

CASKET EMPTY

Part 11 – Yet to Come

Revelation 21:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 17, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹Then 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;

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. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and

they will be my children. ⁸But as for the cowardly,

the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the

fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all

liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

(Revelation 21:1-8, NRSV)

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Nearly all good stories begin the same way. “Once upon a time...” Not all stories open with those exact words but that’s still essentially where all stories, at least stories worth telling, begin.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” (*A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens) “All this happened, more or less.” (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut) “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” (*The Hobbit*, J.R. Tolkien) “Where’s Papa going with that axe?” said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.” (*Charlotte’s Web*, E.B. White) “Every Who down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot. But the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville, did NOT!” (*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Dr. Seuss)

And how do most all stories end? In one way or another, all stories worth telling end: “And they lived happily ever after...” Now it’s true, there are some stories that end without resolution, some movies that leave us hopeless as the credits roll, but typically those stories don’t stand the test of time. Imagine if the prince never finds the woman whose foot fits the glass slipper and Cinderella lives out her days waiting hand and foot on Anastasia and Drizella? What if Luke Skywalker misses that last desperate shot and fails to destroy the Death Star and the Empire squashes the rebellion forever? What if the Grinch hears every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, singing their song with no presents at all, and in response his heart actually grows three sizes smaller? Who wants to read their kids a book where the Grinch ends up even grinchier in the end?

I want to suggest to you that there is something buried deep in every human soul that longs for “once upon a time” to end with “happily ever after”. T.S. Eliot once wrote, “The end is where we start from.” Isn’t that true? In the best stories, the ones which resonate deeply within us, the ones which stand the test of time, the ending is always the beginning, the point at which everything is finally set right and life can at last begin to be lived as it was meant to be lived. The human soul aches for happily ever after.

Once upon a time God created the heavens and the earth. He made them good, made them to flourish with abundant life. But people, God’s most treasured creation, turned their backs on God and their sin, our sin, spoiled the goodness of the world. Though now tarnished, echoes of that good world have ever since reverberated in every human soul, stubborn rumors of a lost paradise. Thankfully, those rumors persisted in the mind of God as well. And though nobody could blame him if he did, God did not walk away from the spoiled world. In time, God acted to restore the world. His first step was to choose an old, childless, idol-worshipping pagan named Abraham and make a covenant with him and his wife, Sarah, promising that he would bless and increase their family to eventually number as many as the stars in the sky and that one day, the whole world would be blessed through their family.

Well, hundreds of years went by. Abraham's family did grow, but also kept turning their backs on God. When God saved them and gave them the law at Sinai, they turned again to worship the creation around them rather than their creator. Still, God remained faithful. In time, God raised up a young king, David, and made another covenant, this time promising that David's line would always reign on the throne and that one day one of his descendants, the Messiah, would ascend the throne and reign for eternity, finally ushering in God's Kingdom to earth.

When Israel was ultimately hauled off into exile in Babylon, God promised them that he would not forget them and that, in time, they would be brought home. In fact, the Temple in Jerusalem taught Israel that God was not distant, but that he was breaking into the world, settling his presence with his people. As the years went by, expectation grew within the people as they waited and watched for the Lord to come and do what he had promised to do.

When the time was right, God did come, though not in the way anybody expected. The Messiah was born in a stable, lived his life on the edges of poverty, and died the death of a common criminal. But then, to the utter shock of even his most devoted followers, he rose from the dead on the third day. Shortly afterwards, at Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ poured out from heaven and flooded the earth, enlivening and empowering the church to carry out the mission of Christ in the world. Sent out to all people, the church then carried with them the life-changing message of Christ, the Lord and the Savior whose teachings could be trusted without exception.

This now is the point in the story where we find ourselves today, in fact the point at which we actually enter into the story as we, following the pattern of disciples before us, find ourselves enlivened by the Spirit of Christ and sent out into the world to share the good news of the gospel. When people come to Christ in faith, we then are to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teach them to obey and follow everything that Jesus taught us.¹ But for how long? That's the question. How long is this to go on? Though we see the Kingdom of God breaking in all around us, lives continually transformed and healed, we remain surrounded in this world by such brokenness and darkness, both within and without. There is no happily ever after yet. Right? Not for me. Not for you. Not for anybody I know.

Truth is, we don't know how many more chapters there are in this story. But we do know the end. We do know what is yet to come. How does the Bible end? It ends with a revelation, John's revelation, recorded in the last book of the Bible by that same name.

Revelation is a word that literally means "to see behind the veil." The Greek word from which we get our word 'apocalypse' means the same thing.² So it is here, in these final words of scripture, that we are given a glimpse of what is yet to come, a sneak peek into the real world that God intended at creation and promised to one day restore in all its fullness.

You see, God really is in control of history, and of all things. And God really is gathering his people to himself. Our Lord's cause, his Kingdom, will prevail in the end, no matter what, no matter how things may appear at present. The deep longing of our souls, the longing for all stories to end happily ever after is not unfounded because *the* story ends and, at the same time begins, in this way. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."³ Or a new world, as the case may be. A restored world. A world set right and set right ever after.

Revelation overflows with brilliant images of what is yet to come, images that aren't new but find their roots in Old Testament apocalyptic literature like Daniel and Ezekiel. The text we read this morning from Revelation 21 is one of the most brilliant. At the heart of this vision is this picture of the new heaven and the new earth, the holy city descended from heaven to replace the old heaven and earth which have passed away. This picture ought to bring to mind the prayer the church has been praying ever since Jesus taught it to us: **"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, one earth as it is in heaven."**

Understand that God isn't going to throw this old world away. Remember, heaven isn't just spiritual, some ethereal existence far away up in the clouds. No, the material world does not cease with the resurrection, as if God begins in the material but gradually refines things to the spiritual.⁴ Jesus was raised in spirit *and* in body. In the creeds we declare that we believe in the "resurrection of the body." And this isn't just true of Jesus, or of us, but of all creation. In fact, the physical world we now know is just a shadow of the real thing to

² David L. Palmer, *Casket Empty: New Testament Study Guide* (Crossway, 2001), 274.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1960), 119.

⁴ Insight from Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (Harper, 1988), 171.

¹ See *The Great Commission* in Matthew 28:19-20.

come. Everything God has created – mountains, planets, oceans, trees, animals – everything will one day be made new so that what we have now begun to experience we will, in that time, completely experience. Heaven is not the escape from the world, but the healing and the wholeness of the world.

We're told that when heaven descends to earth it will come prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. You know, twenty-five years later I vividly remember the very moment the back doors to the church swung open and my bride, escorted by her father, began to make her way down the aisle towards me. As my knees buckled and my heart grew weak, two thoughts followed one another across my mind. First, I knew that my bride looked as beautiful in that moment as I had ever before seen her. Second, I wondered to myself, "Why in the world is she marrying me?!"

When God's Kingdom finally comes to earth in all its fullness, I have to imagine that God's people will react in a similar way. We can't even begin to imagine how the world will look, and smell, and taste, and sound, and feel when God makes it right. And in that moment every knee will bow in awe as every soul wonders to itself, "How could it be that God would share all this with us?"

The most striking feature of this vision is that at that time God will be present, fully present. Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 3 this way in *The Message*, "**Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They are his people, he is their God.**" In the end we will meet a person more than just experience an event or discover a place. God himself is the reality who will embrace all things at the end of time. God doesn't bring the end; God *is* the end, just as he is the beginning. Later in the chapter we read that in the New Jerusalem, the new City of God, there will be no Temple.⁵ In ancient Israel – remember? – the Temple was the thinnest place on earth, the spot where God came most near to his people. In the Kingdom, however, God himself is present with us because God himself, in Christ, became one of us. In that day all creation will be made sacred, not just certain spots like temples and mountain tops. No, in that day there will be no more special times, special places, special people. Every square inch of creation will be made fully pleasing and fully present to our Creator.⁶

⁵ "**I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.**" – Revelation 21:22

⁶ I'm drawing heavily here from M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation (The Interpretation Series)* (John Knox Press, 1989), 213-218.

There is also no sea. As you might also remember, in the Old Testament, and even at places in the New Testament, the sea often represents the chaotic power of all that stands against creation and its Creator. In much of apocalyptic literature in the scriptures, the beasts which come to harm and destroy come from the sea.⁷ Throughout history, God drives the sea back and holds it at bay, even calms it when necessary. But at the end of history we are told that the sea will be no more, which leads us to believe that in the end everything that disturbs or corrupts the creation God intends will be irrevocably overcome.

Verse 4 gets specific. Every tear, for instance, will be wiped away from every eye. Death will be gone for good. Sadness will disappear. Pain will be gone. Grief and sorrow will be gone, not held at bay, but vanquished forever from existence. Can you imagine? Some of you are in a season of life right now where you are drowning in tears. The pain and sorrow in life for some of us today are almost too much to take. Can you believe the promise that a day is coming when all sadness and all pain will be gone for good? Can you believe that?

Plus, no more sin. In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of verse 8 we read: "**The feckless and faithless, degenerates and murderers, sex peddlers and sorcerers, idolaters and all liars,**" none will be present in the Kingdom. It's not that anybody who has ever committed these and other sins will be excluded because then who among us would be left!? No, what we are told here is that no one will bring these sinful practices into the Kingdom. Sin, along with pain, sadness and death, will be no more. There will, of course, be some who want to cling to their sin, those who don't want God or want to even be near God, but they will hardly be expected to be very interested in heaven in the first place. Sinners, however, who want God will find God and also find, in the end, that their sin is no more.

In a few moments will sing *Joy to the World* which includes these well-known lines:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found*

This is the promise of what is yet to come, the happily ever after for which every human soul can't help but ache, that coming day when we begin with the ending as Christ returns in glory and sets everything right

⁷ See, for instance, Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.

forever so that in every square inch of creation blessing replaces curse. We now live, of course, in between two advents. For so long Israel waited for the Messiah to come. Now, having come and gone, we wait for him to come again to finish what he began. But in a way, it is already finished. The world we see around us is not the world that truly is.

Recently I got to try one of these virtual reality game systems. A headset and goggles were strapped to my head and all at once I was transported from my friend's living room to the wall of a medieval castle where, with bow and arrow in hand, I immediately found myself defending the castle from invading barbarians. It was like nothing I have ever experienced. The images seemed as if they were right before me in real time and space, as real as the furniture I had just seen in the room around me. I ducked when arrows came flying towards me, jumped quickly back when I found myself perilously close to the edge of the castle wall, panicked and literally started to sweat when the castle around me caught fire. I was stunned at just how real the whole experience seemed to me.

But it wasn't real. Though my mind is now left with the vivid memories, I actually have never defended a castle from invading barbarians (though I will say that if it ever comes to that, I think I've proven that I'm quite up to the task!). But seriously, something very similar is true of our world. On any given day the morning newspaper paints a picture of a world that is absolutely broken, ruled by war, hatred, racism, injustice, and poverty, a world where evil seems to keep coming out on top, and sin never seems to loosen its grip, and sadness seems it is an uninvited guest who will never leave, and death always seems to have the last word.

In contrast to that picture, however, the unflinchingly bold proclamation of the Christian Gospel is that the world that appears before us *is not real*, at least real in the lasting sense. Instead the 'virtual reality' of this corrupt and broken world is a reality that's passing away, like an early morning mist which fades as the sun rises into the sky. What this means is that as Christians we ought never to worry whether or not history will come out right, or even imagine that somehow we can make history come out right if we work hard enough at it. *In Christ, God has already made history come out right!*⁸ There is no question as to how the story ends, and then begins again as it does end.

⁸ I'm borrowing words here from Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, 1989), 87.

On the first day of his public ministry Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and, after reading the prophesy in Isaiah that describes all that the Messiah will do when he comes, Jesus immediately turned to the crowd and declared to them, "**Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**"⁹ Not fulfilled some day. No! Fulfilled *today*! When Jesus died on the cross he cried out, "**It is finished!**", because, of course, it was finished.¹⁰ Though we wait for what is yet to come, at the same time we know that it has already happened. Merely time stands between us and the fulfillment in Christ of all that God has promised to do. *Merely time.* That's it! Therefore, we now must live in ways that affirm this reality, for to live otherwise is to ignore reality itself.

Hiroo Onoda was a Japanese soldier in World War II. His assignment was to protect the Philippine island of Lubang from any attack, never surrendering under any circumstance. When the war ended in September of 1945, leaflets were dropped over the island to inform Onoda and his men. But thinking it was an Allied trick, they refused to believe that the war was really over and, instead, retreated to the mountains where they vowed to maintain their post. For the next *twenty-nine years*, Onoda did exactly that. Long after peace had been established he and a few of his men continued to fight a war that didn't exist, often engaging in guerrilla activities with local officials. Onoda only capitulated when in 1974 Major Yoshimi, his former commanding officer turned bookseller after the war, was flown to the Philippines to formally relieve him of his duties.

In this advent time before what is yet to come, we must live in the reality that the victory in Christ is already won! As we do – if we do! – it changes everything. I love how a writer named Mark Buchannan puts it, "The future shapes you as much as the past or the present, maybe more. Destiny, every bit as much as history, determines identity."¹¹ In Christ, our identity is that of highly-favored, beloved sons and daughters of a King who has already come and issued a death blow to everything cursed in creation, even death itself, and has secured for us a home with him forever in the new creation. We must now lay hold of this future hope as we anticipate its certain arrival. What will happen is more important than what has happened or even what is happening now.¹²

⁹ Luke 4:21

¹⁰ John 19:30

¹¹ Mark Buchannan, *The Rest of God* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 209.

¹² Eugene Peterson says, "Everything in history is retrievable." *Reversed Thunder*, 177.

The certainty of what is yet to come impacts the way we live today in at least these three ways.

To begin with, we do not put our hope in the world as it stands today. What we see is not what we get. The kingdoms and systems of this world, every one of them corrupt, are not going to last or, on their own, ever right themselves. True peace will never be established worldwide until Christ comes again. It just won't. The headlines will always be full of the mess of the world. Always. The weeds around us will grow ever stronger and stronger.¹³ Therefore, as one writer put it, "Our hope is never based in Caesar's missiles or Caesar's treaties but on the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth."¹⁴

At the same time, though our hope is not in the world, we dare not abandon the world. Jesus never once even suggested to his disciples that their calling was to escape the world by huddling off in a safe corner until the mess was over. Never! The calling of the church is actually to follow Jesus into the mess and to give our lives, as he gave his life, for the sake of the world and all who live in it. Because our future is certain, our identity in Christ secure, we are now free to do so, to let go of ourselves, our things, our very lives and live boldly, joyfully, dangerously, dying to self but fully alive. In fact, the church is meant to be a living, breathing, concrete manifestation of the Kingdom of God present to the world today, salt and light as Jesus put it.¹⁵ The world ought to look at the church – the way we love and serve and forgive one another, the way we live generously and joyfully, the way we make certain not a one of us has a need that remains unmet – the world ought to see in the church a revelation, a glimpse behind the veil, of what God once intended the world to look like and what, in time, he will renew the world to become. So no, we don't abandon the world but give ourselves to the world, for the sake of the world.

Third, we must not give up along the way. We must not lose heart. The past, for one, will try to tear us down. Failure and grief hang around our minds and hearts and, like an unruly child, race around scribbling all over the walls messages of guilt, and shame, and despair which threaten to convince us that hope is a sham. In response, you must let the promises of the future loose with a roller brush and a can of paint to cover over every condemning message the evil one graffiti's on your mind or heart.¹⁶

¹³ See Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds.

¹⁴ Hauerwas & Willamon, 89.

¹⁵ Matthew 5:13-16

¹⁶ Image stolen from Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 211.

The present will also try to tear us down, or at least distract us. But whatever problem that you face right now, or whatever problem you see around you in the world, when you look at the challenges of today from the long perspective of eternity, in the light of the reality that the victory is already won and only time stands between today and everything being set right again, don't the challenges of the day quickly scale down to more modest proportions? Of course they do.

Paul's words in II Corinthians 4 are some of my favorite in all of scripture:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.¹⁷

Do you know how the Bible ends? It ends with a prayer, a prayer and a blessing. Listen to Revelation 22:20-21, the very last words of the Bible,

The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.¹⁸

When I was younger I would never pray that prayer. To be honest, I didn't want Jesus to come, at least not yet. There was too much life to be lived. The older I get – and I suspect many of you are the same – the more and more I embrace that prayer. There are days, in fact, when I beg Jesus to come and come quickly. The pain and heartache I see around me, some of it in some of you, can be nearly too much to bear. And I know now, like I did not know when I was younger, that when Jesus comes everything – *everything!* – will be better than it is now. Everything will be set right so that even the very best parts of this present world will then appear as mere shadows when compared to the new creation God will establish. All tears wiped dry. All pain vanished. All hope fulfilled. Happily ever after, yes, but really so much more.

Jesus promised us he is coming soon. When considered from the light of eternity, he *is* coming soon, probably sooner than any of us realize. Let us pray for him to come. And in the meantime as we wait, may we hold

¹⁷ NRSV

¹⁸ NRSV

tightly to this blessing, that his grace is with us and will sustain us until he does come, no matter what.

Amen.

As we pray, hear these words of encouragement from Romans 13: “Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here.”

In these moments we turn, now, to the One we believe is coming, the one who promised us he is coming soon, and we ask him to bring his light, and to once and for all put an end to this world’s dark night of longing.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Break the chains of warfare, violence and terror in our world. We will never solve these problems on our own. The infection runs too deeply.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Too many people in this world have too little. Bring good news to the poor as you promised you would do. Bless the poor as you promised to do.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. People all over our city have no place to live, sleep on the cold concrete, eat out of garbage cans. Each one made in very image of God – Lord, this cannot be how you made the world to be.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Break the chains of oppression and persecution. So few in our world have been set in places to oppress so many. You came to set people free. Lord, set people free!

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Take away the joylessness and fear that weigh so heavily on so many. How can we have so much and yet still live as if we don’t have enough. Come and show us abundant life. Show us how to trust.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Grief and sadness are too heavy to carry much longer. Some of us have lost what is most dear and the only way we know that can be restored is for you to come again. We are ready for you to come and make all things right again. We are ready to have our tears wiped away.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Everywhere there is disease. Cancer infects so many. Pain is chronic. We watch helplessly as the memories fade in the minds of those we love. You are the great healer! We are weary of waiting. Come and heal once and for all.

In the meantime, Lord, we know that your grace is with us. May that be evident to the world. May we, your church, be empowered and enlivened and sent out into the world to give ourselves for the world – help us live boldly, joyfully,

dangerously, dying to ourselves that we might be made fully alive. May the world around us be given in us a glimpse of the kingdom which is to come, the reality beneath the shadows which is inevitable. As we pray for things to be set right in this world, use us as your instruments to set things right.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. We watch and wait for you. We rejoice in you because we know in time you will do all you have promised to do. New heaven. New earth. All things new. You as our God, present with your people. Every tear wiped away. Death no more. Crying and pain no more. Sin no more.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. We are awake. We believe salvation is nearer now than before. The night is almost gone. The day of salvation will soon be here. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who makes all things new.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read again this portion of John’s revelation in Revelation 21:1-8. What part of the vivid imagery stands out to you?
2. The one seated on the throne declares, “**See, I am making all things new.**” What do you think this means?
3. What has caused you grief, tears or pain in the last year? What does this mean to you to know that this will in time pass away forever?
4. Mark Buchannan, in *The Rest of God*, writes, ““The future shapes you as much as the past or the present, maybe more. Destiny, every bit as much as history, determines identity.” What does this mean to you? How has the future of what is ‘yet to come’ shaped you in the present?
5. What does it mean to, on one hand, not put our hope in the world but to, on the other hand, not abandon the world? Can you give an example of what this might look like in your daily life?

6. Consider again these words from II Corinthians 4:16-18: **“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”** What is the message you believe God has for you in these words?
7. Are you able to sincerely pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” and desire that prayer to be answered as quickly as possible? Why or why not?
8. As we have journeyed together this fall through the CASKET EMPTY series, what is one thing that God has taught you (or one way God has changed you) along the way?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How do you think things will be different when Jesus comes back to earth?