

## The End of the Story

The more we think about the end, the stronger and more effective we will be as Christians. It keeps us focused on the goal. It reminds us that God is not finished working and that everything will be accomplished in God's perfect timing.

How often do you meditate on the way the world will end?

With this session, we come to the end of the biblical storyline. As we have seen, God's good world fell under the power of the curse after Adam and Eve rejected the reign of their King. The Bible recounts God's plan of redemption as it plays out in the promises to Abraham, the exodus of Israel, the Law of Moses, and the royal throne of David. This plan of redemption reaches its culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and carries into the life of the church as Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to empower His people to continue God's mission. In essence, the story of the Bible follows God's actions as He works out His plan to reverse the effects of the fall. God created human beings in His own image and placed them in the midst of His good world to shape it and lovingly rule over it on His behalf. But from the moment Adam and Eve rebelled against God, this world has been under the curse, stained by sin and death. As Paul put it, the entire creation is groaning to be set free from its bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:19–22). God's comprehensive plan of redemption is to reverse everything that sin has done to corrupt this world. The Bible begins with the statement that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" and ends with God's declaration: "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

## The Beginning of the End

We can't talk about the end without talking about Jesus. Our final salvation is coming at the end of history when Jesus returns. But that salvation has already been purchased and secured. Jesus assured us of this when He announced from the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Whatever will take place in the future, our hope is secured in the reality that Jesus has acted decisively in history and restored our broken relationship with God. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection were not just a part of the story of redemption; they were the climax. This was where Eve's descendant crushed the head of

the Enemy (Gen. 3:15). Because of what Jesus has done on our behalf, history is moving toward a glorious end. Just as history changed when Jesus came to earth, everything will be changed again when He returns (an event we refer to as “the Second Coming”). The author of Hebrews explained the significance of both of Jesus’s appearances on earth: He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb. 9:26–28) Jesus appeared the first time to sacrifice Himself and secure our salvation, and He will appear again to bring that salvation to fruition. This is the future that history is moving toward. This is how the world will end. Christians tend to disagree about many points of theology, especially when it comes to future events. Theological camps have formed around differing views of how the end times will unfold. Much of the disagreement centers on the precise timeline of end-times prophecies. Some of these Old and New Testament prophecies are notoriously difficult to interpret. Because some of these concepts are tough and have at times caused division, many choose to avoid the topic altogether—as if the end of the world isn’t really that big of a deal. But Jesus often spoke about the end. In fact, holding on to the promise of the end can help to carry us through difficult situations today. As Christians, peace comes from knowing our pain will end. Joy results from our confidence that Jesus is returning to make all things new. It would be wrong for us to ignore end-times events, but there are some issues that are too complex to sort out here. We will focus on the big picture and the concepts that God clearly wants us to recognize in these prophecies.

Q1 Have you done much studying or thinking on how and when the world will end? If so, what has been your impression of the end times? If not, why do you think you haven’t approached this issue in the past?

What We’ve All Been Longing For

Throughout history, humanity has not been able to shake the feeling that there is something wrong with the world. People have tried to blame God,

political leaders, religions, and just about everyone and everything else for the disappointment we feel about the state of the world. We see the problem in the crimes we hear about on the news, and also in the frustrations and injustices we experience in our daily lives. This problem even permeates the very thoughts that pass through our minds. There is something fundamentally wrong with the world, and it pervades every aspect of our existence. As Christians, we see some of the effects of the fall reversed in our lives. The gospel has freed us from bondage to sin (Rom. 6), and the Spirit of God enables us to follow Jesus in ways that non-Christians cannot (Rom. 8 and Gal. 5). But we also experience an added struggle—Paul promised that everyone who desires to live a godly life will experience persecution (2 Tim. 3:12). We experience the joy of the Lord, but life in a fallen world is difficult and often disappointing. We are called to faithfully follow Jesus in the midst of this sin-stained world, but we also have the sweet promise that it won't be like this forever. Jesus will return, and the world will be set to rights. Whereas we now experience injustice, God will bring justice. Where there is division, God will bring peace. Where there is sin, God will bring righteousness. This is the promise that carries us along when we feel as though this world is too broken to be fixed or that we are too weak to endure much longer.

Q2 Read Romans 8:18–25. How does this promise affect your view of the world?

### The Return of the King

The most important thing that we should understand about the future is that Jesus is coming back. When He returned to His Father, He left the church to carry on His mission and sent the Holy Spirit to empower us for the task. But Jesus is not done with this world. He will return, and when He does, He will rule over a perfect, peaceful, re-created earth. Read the first chapter of Revelation and you will quickly see that Jesus's second coming will be much different from His first. The meek Servant, once ridiculed and spat upon, is shown to be the Ruler of the universe and worthy to be feared. At His return, Jesus will bring final salvation to His people, restore justice to the earth, and destroy all of God's enemies. The book of Revelation records

fierce warfare and portrays Jesus as a conquering King, boldly reclaiming the world that rightfully belongs to Him (Rev. 19). As weak as the church has seemed at some points in history, as persecuted and defeated as we sometimes feel, this is what lies in our future.

God's plan of redemption has never been contingent. There has never been any doubt about the way history will end. This is God's world; He created it; He vowed to reclaim it; He died to purchase His people, and finally, when the time arrives, He will come and take this world by force. Paul illustrated the reality of this last day powerfully: Therefore [because of Jesus's obedience and sacrifice] God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11) No matter how much opposition we face, the day will come when everyone will see Jesus for who He truly is. His reign will finally be realized on earth in the same way that it has always been realized in heaven.

Q3 Read Revelation 1. Based on this description of Jesus, how will Jesus in His second coming be different from in His first coming?

### The New Heavens and New Earth

Turn to the last pages of the Bible and you will find a beautiful picture of creation restored. The first chapters of Genesis and the last chapters of Revelation function as bookends to God's plan of redemption. In Genesis, God created all things and called them "good" (Gen. 1–2). People were created to have fellowship with God and to reflect His glory as a ruling steward of creation. In similar fashion, the Bible ends with a picture of a new creation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1). This new creation was anticipated in the Old Testament, so it is no accident that Revelation describes the new creation using imagery from both the garden in Eden and the temple in Jerusalem. These locations, the garden and the temple, were God's meeting places with humanity. The leaves of the tree of life will now bring healing, and the river of the water of life will flow from God's throne (22:1–2). There is also a new Jerusalem; only this holy city has

no need for a temple building, because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (21:22). Everything about the old creation that has been marred by sin and death is no more, for God has made all things new. The new creation will be so full of joy that it seems difficult to fathom. But the best news about this new creation, this eternal paradise, is not that the flowers will be more beautiful or the grass will be greener, or even that our bodies will be free from disease (as great as those things will be); rather, the greatest feature of the new creation is that we will have perfect communion with God. Listen to how John put it: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (21:3). This statement echoes the covenants that God made with His people from the very beginning, and it points toward the reality that we are all longing for. Imagine what it will be like to physically see our Holy God dwelling with us. This fellowship with God extends far beyond one man (as in the case of Abraham) or one nation (as in the case of Israel). We read of people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9) who will be worshipping at Jesus’s throne. The command that Jesus gave in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations will finally be fulfilled. God’s purposes for this world will finally be accomplished. Redemption will be completed.

Q4 Read Revelation 21–22. As you read this beautiful description of the New Creation, don’t get caught up in trying to interpret every detail. Instead, try to picture and feel the beauty and peace of the scene that awaits us. What stands out to you most from reading this account?

Q5 Based on what you read in Revelation 21–22 and what you read and discussed in the session on creation, how will God’s new creation reflect the reality of God’s initial creation before the fall? How will it be better?

#### A Day of Judgment

There is also a horrifying flip side to this glorious consummation in Revelation. Everlasting judgment awaits those who have rejected God and opposed His people. Sin will be seen for what it is—not an inconsequential part of life, but a serious affront to God. Those who do evil will be kept out

of the glorious city. Christ will judge people according to what they have done (22:12), and only those who are united to Jesus will be allowed to enter. The rest will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11–15). This should cause us to literally tremble as we think of those who have not submitted to Jesus as Lord (see Rom. 9:1–3). Our mission to those who are lost could not be more urgent. The unreached people groups across the globe and our next-door neighbors need to hear the only message that can save them. What about you? Do you understand the extent to which sin stains your life and separates you from the Holy God of the universe? Do you see your rebellion for what it is? Have you embraced the sacrifice that Jesus made to remove your sin and restore your relationship with God? Or are you under the illusion that your own moral effort will grant you access to God’s everlasting rest? Hear Jesus’s words: “To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment” (21:6). Come, believe, and drink freely.

Q6 How should the promise of judgment at Jesus’s return affect the way we think about and interact with the non-Christians in our lives?

Q7 Is there anyone in your life whom you need to be more purposeful in reaching out to? If so, spend some time asking the Holy Spirit to give you confidence and wisdom in reaching out to this person with the gospel.

### Living with the End in View

The message of Revelation has huge implications for the way we live our lives today. It’s not just about what will happen in the future. Just as God’s actions in the past should affect the way we live today, so God’s actions in the future should shape everything we do now. One of the strongest features of the book of Revelation is its encouragement to remain faithful in the midst of seemingly hopeless circumstances. When the apostle John wrote Revelation, he was in exile on the isle of Patmos. He was banished there because he refused to stop preaching the gospel (Rev. 1:9). As he waited in exile, God gave John a glimpse of the world as it really is, and as it really will be in the future. Although the then-dominant Roman Empire seemed to be in control of the known world, John received a different picture of reality—he saw the world as God sees it. The book of Revelation

essentially conveys this message to seven churches during the first century AD, and by extension, to all Christians.

The message to the seven churches in Revelation, and to us today, is that we cannot let go of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Although we may face opposition and suffering, Jesus is reigning over every earthly authority. The judgment that is coming upon those who reject Christ is terrible, but believers should long for Christ's return, since their ultimate destination is a new creation. God's purposes will ultimately succeed, and the good news will be proclaimed and believed in every part of the earth. Revelation calls those who don't follow Jesus to repent and receive the salvation Jesus offers before it is too late. It also calls those who are followers of Jesus to stand strong until the end. Peter warned us that in the last days, people will mock us for believing that Jesus will return: "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:4). In other words, "We haven't seen Him do anything to punish the wicked, so why should we believe that there will be a day of judgment?" Peter's answer offers us great hope: But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. (2 Pet. 3:8–14) Make no mistake, Jesus is returning. He is patiently waiting for the men and women He created to repent, but He will not wait forever. The day will come when

this world that He created will be purified by fire, just as the world was purified by a flood in Noah's day. The reality of judgment and the promise of the new heavens and new earth should motivate us to remain faithful to Jesus now. We do not need to doubt that God's plan of redemption will come to completion, but the end toward which history is headed should set our agenda for today.

Q8 How should the end of the story affect the way we live today? Be as specific to your own situation as possible.

### Why We Make Disciples

The Bible ends with these words: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" (Rev. 22:20–21). Our God-given task is to reach into every corner of creation and make disciples of all nations. Jesus gave us this command when He left, and He is coming again soon. This life is about Jesus and His glory. Our mission is about God and His plan of redemption. We have seen God's story of redemption unfold from the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit until the early church spread the good news about Jesus around the known world. The church also has a two-thousand-year history of continuing the mission of making disciples and spreading the gospel around the world (though we have not always done this perfectly). And in this session, we have seen where the story will end. We can follow the storyline from beginning to end, yet there is one gap that still remains in the story, and that is the part that we are called to play. The end of the story has been written, but we still have a responsibility to faithfully play our part. The hope and healing of the gospel still needs to reach people all around the world today. This moment has been entrusted to us by God. Making disciples has always been the calling of the church, and it is our responsibility to be devoted to that end.

Jesus said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20) The King has full authority, and He has

given us this command. He will be with us always, even to the end of the age. We don't know exactly when the end will come, but we know that making disciples is what we need to be doing. Let us pray that when Jesus returns, He will find us faithfully pursuing His mission with the skills, relationships, and resources that He has entrusted to us.

Q9 Spend some time in prayer. Thank God that Jesus will return to set the world to rights and that His plan of redemption will be completed. Ask God to affect your heart with the reality of what the future holds. Ask Him to guide you and empower you to live as a faithful disciple maker at this moment in history.