

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Alpha and the Omega, Our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Have you ever read a really good book that you never wanted to end? As you approach the ending you almost dread turning the pages because you know the ending is just around the corner. That's how I feel every time I read the Book of Revelation. With every page there's a new surprise. Last week we read about the two great beasts that were sent from the dragon to wreak havoc on humanity. In the parts we skipped over, there was a great build up to the final war, the Armageddon. After all the parts we skipped we landed today in the final 2 chapters, and we get a glimpse into the aftermath of what happens after a properly executed celestial war. By the way, the lectionary probably skipped over Armageddon because it turns out to be a big nothing burger. There are no Blackhawk helicopters, no F-32s, no stealth bombers. There's no swords or guns at all. There were no verses describing people being left behind to face the evil devil alone... In fact, the only weapon even mentioned is the Word of God. At the mere mention of God's Word both beasts are thrown into the Lake of Fire and the Dragon, who is the Devil himself, is bound and thrown into the bottomless abyss. So, like I said, a big nothing burger in terms of John's vision. Much more important for John, is his vision for what comes afterward, and it is marvels-- beyond human capability to comprehend.

The new heaven and the new earth coming down out of heaven. It's the perfect place for God's children. In order to interpret all the images John uses to describe this New Jerusalem, I would have to be an Old Testament Bible Scholar, which I am not... I do have an imagination and I'm not afraid to use it though...

The biggest revelation that struck me like a bolt out of the blue was when I realized chapters 21 and 22 aren't describing a time when everything as we know it will end. There are precious few times in the entire Bible when God speaks directly, like on the mountain top transfiguration of Jesus. So, when God speaks, we should pay attention... In the text for today God said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." For some reason, as I read those words this week, I realized God is in fact the end of all things. When we get to that time, God will be all and in all. PERIOD. That's right my dear friends, God will be your neighbor and maybe even more intimate than your neighbor, God will be in you and around you, so close that there won't be any need for the sun or moon for light. God will be all around in all and throughout every atomic particle, God will be within everything. In John's vision, the imagery of the walls of the new city of God are made of every kind of jewel, but the jewels mentioned were all Old Testament images that referred to God's glory. So, if I can venture to interpret, this means the walls are made out of the Glory of God. God's own Glory protects the New Jerusalem, and that same Glory serves to light the city as well...

If God can be taken at His Word, and God really is the End, then these last 2 Chapters are actually describing God. It's too marvelous for words to describe. I mean a city where the streets are made of Gold, but not just your average, ordinary gold. No, the streets of Heaven are paved with gold that's as clear as glass. Wait! What? How can gold be clear as glass? All I can say is that is some pretty well refined gold with no impurities, at all...

Since it's really hard, no, impossible to describe what God is like in human terms, John sprinkles in some things that God is not. There is no sea. Where did the sea go and why? Well in traditional Jewish interpretations, the sea was always the source of chaos and evil. So, if all evil has been cast out, then the seas would serve no purpose and of course be eliminated... Evil, even as a potential disturber of creation, will have been irrevocably overcome. There will be no more tears, death, sorrow, crying, or pain. In one phrase John sums up all human frailties when he says, "the former things have passed away." God says, "See. I am making all things new!" Here the Almighty himself promises all that now robs life from being fulfilled, joyful, vibrant life will be absent from the final reality to which God is leading history.

I want to spend a short moment thinking about how the Book of Revelation itself refutes this whole false doctrine of the Rapture. Did you notice that the New Heaven and the New Earth come down here? The New Jerusalem comes to earth.

There's no mention of all the good Christians going elsewhere. God is headed our way folks. God is in the renovation business. He says so himself, "See, I am making all things new." He never said, "See, I am making all new things..." All things will be made new. I believe all means all. All our relationships, all our rusted out old cars, even this old broken body will be made new. All means all. If so, then every person will be made new and acceptable to God. That doesn't mean we should accept criminals or criminal behavior. Yet, I refuse to limit God and believe God can find the good, even in hardened criminals, and maybe even lying politicians, which means all of them... I think about the image of God separating out the wheat from the chaff. Both grow on the same plant, yet when you thrash the plant, you can separate out the good wheat germ from the disposable chaff. I think God can do that with humans as well. When we go to God's city we too will be well refined like the see-through gold used to pave the roads. All the evil will be thrashed out of us as well and as a result, there won't be any sinners or sin in the New Jerusalem. The vision of God all the way back in chapter 4 is fulfilled: God is the creator. Yet the one who does not quench a smoking wick or break a bruised reed as it says in Isaiah 42:3 and Matthew 12:20 does not junk you, me, this planet, or any part of the cosmos and start all over—he renews the old and brings it to fulfillment. God makes ALL THINGS new! And that's really good news for all of us sinners!

John affirms this world and its value and thus pictures eternal salvation as the salvation of the world and of history itself. Salvation does not, according to John, offer escape from the tragedy of historical existence. On the contrary, our history, complete with all the pain and suffering we've inflicted upon the earth and each other will be redeemed, reconciled, and renewed. So, what does all that mean for us? Well for one thing, it means the good we do here on earth really does have significance. We are part of God's plan of salvation and rehabilitation of this part of the cosmos. I don't care what your stance is on man-made global climate change, all of us can agree that humans have scarred this planet with our strip mines and nuclear waste and many forms of pollution. On the other hand, we can each play a part in the restoration of the earth and in the reconciliation of one another through our good works and through our acts of forgiveness of one another. That's called being good stewards of everything we have. We can do that in every aspect of our lives! Any excess money we have, has been given to us in order to be a blessing to others who have far less than we do. When we care for one another through the good times and through life's messes, that's when we're assisting God in bringing about this new heaven, right here on earth.

The whole Bible, in a round about fashion, has been heading toward this conclusion, we call the Book of Revelation. It's not a time to fear, but to embrace. Every time we join in to help fund a missionary spreading God's Word, or help in

bringing fresh drinking water to a village, or show the people in that remote village how to create and sustain a fish farm, or any of a myriad of other good works, you are helping God in this rehabilitation, reconciliation, and renewal project. May our Good Works help usher in the New Jerusalem by shining the light of God's Glory into every dark place on this planet. May you be blessed in this ministry of creation and renewal. May Jesus return quickly so all may know His Glory, amen.