

New Creation

Third Sunday after Pentecost ~ June 29, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (from the NRSV)

Isaiah 43:18-19

¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Today, we continue a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our seventh symbol is that of the butterfly, a joyful symbol of new creation and resurrection.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Seeing the real world

Isaiah writes of God doing “a new thing” that “springs forth” (v. 19). Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth, Greece, that if “anyone is in Christ – new creation! – everything old has passed away, everything has become new” (v. 17). Such phrases are exciting and comforting but many Christians don’t quite know what to make of them – what is all this talk about the *old* going and the *new* coming?

These aren’t sentimental words. Paul is not speaking metaphorically or figuratively. Instead, Paul writes about the way the world really is, the way it really works. This is concrete language grounded in things as they are. Understanding Paul and the rest of the NT writers on this will take a little effort, but I promise that the effort is worth it! Grasping Paul’s meaning in v.17 will open up to you vast portions of the New Testament. Indeed, though I’m sure you are not in the habit of saving these studies, you should save this one for awhile. The figures on page 2 are self-explanatory but it takes a while to soak in their meaning.

“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15)

These are Jesus’ first words in Mark’s Gospel. What is he talking about? What time? What is to be fulfilled? What does it have to do with the kingdom of God? . . . Jesus and his fellow Jews shared a common perspective on the world. They believed in God who had created everything there is and pronounced it good. But they also knew that God’s world was not as he had intended it to be. Creation was broken. Humans, despite being made in God’s image, were estranged from God. The Jews knew that God had chosen them to be the ones through whom creation would be healed. Indeed, as depicted in Figure 1 on page 2, they awaited the arrival of the Messiah, the anointed of God, who would bring about God’s kingdom, healing all of creation and restoring everyone to right relationship with God. The coming of the Messiah would be the climax of history. It would be the time to which God’s people had been pointing for nearly 2000 years. This would be Isaiah’s “new thing.” Exile would be ended. Sins would be forgiven.



The Butterfly

The butterfly is a well-known symbol of new creation, as the creature passes from its old self, the caterpillar, to its new self. This symbol reminds us that by our faith in Jesus Christ we too are made new. We shed our old selves, tied to the things of the present age, and take on a new self, re-born, living in the kingdom of God.

Evil would be banished. It would be God's time. It would be God's kingdom. God would give his people "a new Spirit." Everyone would know God in their own hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus came talking about fulfillment of this Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom. In God's kingdom there were no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the 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.

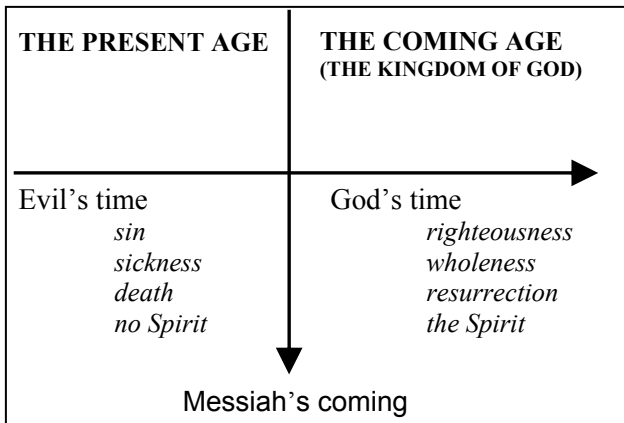


Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus' day (figures from Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

Already/Not yet

But Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. 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*. 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

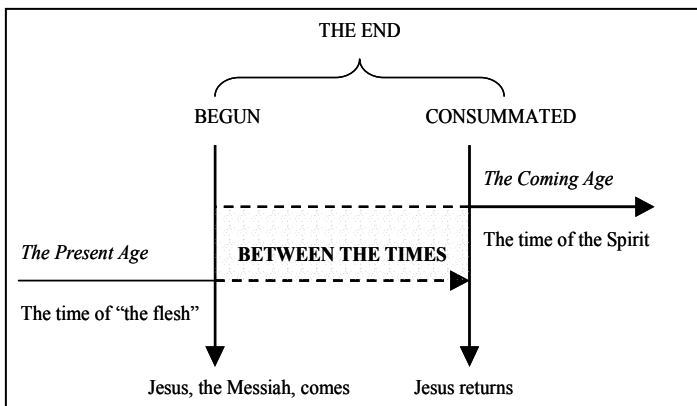


Figure 2. The Christians' new perspective: *already/not yet*

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!

As Gordon Fee writes, 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 all the 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. *This is the real world.* Glory be to God!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 11:1-9 The future peaceful kingdom</p>	<p>Day 2 Joel 2:28-30; Jeremiah 31:31-34 The Spirit is poured out in the new age of the new covenant</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 3:7-17; 17:20-21 John the Baptist announces that the Messiah is at hand and will usher in the age of the Spirit; Jesus proclaims the coming of God's kingdom</p>	<p>Day 4 John 3 Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the new birth.</p>
<p>Day 5 Philippians 3:7-14 Already they know forgiveness, but the Christians are not yet perfected.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

A New Adult Sunday School Class begins July 13!

9:30 hour – will be taught by Scott Engle – open to all adults!

We are pleased to announce that Sunday, July 13, we'll inaugurate a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class will be led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies. The class will be open to all adults and will be based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It will be a lecture-oriented class, but there will be plenty of time for questions and answers. If you've been thinking about attending a class on Sunday morning but haven't been sure where to begin – this would be a great place to start! Please join us!

We will meet in Room 4 of Piro Hall – downstairs in the Garden Level of the new Sanctuary.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Gordon Fee, a leading NT scholar, recently wrote that if he were going to return to be the pastor of a local church (as he once was), he “. . . would set about with a single-minded passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church's understanding of itself as an eschatological¹ community.” Review again the two figures in the today's lesson. Discuss what they mean. Do you understand why the Christians came to a different perspective from the Jews? How does the Christian perspective differ? What do you think Dr. Fee means by “eschatological community.” Consider the following:

- Why do you think that Dr. Fee would say such a thing? Why is this so important?
- How might understanding ourselves as an eschatological community change us ~ our lives, our priorities – even our congregation?
- Richard Hays writes, “. . . the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time, and the form of this world is passing away.” What is to be our role in the consummation of God's kingdom? Should we quietly await Jesus' return and watch the present world “pass away?” Or are we to do all we can to renew creation and make God's kingdom a present reality? If renewal is our responsibility, what can we actually do?

¹ *Eschatology* is from the Greek word, *eschaton*, meaning “last things;” it has to do with the end-times. The figures in the study are eschatological frameworks depicting related, but contrasting, views of the end times.