

The End of Tears

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

June 27, 2010

#7 of 7 in the series, *Connecting the Dots*

Revelation 19:6-8 (NRSV)

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure” —

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then 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 as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

We started “in the beginning” and now we come to “the End.” But this End is not an event or a time or but a person: our Lord, indeed the Lord of all, Jesus Christ.

This week, we have arrived at the end of our journey through the entire biblical story. Thus, we have come to Act 6 in our six-act play. This is the story of Jesus’ return and the renewal of all of God’s creation. It is the final consummation of all that God had promised to Abraham, to Moses, and to all the prophets of old. It is where God’s work has always been headed.

Act One *Act Two* *Act Three* *Act Four* *Act Five* *Act Six*
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

For the last time, let’s take a brief look at the whole story to this point.¹ In Acts 1 and 2, God creates everything, including humans in God’s image. All is good until the humans rebel against God, seeking to be like gods themselves. This rebellion not only destroys the

¹If it seems a bit repetitive to go back through the story each week, that is because I am intending to be repetitive, albeit in different words. As disciples of Jesus, we need to absorb this story, breathing it in so that this story of God’s saving work can reshape the lens through which we see the world and the hearts with which we love.

humans' relationship with God but even damages God's creation. In Act 3, God sets out on a new course. The creator of the cosmos chooses one couple, Abraham and Sarah, through whose family all the families of the earth would be blessed. Later, God rescues this family from slavery and pursues them without end across a millennium and more.

God also makes a promise to protect and preserve this family, his people. But this promise is a covenant, a two-way agreement. For their part, the people of God are to love God and love one another. However, instead they would remain rebellious and sinful, understanding little about what it really means to love. Sadly, God's people proved unable to live up to their end of the agreement. Thus the question at the end of Act 3 is this: Would God's covenantal promises of restoration and renewal go forever unkept?

But the story goes on. In Act 4, we learn that God provided, in his only Son, the one faithful Jew who would truly love God and neighbor, who would keep the people's covenant with God. Thus, God also keeps his covenantal promises. Through the faith of Jesus Christ, this representative Messiah, the people of God are restored to a right relationship with God and the kingdom of God is ushered in.

Of course, anyone can look around and see that tragedy and grief and poverty and illness are still with us. It is as if God's kingdom has come already, but not yet.² Thus, there is still work to do. This is the story of Act 5, our own place in the larger story. Act 5 is yet unfinished and we are part of it every day. It is the story of God's Church, the fellowship formed by and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. It is the work of making disciples and building for the kingdom of God.

But when will this work be complete? When will God's saving purposes be consummated? When will the kingdom of God be a present reality to all? This is the story of Act 6.

Jesus returns, the Bridegroom comes to his bride

Marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people is one of the most enduring and profound of all biblical images. The power of the metaphor is grounded in the significance of covenant. The marriage of a man and a woman is a covenant, instituted by God, to which both are expected to remain faithful. The relationship between God and his people is lived out in a covenant – to which both are expected to remain faithful. Thus, just as adultery is forbidden in a marriage, even making the Top Ten list, the prophet Hosea³ uses adultery to describe Israel's relentless chasing after other gods (Hosea 2). But Hosea also describes God's determination to woo his bride anew so that "she shall respond as in the days of her youth" (Hosea 2:15).

Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the bridegroom. John the Baptist is a friend of the groom (John 3:22-30). When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples don't fast, he tells them that the disciples are wedding guests who won't fast while they are with the groom (Mark 2:18-22). Numerous parables liken Jesus' ministry and the coming kingdom of God to a wedding feast.

All this prepares us for the images in John's vision in the book of Revelation. We are nearing the end of the story, for this vision is from Revelation 19. The Lamb, Christ, is almost ready for his marriage to his bride, the Church. Jesus' second coming will be the consummation of this marriage. An angel then arrives, bearing a message of salvation, the third of the book's seven beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," recalling Jesus' parable of a wedding feast that focuses on invitations rejected and accepted (Matthew 22:1-14). John is so overcome by all this, that he falls on the ground to worship the angel. He is, of course, scolded by the angel, for we are to worship only God.

²Take a few minutes and read the supplemental reading on p. 4. I think it will help.

³The book of Hosea has some of the most remarkable biblical imagery weaving together the marriage covenant with the covenant between God and his people.

There are other places in the NT that refer to Jesus' second coming, but this marriage supper from John's visions is the most poetic. How else would one really talk about the Lord's return and the restoration of all things. This image of the marriage supper is meant to convey to us that the consummation of all God's work, the entire rescue project, has come.

But what can be said of this restoration and renewal, this massive outpouring of God's creative energies? Again, the poetry of John's revelation, building on the Old Testament prophets, paints a beautiful portrait of a restored creation.

Looking back so we can look ahead

It's easy to get lost in the expanse of the Bible. 66 books. 1,189 chapters. 31,102 verses⁴. Written, compiled, and edited over many centuries. Millennia ago. Yet, there is an overarching narrative to this vast library. Here is the story, told not in six acts, but in 124 words:

It is the story of God putting right what went wrong almost from the beginning. God created the cosmos, pronounced it good, and made humans in his image. He gave them a beautiful place to live and work. Yet, tragically, they tossed it all away for the chance to be like gods themselves. So God set about to put things right. God chose a people, Abraham and his descendants, through whom this restoration would proceed. In the end, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, did for Israel and all humanity what they were and we still are unable to do for ourselves – simply to love God and to love neighbor, enabling the rescue of God's people and the restoration of God's good creation.

The renewal of creation and the restoration of loving relationship is what it has always been about. They are the final fulfillment of promises God made through his many prophets. Hence, the closing visions of Revelation are like a stained glass window in which each fragment of glass is borrowed from earlier in the story that began with Genesis. The "new heaven and new earth" is from Isaiah 65 and 66. The loud voices from the throne sing from Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah 35 and 65. The water of life evokes for us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to whom he promises "a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life" (John 4). There is the tree of life, which we have not seen since Genesis 3 when the humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden, denying them access to this tree that gives eternal life. Whereas Moses couldn't see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20), we are told that God's servants will see God's face (Rev. 22:4).

All will be well

It is so easy to be caught up in the troubles and terrors of our lives and our world. Too often, we are overwhelmed by our anxieties and fears. Yet, these apocalyptic visions of a day with no death or tears or pain are God's promises that all will be well. John Ortberg wrote recently of our hunger for joy, rightful hunger because joy lies at the core of the cosmos. The closing visions of Revelation are one big fountain of joy. We may not always know that all will be well, but God knows it. Ortberg quotes a Christian who lived long ago, Julian of Norwich:

"All will be well,
And all will be well,
And all manner of things will be well."

The "End" is not an event but a "Who." There is no need for a temple in the new Jerusalem because the temple is the Lord God and the Lamb (v. 22). There is no need for a sun or the light of a lamp because the Lord God will be our light (22:5). It is the Lamb who is the "Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:12).

Maranatha . . . Come, Lord Jesus, Come (Revelation 22:20)

⁴No need to e-mail me if you have a different number. It all depends on which translation is used, the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts, and who is doing the counting. It is helpful to remember that the original texts had no chapter and verse divisions; these were added much later.

Supplemental Reading: *The Already/Not Yet Perspective*

I don't think there is anything more important to reading the New Testament well and, at the same time, more difficult to teach than the reality that the kingdom of God has come already . . . but not yet. This perspective permeates the NT from beginning to end and can be quickly seen in something as mundane as verb tenses. Gordon Fee writes:

For Paul, therefore, God's final salvation of his people has already been accomplished by Christ. In a sort of divine time warp, the future condemnation we all richly deserve has been transferred from the future into the past, having been borne by Christ (Rom. 8:1-3). Thus, we "have been saved" (Eph. 2:8). Since our final salvation has not been fully realized, he can likewise speak of salvation as something presently in process "we are being saved," (1 Cor. 1:18) and as yet to be completed ("we shall be saved, Rom 5:9). "Redemption is both "already" (Eph. 1:7) and "not yet" (Eph. 4:30), as is our "adoption" (Rom 8:15 and 23) and "justification" (Rom 5:1; Gal. 5:5).

I invite you to check out these verses and others. Is Paul merely confused about his grammar? Hardly! He is working out the implications of Jesus' resurrection and the coming of God's kingdom (resurrection is part of the larger package called the kingdom of God). What does it mean for a world still wracked with sin and tragedy? Did Jesus get the job only partly done? No. I hope the following explanation will be helpful.

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrated the reality of God's kingdom. For example, in God's kingdom there would be no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, some did.

In the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it's as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn't really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

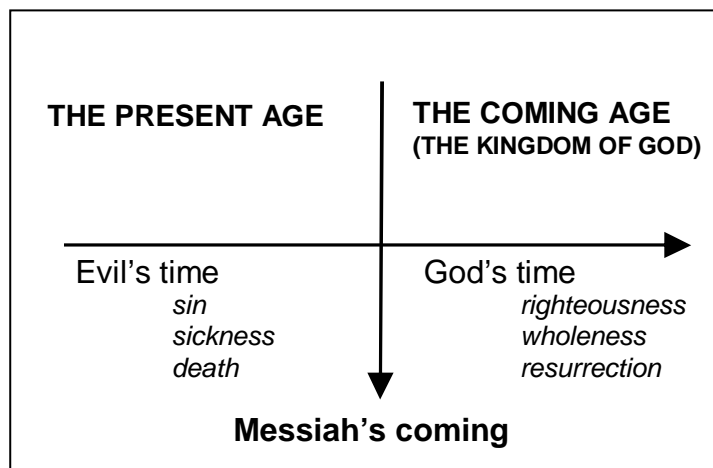


Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus' day
(figures from Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

Already/Not yet

But Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. Jesus' resurrection was the proof of that. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective depicted in Figure 1. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come -- but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come *already*, but *not yet*. To reiterate, I really can't

overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this “already/not yet” perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the “ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

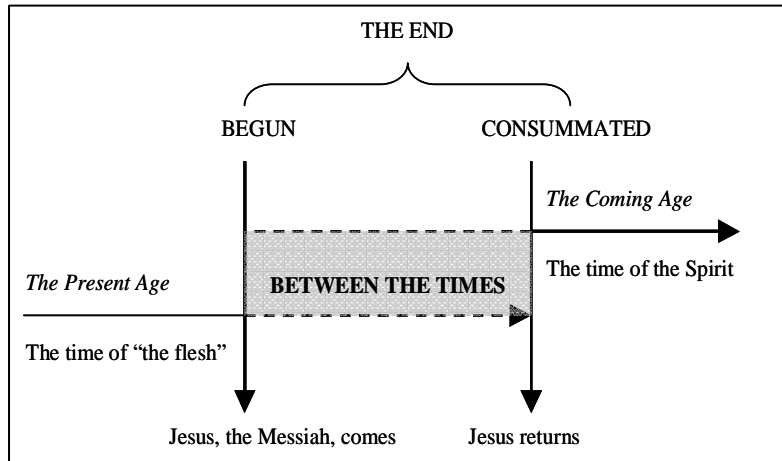


Figure 2. The Christians' new perspective: already/not yet

We are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of the whole world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). St. Andrew is just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly awhile to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are . . . already. *This is the real world.*

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Daniel 7:9-14 The Son of Man is given dominion over all creation.

Tuesday, Acts 1:1-11 The angels announce that Jesus will return (v. 11).

Wednesday, 1 Thess. 4:13-18 Jesus will return and we will all go out to welcome him back to the renewed earth.

Thursday, Revelation 20:11-15 A vision of the final judgment.

Friday, Revelation 22:1-5 The river of life and the tree of life. We first encountered this tree in Genesis 2.

Saturday, Revelation 22:16-17 All those who wish may drink from the water of life! Come Lord Jesus!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Seven weeks in this series. The entire biblical story from beginning to end. What is your reaction to this series? Has it helped you to grasp the immensity of God's work to rescue his creation? Do you better understand why the early Christians kept the Hebrew Scriptures?

What does the overarching biblical story mean for your own faith and your discipleship? The final act of our play is filled with expectation of a world put right, in which God's mercy and justice sweep across the nations. How can we grasp hold of this hope as we make our way through a world racked with trouble and suffering?

Finally, how would you succinctly tell this story to someone else? I suggest that you read back over these seven studies from time to time. I think you'll find that your confidence in your own understanding of this story and your ability to tell it will increase dramatically.

