

Life After Death (5): The New Creation

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[0 : 00] Well, every story has a setting, a problem, and a resolution, or more simply a beginning, a middle, and an end. And the true story of the Bible is the same. In revealing truth to us, God hasn't given us a theological textbook or a pithy thread of tweets. No, He's given us a story. He's created us, hasn't He, as storytellers and storytakers. We live in the stories that we tell ourselves about our lives, about who we are, about God, about our worlds.

And we don't get to write the end of our own stories in this age. That's what this whole series has been about, in a sense, showing us, filling in for us, the end of the story that God himself has written. In the end, we are all going to die, and we are not in control of what happens to us then. But God has written the ending for all of our stories. It's quite well known, perhaps you know, that the author, J.K. Rowling, says that she had mapped out the entire plot of the Harry Potter series on a train ride from Edinburgh to London. If that's true, it would have been a wild four and a half hours, wouldn't it? But the point is that she knew, then, how the last book was going to end before she'd written the first words of the first book. So that, with every page of the 4,000 plus pages of the seven books of the Harry Potter series, what was she doing?

Well, she was working steadily towards the conclusion that she had already decided on, wasn't she? To the reader, the story builds up from the start through the middle to the climax, but for the author, the story unfolds backwards from the ending. And in the Bible, God, the author of history and reality and reality and time, then, has shown us the ending that he has planned from the beginning.

And so that we can bend the stories of our lives, the stories we tell ourselves about the world, about who we are, about our place in it, about how we live, so that we can bend our lives towards the conclusion that he has decided from the beginning. A writer called Graham Goldsworthy said, rightly, I think, that the whole story of the Bible is driven by one great concern, summed up in this phrase, God's people in God's place under God's rule. God's people in God's place under God's rule. That's what he says the Bible is searching for from the very first page, and what it finds on its very last page. And every page in between, then, is a God-ordained treasure hunt for that reality. I think in the beginning, what do we see? God's image bearers placed in a garden created by God, with God, and under his loving rule, his word. There it is. God's people in God's place under God's rule. But they could make that all untrue, couldn't they?

And indeed, they did. They rejected his rule over them. And what happens? They are evicted from his place. And the rest of the Bible is one long search, then, back into that place, back under God's rule. The Bible comes alive when we see the story that it is telling, the drama at its heart. And it is even more electric to see that it is not so much our search for home as it is God's search for us, to bring us back to his place, us back under his rule. You think how the story carries on. Noah.

[4 : 04] What happens? God sovereignly washes the world clean from sin. People walk out of the ark into a world made new, his place. They come out under his promise, symbolized by that rainbow, under his rule.

But what happens? They continue to sin. They have families. They fill the world again with sin and with violence. Then Abraham. What does God promise? He promises a family, a people. He promises a place for them to live. He gives them his word, his covenant, his rule under which they will live.

But what happens after a long and bloody history? God's people throw off his rule, his law. And what happens? They are evicted from his place. The land, the temple, no more. We could go on. We would see time and again that the Bible is God's long search for us to bring us back into his place and under his rule. The beginning of the story is God's place. The middle is we do not want God's rule. The ending, the ending is God's people in God's place and under his loving rule.

And tonight we'll see how he will do that once and for all in the end. This is how the story ends for us. If our trust is in Christ, the cycle broken, the conclusion written, God's people in God's place under his rule. So those are our three points we'll think about tonight. And as we think about them, we are fixing our hearts, aren't we, on what God has promised us, what he will do. This is our great hope as Christians. This is the hope that enables us to get up tomorrow and live another day in this fallen and broken world. This is the hope that enables us to live our lives for what God has promised us and not just what is in front of our faces. Firstly then, what do we see about God's people? Well, we've dipped in and out of revelation in our time in this series.

[6 : 18] One of the really thrilling things, sometimes one of the intimidating things, I guess, about the book of Revelation are the pictures, the illustrations. Reading Revelation, I think, is a little bit like trying to watch three films at the same time on screens that are next to each other. Sometimes they're not very overlapping films. It's a bit like watching a sci-fi and a horror and a romance all at once. And that would be overwhelming, wouldn't it? Our senses would be overwhelmed by that. And that is like reading the book of Revelation, isn't it? It is overwhelming. Our senses just can't take it in.

But it is meant to overwhelm our senses. If we feel like we're understanding it all, we're probably not understanding it all when it comes to Revelation, because it's a book written to tell us a story more true than what our eyes and hands and ears can tell us, what we can see and touch and taste and hear. That's the power of apocalyptic writing, that it reveals reality more truly and more forcefully than our lived experience can. And in the chapters that we read together in Revelation, all the images and all the plot lines of these stories collide into one great finale in Revelation 21 and 22. The climax of the whole Bible, think of that, when the one sitting on the throne says, I am making all things new. Remember the throne, he was sitting on it, he was speaking from it. It is God and the Lamb.

Okay, this is your Savior speaking. This is Jesus calling. You might feel a long way off, but the day will come when Jesus will say, verse 6, it is done. It is done. I am making all things new. I am the alpha, the omega, the beginning and the end. To those who are thirsty, I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this. I will be their God and they will be my children. My children, my people. It's his people that at the heart of this vision, isn't it?

Look at verse 3, a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people. He will dwell with them. They will be his people. God himself will be with them and be their God.

[8 : 59] And if we know the Bible up to this point, we should be crying out, at last! We've made it! We're home! God is making his home with us, that covenant promise. You will be my people. I will be your God.

God, we've tasted it. We know that it's true. But then it will be fuller, better, more true than it has ever, ever, ever been in human history. Listen to this in 1 John chapter 3. Dear friends, now we are the children of God. That's who we are. If our trust is in Christ, we are the children of God. And what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know when Christ appears, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Now we are children of God through his Son, he says. That's wonderful enough. But what we will be, that is simply beyond words, beyond imagining. We only know that when we see Christ come in glory, when we see him face to face, then what we are will give way to what we were always purposed to be.

We will say to one another, transformed and transfixed by the face of Christ, we will say, I knew it. I knew that's who you were created to be. I knew that's who you always were, but broken and twisted and corrupted by sin. But now you're with him. Or rather, now he's with you. You see him face to face as he is. Well, now I see the child of God that you were saved to be. Because now you are like him, as you were never on earth. I've spoken before about communion, being a bit like a dad coming home at the end of the day to sit at the table with us. We've wanted to be with him all week. And now he's home and he's sitting at the table with us, sharing the food and drink, the bread and the wine that make us the family we are. It's a special moment of communion with our God. But the end of the story is that reality forever. Dad coming home and never going away again. Permanent, unending, unchanging, communion with God. I'm with you forever, he says. I'm home with you now. I'm not going away. You'll never miss me again in the way that you once did. I've got an eternity of never-ending days to spend with you. And I'm never going anywhere without you. If a dad said that

and did that, would that not change the experience of the children? Would their experience of being children of this dad not be transformed? More intimate, more familiar, more constant. Friends, in Christ we are his children, adopted by his grace through his son, born again by his spirit, children of the living God.

But know this, then we will know him, feel him, hear him, see him. We will know what it is to be his children as we have never known it here. It will be that much better. And John spells that out. That is kind of what this whole chapter is about. He goes to town on it, almost literally in fact, because almost all that he talks about is God being with his people here. John's doing the three films at once thing. He shows us, doesn't he, at the same time, a city, a bride, precious jewels, gold, a lamp, a temple. And in our heads, we're kind of, what do we picture? What do we fix on? Well, we kind of think, don't we? A city, a bride, precious jewels, a lamp, a temple. We kind of have all of that buzzing around in our heads. But peel back the pictures, and what do we see? Just look and see this in verse 9.

[13:18] Verse 9, chapter 21, come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb. Who does the Bible tell us is the bride of Christ? It is his people, his church, those who endure with Jesus to the end. But look at verse 10, what does John see? He carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. What are we meant to understand? The city is the bride, and the bride is the city. The city paved with gold and built of jewels is the bride, washed clean and beautifully dressed for her husband. Brothers and sisters, what are we looking at in this chapter?

What are we gazing at? What is he describing? I'm looking at it. It's you. It is the church, the redeemed people of the living God. Look at the people in front of you, and next to you, and behind you, what is it? This is us, but future. You are the bride. You are the city, the people of God. Look at churches across the world. Look at the saints gone before us. Read these words again later on, or tomorrow and in the week. And as you read of precious stones, and pure gold, and radiance, and beauty, and glory, think of the people here around you.

That is what it is describing. What we will be has not yet been made known, but we will be like this, purified, glorified. And here is the beauty. Strip away the paint and the plaster of the city to the people inside. And if the city is the people, then what is verse 22 saying?

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. What is it saying? God's unfiltered, immediate presence, not in a city, but in ye. The city does not need the sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. Christ, our light himself, not in a city, but in ye. David Jackman in that book says with beautiful simplicity, the essence of eternal life is the life of the eternal within each of his people. Think of that, God forever in ye, unfiltered, unmediated. If your trust is in Jesus, that is where your story ends, for we are his people, and he is our God. And God's people will then be forever in God's place. Now, maybe you're thinking, if the city isn't a place but a people, then where will we live forever with God? Notice, though, that the city is not going up to heaven to God. John says twice it is coming down from heaven from God. John is saying the place where God will live with us forever is down here, not up there, a new heavens, a new earth, a whole new creation. This is one of the big hopping off points from the intermediate state that we thought about before. The souls of God's people who've died are gathered into God's presence while they wait for this day, the day John is describing, which means, friends, our ultimate hope and our big hope is so, so much bigger than our souls going to heaven when we die. Because what John's describing is the day Christ returns, and on that day, he says, the physical cosmos, the fabric of reality, the world and everything in it will change forever in unimaginable ways. Now, to help us to grasp how immense that change will be, the Bible uses the language of this age and the age to come. That's as close as we get in our own understanding of the way that history and time work, an age or an era or period. We think of world history, don't we, as sort of the Stone Age giving way to the Bronze Age and then the Iron Age. But think about this, the people who lived in those ages didn't think that they were living, did they, in the Stone Age or the Bronze Age or the Iron Age. For them, it was just life. And they had no anticipation, did they, that life was ever going to change, that radically the fabric of life and society was going to end until it did. Historians talk about the Bronze Age collapse that happened in the 1100s BC.

[18:22] Whole civilizations ended. Empires that we've never heard of crumbled. Our own personal history, we sometimes say, don't we, it's the end of an era. But of course, we don't think of it like that when we're living it, do we? We don't think we're in an era until we're at the end of it. Then

we look back and say, wow, what a lot of time has passed. It's the end of an era, start of a new age. And so the Bible says, in a way that we can barely get our heads around, that one day we will stand at the end of history and look back on the whole history of the world back to the Garden.

And we will take everything that is in every history textbook, and every museum, every civilization, people, and nation, everything that has happened, and say, it's the end of an era.

One brief period of life in this cosmos that is passing away and a new age beginning. Just see that in Revelation 21 verse 1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth had passed away.

Just look what it calls this world now, the first earth. The first world. We don't think of it like that, do we? We live as if this was the only heavens and earth. In our world, our culture has convinced us that that's all it's ever going to be. History isn't going to end. This is the only world we've got.

[19 : 53] There is no final destination. Or if there is a destination, then we have to fight to get it by cutting other people out of history. But those are not biblical views of history.

The Bible says that this is the first cosmos, and a first cosmos collapse is coming. The day of the Lord will come like a thief, says Peter. The heavens will disappear with a roar.

The elements will be destroyed by fire. The earth and everything done on it will be laid bare. If that is not the collapse of the cosmos, I don't know what is. But in keeping with his promise, says Peter, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

And so out of the ashes of the old, a new cosmos, a new world, a new age. Now what will that new creation be like? Well, in some ways, understandably, it's just more than we can grasp. The Bible gives us some language to grasp towards it, though. We know it will be physical, in that it will be a new heavens and new earth. And we know that we will be physical. Our bodies resurrected. That's what Paul was saying in that passage in 1 Corinthians. If it's preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead, he says? Christ is raised. We will be raised. And we know that the world and our bodies will be the same world and the same bodies, but made new. Now remember way back to the start of our series, what did we ground our hope in?

All of this unfolds, doesn't it, from the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Jesus did not get a new body when he was raised from the dead. It was his same body. The body that was formed in Mary's womb and that was nailed to the cross is the body that was raised and walked out of the tomb, the same body, but glorified, recognizable, but transformed. So it will be with our bodies.

[22 : 07] And so it will be with this cosmos, the same earth, the same genes, the same me and you, but gloriously resurrected, renewed, and transformed. And Paul and John are very clear that that world and those bodies will not know pain or disease or suffering or death in the way that our bodies do now. Medicine has made great progress, hasn't it? In God's mercy, we live today in an age unlike any other in terms of the health care that we receive, the length of our lives. But here's a hope that even the best doctors in the world cannot offer you. That is the hope of being free from every sickness, the damage that has been done to our bodies and our minds being undone, our whole being restored, and living in a world in which there is no threat, no disease, no accidents. God tells us in Christ that your same body today will be raised imperishable and incorruptible in a world that is made ye.

And so here is a biblical view of history, what Pastor Sam Ferguson calls the long arc of redemption, that history is aiming towards the redemption of our bodies and the restoration of our whole world.

Now, maybe the question then is, what will our bodies do in this new world? Will we work? And in what sense?

How much of our work here and now will be kind of carried over into the new world? The Bible doesn't say. Revelation says that the nations, the kingdoms of the world will bring their glory into the new creation.

But I take it from the Bible that when God gives us a new land to live in, whatever that looks like, he's not going to do it in any way that gives us any scope for taking any credit for it.

[24 : 13] Here's Moses speaking to God's people about to cross over into the promised land in Deuteronomy. And he says this, So notice the great stress.

He says, Not because you built this life for yourself.

So, in what sense will our work survive into the new creation? Or will we work in the new creation? Well, I suspect not in the sense that we mean it when we say, Will our work survive or will we work? It's instructive that our work, the work Adam was given to do in the first creation, was to tend and keep the garden. But those are not gardening words. Those are worshiping words.

The same pair of verbs is used of the priests who serve in the tabernacle. They serve and guard. They tend and keep the holy place, the place of God's presence.

[26 : 03] And so I don't know what kind of work will be given to do in a new creation. But whatever it is, whatever it is, whatever survives, whatever glory we bring into it, you can be sure that it will not serve our personal kingdom.

that it will not be to serve our personal agenda, but it will be for God's kingdom and his glory, which should help us think, shouldn't it?

What am I working for now? What is going to last into eternity? What is my work going to be for all eternity in the presence of God?

And is that feeding back into the way that I work here and now? Because then it will all be from him and it will all be for him, so that we will never forget why we are there, only because he graciously and powerfully redeemed us from slavery to sin by the blood of his son.

God's people in God's place. And finally, under God's rule. John stresses again, doesn't he? This will be a world put right, a world perfectly under the righteous rule of God, our king.

[27 : 21] Incidentally, if you're wondering, that's why John says there will be no sea in the new creation, because very often in the Bible, the sea is a symbol of anti-God rebellion. And so it's simply John's way of saying that there will be no opposition to God at all in this new creation.

And he spells that out, doesn't he, in verse 8 of chapter 21. It casts a shadow over this beautiful chapter. To read it, it's almost jarring, isn't it?

But it is intrinsic to what God is doing in the new creation, which is ridding his world of all wrong.

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. Notice then, in a world under God's rule, it is not only sin that is barred, but sinners. It's there to remind us, isn't it, that God won't put the world right without righting all the wrongs.

And we do long for that, don't we? We long for a world free from wrong, a world put right. The new creation is that world. And here God is promising that it will be, for no sin will be present in it, because no enemy of God will come into it.

[28 : 45] And if we're Christians, our hearts should rejoice in that. We do not wish hell on anyone. Judgment is reserved to God alone.

But we do wish for a world that is ruled by God like this. You just think of all the harm that is inflicted by human beings on human beings, God's image bearers.

And in so many ways, friends, the new creation will be without pain, because those who cause pain without remorse will be taken away from it. This is the world we all really want.

But if you're not a Christian, then think, do I have a place in that perfect world? Do I have a place under God's rule? Because to be in God's place, what do we have to be?

We have to be under his rule. If we lay down our weapons, we surrender to him. If we plead his grace through the death of his son for our sins, then we live under his rule.

[29 : 50] But if we are not submitting to God's rule now, here and now, how can we expect to live in a world made right then? Live in a world under God's rule then? It will also be a world put right, because the harms of this world will be healed.

Now, I don't know about ye. I can barely read any of these verses without crying. But there's one verse in particular that I can't read without tears in my eyes, and it's verse 2 of chapter 22.

It says, Just think of the suffering throughout history that peoples have gone through.

History is a catalogue of the suffering of nations, or even just look at the knees and see what damage has been done. Only last week, perhaps, you saw there was a phosphorus attack in Ukraine.

Intensely flammable chemicals raining down on a city, causing burns so severe that, in some cases, they reignite when the bandages are removed. Think of that, the suffering of the nations.

[31 : 15] Where can wounds like that be healed? And not only the physical wounds, but the trauma of losing your country, the grief of family killed in war, the loss of a whole life in the space of a year.

Where can, not only in individuals, but a nation's suffering be healed? And not only a nation, but the history of the nations throughout the world.

Well, here it is. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. This is where history ends, isn't it?

This is where all the wrongs are put right for all of time. The wrongs won't just be righted by his justice, but the harms healed by his love.

And we'll finish with this thought. This world under God's rule is a world put right because wrong will be impossible for us. Sometimes we talk about the new creation being like God taking us back to Eden and back to the beginning, but that's not quite right.

[32 : 26] It will be like the garden in so many ways, but the end is better than the beginning because what will not happen in the new creation? What will not happen is sin.

We sang earlier in this hymn of Jesus, in him the tribes of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost. Just unpack that.

Think about that. More blessings than their father lost. More than Adam threw away is what we kept back from God in the new creation. How is that?

Well, because what went wrong in the garden will never happen in the city. Under God's rule, there will be no more sin. There will be no more temptation to sin.

No one will ever say in this world, did God really say? No one will ever want to do that. Adam was created without sin, and when he sinned, he did not know, did he, the glory of God's salvation.

[33 : 29] He did not know what it would cost God to save him, how far God would go in love to rescue him. Brothers and sisters, then we will be without sin. But we will be without sin and know what it cost God to save us.

We will know the glory of his salvation. We will sing of it from day to day, and we will never stop loving and worshiping God for it. And so sin will be impossible to us because our hearts will not be free like Adam's was.

Our hearts will be captivated by God's grace, captivated by the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

That is why the end of our story is better than the beginning. That is why we can say that God knew where it would end before the beginning, because this is where the whole story was going, to a better ending than even the start of the story.

And that is where our story ends, so to speak, if we are in Christ. So, where do we go from here? What does tomorrow hold for you?

[34 : 41] Whatever it holds, set your hope on that day. Fix your eyes upon it. Don't forget it. Don't let it drift to the margins of your life.

In this knowledge, live each day in the light of this glorious ending. Live then as God's people. Set your heart on God's place. Live under God's rule.

Look forward to that day when he comes. Pray for it, won't you, with the church down through the ages. Come, Lord Jesus. It's one of the oldest prayers in the book.

And it is when we live for that day then that we discover that this life really is only the cover and the title page of that great story.

The story that no one on earth has read, which goes on forever and ever. and in which every chapter is better than the one before. Let's pray together.

[35 : 40] God, our Father, how we thank you and praise you for your free gift of life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Our Father, how we thank you that you promise us so much more, Lord, than we could ever imagine. Lord, not only that, but not only what we don't deserve, but the opposite of what we do deserve.

Lord, for our sin, we deserve to be cast away by you, but in your grace and your love, you have redeemed us. Lord, what a thought that you have made us your children. Lord, that you have destined us for glory.

Lord, that you promise us a new world in which to live, our bodies raised from the dead. our Father, we pray you would help us to set our hearts upon that day, to thank you for it each and every day.

And Lord, that a day would not pass, that our lives do not change in the light of the revelation of your word. Lord, we ask each of us here that our lives would be bending towards that conclusion.

[36 : 58] Lord, we thank you that in Christ each day brings us closer because the work you have begun in us, you will bring to completion. on the day when he returns. Lord, keep us, we pray, to the end.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.