

Variety from Revelation 20-22 (DHT)

20:1-2—And I saw an angel descending out of heaven, having the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he took the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and the Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

20:7-15—And when the thousand years were completed, the Satan will be released out of his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog to gather them for war, whose number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the breadth of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire descended out of heaven and devoured them, and the devil who deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and of sulfur where the beast and the false prophet also are, and they will be tormented day and night from ever for ever. Then I saw a great white throne and the one sitting on it, from whose face heaven and earth fled, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the one of life. And the dead were judged out of the things written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it; death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were each judged, according to their works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death and if anyone was not found to be written in the book of life, then he was cast into the lake of fire.

21:1-7—And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had gone away, and no longer was the sea. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem prepared as a bride adorned for her husband descending out of heaven from God. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with humanity. He will tabernacle with them and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be their God with them. And he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and no longer will there be death. No longer will there be mourning, crying, or pain because the former things have gone away.” And the one sitting on the throne said, “Behold! I am making all things new.” And he said, “Write this, because these words are faithful and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the alpha and omega, the beginning and completion. To the thirsty I will freely give from the spring of the water of life. The overcoming one will have this inheritance: I will be his God and he will be my son.

21:22-26—And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God

illuminated it, and its lamp is the lamb. And the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. And its gates will absolutely-not be shut by day for there will be no night there. They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. But anything unclean and those who practice abominations and liars will absolutely-not enter into it if they have not been written in the Book of the Lamb of Life.

22:1-5—Then he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street and of its river, and the tree of life was on this side and that side, providing twelve fruit, yielding its fruit according to each month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. And no longer will there be any curse, and the throne of God and of the lamb will be in it, and his servants will serve him. And they will see his face, and his name on their foreheads. And night will not be there; and they will have no need of the light of the lamb and the light of the sun because the Lord God will illuminate them, and they will reign from ever for ever.

22:14-17—Blessed are those washing their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually-immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and all who love and practice lying. “I, Jesus, have sent my messenger to testify these things to you in the churches. I am the root and the seed of David, the bright morning star.” And the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let those who hear say, “Come.” And let those who thirst come. Let those who desire freely take the water of life.

Stories that Captivate Us

In C.S. Lewis’ classic series, four children stumble into a land called Narnia. While there, Edmund gets in some trouble, which required him to die. This is problematic for it would foil the prophecy of the White Witch’s demise and so Aslan, the lion of Narnia, substitutes himself in Edmund’s place, innocently sacrificing himself, for which he is later resurrected because of the Deeper Magic, about which the White Witch did not know. Aslan’s substitutionary death and subsequent resurrection paved the way for him to destroy the White Witch in the great battle.¹

Why is this story so captivating?

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

In J.K. Rowling’s famous story, Voldemort attempts to kill Harry Potter as a baby but failed because Harry’s mother Lily threw herself in between Voldemort and her baby, which left a lightning bolt scar on Harry’s forehead. Later on, Professor Dumbledore recounted to Harry his mother’s substitutionary death like this: “Your mother died to save you... love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark... Not a scar, no visible sign... but to have been loved so deeply... will give us some protection forever.”² *Why is this story so captivating?*

I recently watched the acclaimed film, *Freedom Writers*, about a teacher at a rundown school in LA just after the Rodney King riots. Many of her students were affiliated with gangs, drug-dealers, etc. Through a series of events, she discovers only one of her students had heard of the Holocaust and she used the Holocaust to show what dehumanizing the “other” leads to. She has a breakthrough with her class and so they read the *Diary of Anne Frank*. One student in particular reached the end and learned that Anne Frank died. She stormed into the classroom and yelled at her teacher, “I hate you for making me read this. That’s not how the story is supposed to end!” But another student opened her eyes that the story is really about the woman who hid Anne Frank, who simply wanted to be a small light in a dark room. The students identified with this story—this story became their story. Feeling convicted, one student went home and discarded his gun in the sewer. The next scene is of another student who was just evicted but feels “at home” in his teacher’s classroom. The next scene is another student who after years of estrangement reconciles with his mother. And the next scene was that formerly angry student sitting as a witness in court, choosing to discard the lies she was coached to say to protect her gang-family and she instead told the truth, which ostracized her from her family. The movie culminates in their teacher staying with these students through graduation, most of whom were the first in their family to graduate high school. *Why is this story so captivating?*

Perhaps you have seen the Oscar-winning Best Picture, *Spotlight*, about the team of journalists who uncovered the child sex abuse in the Boston diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps you’ve seen *The Blind Side*, about a homeless youth who is adopted by a Christian family who help him rise out of poverty and discover his great potential in life. Perhaps you’ve seen the comedy *Waterboy*, about an intellectually challenged man becoming his own apart from his mama only to use that independence to stand up for his mama. Or perhaps you’ve seen a whole slew of films starring Tom Hanks who seems to frequently play these inspirational,

² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

redemptive-type roles, whether in *Forrest Gump*, *Sully*, *The Terminal*, *Captain Philips*, *Cast Away*, or *Saving Private Ryan*. *Why are these stories so captivating?*

Stories have the power to move us emotionally; to stir our hearts. In the midst of our stories, we know the world—our story; our life—is not how it’s supposed to be. Stories give us an escape from the wrongness of our world out of hope in something better. These stories follow the lives of real people or at least people who seem they could be real who overcome great obstacles, perhaps even mistakes of their own, to come out on top or to make right what has gone wrong. Everyone loves a good redemption story.

Introduction of Fall Sermon Series

We are starting a new sermon series called, “Beginning in the Beginning.” Genesis 1-11 is not just the beginning of the Book of Genesis; these chapters form the prologue to the *entire* Bible. They provide us the origin stories for a Biblical worldview. These chapters form the backdrop upon which the remainder of Scripture is built.

The rest of Scripture speaks to God’s nature as Sovereign-Creator, which is built upon Genesis 1. The rest of Scripture speaks of God’s people as priestly-mediators extending the boundary of God’s reign to the ends of the earth; Scripture speaks of marriage as foundational to orderly society, and the idyllic paradise of God as that which is defined by intimate fellowship with him. These concepts are built upon Genesis 2. The rest of Scripture speaks frequently to the results of original sin that have plagued and broken our world ever since Adam and Eve first disobeyed; Scripture speaks about a promise of life and a promise of death by which all people must choose, these are built upon Genesis 3. The rest of Scripture speaks to sacrifice as a necessary response to sin, and exile as the thematic equivalent to death, both of these are built upon Genesis 4. God promises that a savior would one day come to crush the head of the serpent, and the rest of Scripture traces this genealogical line. These genealogies have a frequent theme. So-and-so lived x-number of years *and died... and died... and died* until there was one who died *but* was then raised to life. The genealogies trace all the way to Jesus Christ the messianic seed of Eve who would reverse the curse, and all this tracing is built upon Genesis 5 and 10. The rest of Scripture speaks about judgment preceding salvation. The two primary ways judgment is described is as a de-creation of the land and a scattering of the people. The two primary ways salvation is described is as a re-creation of the land and a gathering of the people. De-creation

and re-creation of the land are both built upon Genesis 6-9 and the scattering of the people is built upon Genesis 11 in the lead up to Abraham from whom God would gather a people unto himself to live with him how humanity was intended to live.

Genesis 1-11 prepares us to read the rest of the story. The Bible is not just some ancient book with disconnected fables; no, the Bible is telling us a story. A reason we know the Bible is an unfolding story is because it has an easily recognizable plot. In Act 1, “God establishes his kingdom” in creation. In Act 2, there is “rebellion in the kingdom,” which has since polluted all of humanity. In Act 3, salvation is initiated when the Sovereign “King chooses Israel” as the nation from whom he will bless the nations. In Act 4, salvation is accomplished through “the coming of the King” through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Act 5, salvation is shared by “spreading the news of the King.” And in Act 6, salvation is completed in “the return of the King.”³ The Bible is not a library of random stories; no, the Bible is *the* unfolding story of God’s covenant-redemption; his plan to restore humanity and creation to its original, physical glory.

Another reason we know the Bible is God’s unfolding story of covenant-redemption is because of how the beginning and the end specifically correspond to one another. Any good story ends in ways that reminisce the beginning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it like this:

“The Church of Christ bears witness to the end of all things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end... The new is the real end of the old; Christ is the new. Christ is the end of the old. He is not a continuation of the old... Yet the Church, which knows of the end, knows also of the beginning. It knows that there is the same breach between the beginning and now as between now and the end... Therefore the Church only sees the beginning in the end; from the end... The Church does all this because it is grounded upon the testimony of Holy Scripture... it reads all Holy Scripture as the book of the end, of the new, of Christ... Therefore the Scriptures need to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end... Christ is the beginning, the new and the end of our world.”⁴

³ Quotations come from Craig Bartholomew and Paige Vanosky, *The 30-Minute Bible: God’s Story for Everyone*. Downers Grove: IV Press, 2021.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall, Temptation: Two Biblical Studies*; 1959, pages 11-12.

In other words, before we can begin in the beginning, we need to begin with the end. Any good story ends in ways that reminisce the beginning, and this is the ending that we get in the final three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

Eden and New Jerusalem: There and Back Again

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living creation. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. Ezekiel 28 describes the Garden of Eden as a mountaintop. And so in the introductory chapters of the Bible, God prepares a special place, and then his special people are taken up to the Garden, and then the serpent enters the scene. In the concluding chapters of the Bible we see these three elements again, but in reverse order. He took the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and the Satan, and bound him for a thousand years and when the thousand years were completed, the Satan was cast into the lake of fire forever. Then the people of God are separated from the people against God. Those who were not found in the book of life were cast into the lake of fire, leaving behind those who were to enter the city. John saw a new heaven and earth because the first heaven and earth passed away. Then the Spirit led John to a great, exalted mountain, and showed John the holy city Jerusalem descending from heaven.

In the old creation, God prepared a place, brought his people up to that place, and the serpent entered the scene. In the new creation, the serpent exits the scene, God has prepared his people, and then God brings the prepared place *down* to those people. As you read through Revelation 20-22, notice the direction things are going. Everything from God is coming down from heaven to the earth. Heaven is not the final resting place—heaven is not the goal; the new creation *on earth* is the *telos* for God’s people.

How is this new special place described? Rev. 21:10 describes this New Creation as an exalted mountain, just like Ezek. 28 described the Garden of Eden. The size of this New Creation is a perfect cube, identical to the holy of holies in the tabernacle and temple. In Ezekiel, the prophet describes the correspondences between Eden and the Temple, and in Ezekiel’s vision the temple is also a perfect cube. This New Creation is identified by the prevalence of special gemstones, which is also true of Ezekiel’s descriptions of Eden and also in Gen. 2:10-14 there is

a whole paragraph describing the Garden of Eden as being filled with these precious stones. This New Creation has a massive river of the water of life that flows on either side of the Tree of Life, which is in the middle of this New Creation; and that this tree of life is for the healing of the nations. In Gen. 2:9-10, we are told there is a tree of life in the middle of the Garden, and one river out of Eden that divides and flows into the major regions of the world.

The Garden of Eden is on a mountaintop. In the middle of this mountaintop is the Tree of Life. There is also a single river that flows down the mountain from what necessarily is also the middle of the mountaintop. Revelation 22 gives us this same image: the Tree of Life in the middle of this New Creation with the one river of life on both sides of this tree—they’re both in the middle and both for the nations! How is this new special place described? Revelation 20-22 describes the New Creation as a New Garden of Eden.

The most significant link between the Garden of Eden and later sacred spaces is the localized presence of the transcendent God. In the Garden of Eden, we see how life was intended to be for humanity: the idyllic paradise of God is defined by experiencing intimate fellowship with him. God *breathed* into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life. God *took* Adam and *placed* him in the Garden. God *caused* Adam to fall asleep and *took* his side from him, *surgically closed* up his body, and *constructed* the woman. These are loaded terms conveying intimate fellowship.

The New Creation is not just a new garden—after seeing the holy city descend from heaven, John “heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold! The Tabernacle of God is with humanity. He will tabernacle with them and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be their God with them’” (Rev. 21:3). “I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God illuminated it, and its lamp was the lamb” (Rev. 21:22-23). In the New Creation, there is no portable, temporary tabernacle like there was in the wilderness; there is no fixed location of the temple *within* the city like there was in Jerusalem with David’s royal sons. No; the *whole city* is a temple; and why? Because the Lord God Almighty *tabernacles* among them. It is not the building that determines the temple; it is the presence and glory of God. Paul says that each believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit tabernacles within us as a down payment of our inheritance to come. Rev. 21:7 says believers have this inheritance: “I will be his God and he will be my son.” Rev. 22:4 says that “we will see his face.” New Jerusalem is the place of intimate fellowship with God, which was also true of the first Temple-Garden of Eden.

The Gospel is the Climax to the Story of the Bible

And so we can see that the beginning the story of the Bible corresponds with the end: God’s people with him in intimate fellowship and worshipping him forever physically on the earth as we were intended to be. Any good story ends in ways that reminisce the beginning. But it’s not just the beginning and end that make a good story—a good story also needs a climax that brings it all together. The Bible is one unified story of God’s covenant-redemption—not just because we have an idyllic-temple-paradise on both ends—but also because this idyllic-temple-paradise finds its climax in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Standing before Pilate, Jesus declared that the whole of his incarnation was united on a sole mission: For this reason was I born (John 18:37). Jesus came to redeem humanity and the world, and he took upon himself a human nature to redeem humanity. He was born; he became flesh and tabernacled among us (John 1:1, 14). Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience. Jesus endured through all types of temptation, yet without a single sin. Jesus suffered immensely, not just physically but also emotionally. “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,” Jesus said to his closest friends in the *garden* of Gethsemane, which Luke says was on top of a mountain (Luke 22:39). Jesus prayed to the Father in agony to not pour out on him the wrath of God if it were possible, but it wasn’t—it was the Father’s will to crush his son as an offering for the sins of the world (cf. Matt. 26:42; Isa. 53:10). In the wake of their disobedience in the Garden of Eden, God cursed the ground and punished Adam by identifying his work with that of sweat and thorns. In his suffering, Jesus was so emotionally exhausted that he was sweating bullets. And they led Jesus away to physically beat him and they placed on his head a crown of thorns. Jesus, as the second, true and better Adam literally bore the curse of humanity on and in his flesh.

Two criminals were led away to be crucified with him. And they crucified him at Golgotha, the place called The Skull, with the two criminals on either side of him. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” The people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at, reviled, and blasphemed him. One of the criminals railed against him, saying, “If you are the Christ, then save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? We are condemned justly; we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he turned to Jesus and pleaded with him, “Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom.” Jesus looked at him and said, “Truly, I say to you, today you

will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:32-43, *with some paraphrasing*). Now this word “paradise” is not very common in the New Testament; in the Book of Revelation it is used to describe the place of the New Creation, specifically the place of the Tree of Life (Rev. 2:7). Additionally, in LXX—the standard Greek translation of the OT from the century before Christ to the century after Christ—this same word is used in Gen. 2:8-9 for “garden.” While this thief was cutting it pretty short, in his final moments he put his faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and was given the promise that even he would live in the New Creation, the idyllic-temple-paradise *with the Lamb* beginning that very day (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8). And then it was finished; his breath left him; Jesus died. Jesus lived the life we fail to live; he took upon himself the full weight of God’s wrath reserved for every sinner from all of time; for all of you; Jesus died in your place the death your sins deserve.

If the story stopped there, we would feel compelled to join Eva from *Freedom Writers* in crying out, “No! That’s not how the story is supposed to end!” Thanks be to God, it doesn’t. It was on this eighth day—a biblical image for new creation—Sunday morning when the first witnesses went to the tomb and discovered the stone had been rolled away. Mary Magdalene wept outside the tomb. She wept as she looked inside the tomb and saw two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They said to her, “Why are you weeping?” She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” Then she turned around and saw Jesus, but she did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?” *Supposing him to be the gardener*, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you laid him, so I can take him.” When Jesus said her name, she turned and cried out, ‘Teacher!’ and then she went and announced the resurrection to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” (John 20:11-18, *paraphrased*).

The story of God’s covenant redemption begins in a very good mountaintop temple-garden, in which God’s people have intimate fellowship with him. Then his people disobey and a curse is laid down. Then God chooses one nation who would be his instrument through which all nations of the whole world would be blessed. Then Jesus, the seed of Eve, the lion of Judah, and messianic root of Jesse’s eighth son David promised to tear down the existing temple and build up another one in three days, which nobody understood when he said it. Then this Jesus suffered emotionally in a mountaintop-garden before suffering physically on his way to the cross, while literally bearing on himself the curse of humanity in his work. On the cross, Jesus tells the thief

of faith that that very day they would unite in intimate fellowship together in a new mountaintop temple-garden. Then on the eighth day Jesus was resurrected from the dead and at the empty tomb, one of the first witnesses supposed him to be a gardener. *She wasn't wrong.* The Story of the Bible; the Story of God's covenant-redemption climaxes in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ, the true Gardener, whose eighth day resurrection inaugurated the New Creation.

After the dragon, the ancient serpent who is the devil and the Satan is cast into the lake of fire, so also will death itself be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). Then those who reject the free invitation to life in Christ and those who are unclean and practice abominations will be cast also into the lake of fire. Only then can Rev. 22:3 be true that “no longer will there be any curse.” The story of God's covenant redemption will be consummated—will be completed when the Holy City, the Bride of Christ, descends from heave to earth restored to our intended purpose: to live as New Creations in the New Creation in intimate fellowship with God forever without the threat of the devil, deception, disgrace, disease, or death.

Everything that is wrong with the world; everything that is wrong with us; everything that is wrong with our bodies has us screaming out “This is not how things are meant to be!” But only the Christian can find comfort in the wrongness of our present world, for Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, behold! New Creation! The old has passed away; behold! The new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). Not only do Christians begin to live as New Creations in the midst of the wrongness of our world right now but we also know a day is coming when God will *finish* making all things new (Rev. 21:5); more like the original; more like the real thing.

Conclusion: More Like the Real Thing

At the end of the Chronicles of Narnia, the four sons of Adam and daughters of Eve enter into the new creation. Edmund said, “If you ask me, it's like somewhere in the Narnian world.” But Lucy shot back saying, “I don't think those ones are so very like anything in Narnia. But look there... those hills... the nice woody ones and the blue ones behind... Aren't they very like the Southern border of Narnia?” “Like!?” Edmund cried after a moment's silence. “Why they're exactly like...” “And yet,” Lucy said, “they're not like. They're different. They have more colors on them and they look further away than I remembered and they're more...more...Oh, I don't know...” “More like the real thing,” whispered professor Digory... “better than the one before.”⁵

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*.

You can't have a redemption story that doesn't touch on part of the Gospel because the Gospel *is* the quintessential redemption story, upon which all others are based, whether they know it or not. Every redemption story is but a taste of the realest redemption of the Gospel. We are captivated by good redemption stories because every person longs for their own redemption; for all that is wrong to be made right. If you are here this morning or watching online and you are not a Christian but you are captivated by the redemption story of Jesus, I invite you into a time of deep reflection on the wrong in your life; how your sins nailed Jesus to his cross. I invite you to put your faith in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. And I invite you to turn *from* your sin, turning instead *to* Christ, committing your life entirely to him as your Lord and Savior. If you do, he will come into your heart, forgive you of your sins, change your life, and welcome you into his glorious mountaintop temple-garden *to be with him* for all of eternity.

Let's pray.