord says, "I will be their God and they will be my people" - from that place we get to rule and reign with God forever. Somehow, we get reconnected with God's intended purposes, and we get to live forever in co-reigning with God.

I went through those 7 points very quickly, so here they are again, in case you missed one: The snapshots we get of the future are this: 1. God makes everything new; 2. Intimate relationship is restored; 3. Healing and comfort are complete; 4 & 5: the thirsty are satisfied, but the wicked are banished; 6. Worship is all-encompassing; and 7. God (and we) are going to reign forever.

That is encouraging stuff, isn't it? There is a lot to look forward to. But there is one more piece of Good News: we can ask for the blessings of the future to break into our present. We get to ask for God to release those blessings of the future into our present time.

This is one of the main points that Jesus communicated during his ministry – both in word, but particularly... in deed. He came proclaiming the Kingdom of God – the reality of God's rule and reign being available right now to those that would acknowledge their need and turn to God in repentance. And Jesus came demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom by healing people from sicknesses, setting people free from spiritual oppression, and in expressing the amazing compassion of God towards humanity.

The fun part is that this wasn't just Jesus' deal. He invites us into the action... We can ask for those same things. Isn't that how Jesus answered the disciples' question about prayer? They came to Jesus, saying... Lord, teach us to pray – we want to know how to do it like you do...

*Jesus answered: 9 "This, then, is how you should pray:
" 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
(And so on)*

That is the prayer we get invited into praying...

- God, you are holy! Lord, You are awesome!

- Now may the reality of your kingdom come and the expression of your will be done HERE ON EARTH as it is in heaven. May all the snapshots we see of the end somehow begin breaking into our present time, right now.

That is a bold prayer, but it is the one that Jesus gave us.

A few days ago I sent an email to our church distribution list. In that email, I posed this question:

If the future of God's kingdom would suddenly break into your present, what would you desire for Him to do?

As I mentioned a few moments ago – Jesus' model (as well as the model of the early disciples) was to proclaim the reality of the kingdom of God... but not only just to talk about it, but then to pray that God would demonstrate it. That God would make manifest the reality of His kingdom.

Well, this morning we've been proclaiming these snapshots of the end – what God's kingdom looks like. And we read the encouragement of Jesus to ask for the reality of God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is heaven. And that's just what we want to do.

As we've been praying these past few days – asking for the future of God's kingdom to break into our present, we want to provide some time and space for God to answer that in whatever way He might like today.