

*The Story: Alpha and Omega*

*By Jason Huff*

*Joel 2:11-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Revelation 21:1-11,22-27*

Our final Scripture reading this week comes from Revelation 21:1-11,22-27. Listen now to God's Word. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars -- their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal...I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Ask somebody on the street about the book of Revelation, and you'll get a hundred different answers. Some people know nothing about it. Others will tell you it's about the end of the world or the final battle between good and evil. Some folks will call the book "Revelations" with an "s" at the end, even though the book is simply one revelation. It's certainly popular – it's been converted into a variety of different movies and spawned the *Left Behind* series of books selling 65 million copies. Its imagery is embedded in American culture even today. And yet it creates controversy wherever you go. Many pastors and theologians have come up with the "right" interpretation of Revelation only to have it dismissed by someone else who has the "real" insight into it. Even people who agree on virtually everything else in the Bible often see Revelation differently from one another.

In twenty minutes, I can't even cover all the contents of the book, let alone get into all the mysteries and wonders it offers. But as we read this week in the final chapter of *The Story*, it's important we get the main points of Revelation, as it summarizes everything that God has been doing and paints a picture of what's to come. That's what we're going to study this morning.

The book of Revelation begins on the island of Patmos, where John has been exiled for his ministry on behalf of Jesus. It's there where he is given a vision. The vision begins with the glorified Jesus dictating through John letters to seven churches. Jesus warns several of them of their failings – everything from rampant pride to sexual immorality to simply losing their love for Him in the midst of their successes. He urges each to repent and come back to Him rather than to face His judgment. Other churches, He encourages to stand firm against those who would undermine their faith. Ultimately, Jesus is calling His people back to Himself.

Then begins what most of us think of when we think of Revelation – the weird stuff. John's vision has strange creatures who serve the LORD, angels, demonic dragons and beasts, and an overarching story of believers standing against the devilish schemes of a world order that desires to lead every human being astray. It's here that we find things that have crept into the culture like the number 666 as a symbol of evil. However you read this portion of Scripture, it's obvious that many are seduced by the pleasures of the devil and the world, but there is a faithful remnant that stays true to God. At the end of this section, evil is defeated; Christ reigns for a thousand years, and believers are resurrected. After that time period, all the dead are raised and judgment comes on all people.

Then the book closes with the final part of the vision, less concerned with God's victory over evil and more concerned about giving us a tiny glimpse into the long-awaited paradise God has created for those that love Him. As we heard this morning, the earth we now know is gone, replaced with a new earth. The heavens have been remade as well. But what is surprising is that we don't have a picture of believers living eternally in heaven. Instead, John's vision is one of a new Jerusalem, the holy city, that comes out of heaven. It is the place where heaven and earth seem to meet, and that will be the place where God dwells with His people forever. Jesus confirms that He is the Alpha and the Omega – the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet – He is the beginning and the end. As the book closes, Jesus affirms that He is coming soon, and a final call is made for people to abandon their sin and accept the water of life that flows from Him. Three times in the last few verses, the word "come" is repeated – the call for Christ to return and save His people. The book ends with that note of hope...Jesus is coming.

Ever since Revelation was written, well-intentioned readers have tried to figure out the literal events behind the figurative language. Who are the beast and the anti-Christ? What day will it all come down? (According to one guy, it was all supposed to end yesterday. I guess he was wrong.) There's a line of thought that many of the events in Revelation point to the destruction of Israel and the temple in 70 A.D., and that makes a lot of sense. I think understanding the possibilities are helpful for mature Christians as we continue to grow in our faith. But regardless of the interpretation, there are a few straightforward points we can take away from an overview of Revelation.

The first one I picked up this week was this: *Christians are in a very real battle against genuine evil, both internal and external.* First we see Jesus deal with our own sinfulness – in the first few chapters of Revelation, Jesus calls out the churches in no uncertain terms. Jesus calls the Laodicean church “lukewarm” and says that while they consider themselves rich, they are poor and wretched. He chastises Pergamum for tolerating those among the congregation who follow different beliefs and who cause others to stumble into idol worship and sexual immorality. To Sardis, He says, “You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!” And in the passage we read this morning, we heard the warning to all – “nothing impure will ever enter [the holy city], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

But Revelation does not just point to the temptation to sin that we all face. It points to evil not as a concept but as a reality, embodied by those that desire to destroy God and His ways and His people. We are told that the enemies of God are given the power to overcome the saints – not their faith, but the saints themselves face persecution, imprisonment, even death as they face off against the powers of wickedness. The beasts of Revelation are worshiped for their power and deceive the nations. Satan is called “the ancient serpent”, “the one who leads the whole world astray.” While they are powerful, Revelation tells us that all the enemies of God are finally defeated and face the second death – a lake of burning sulfur. Now while all the creatures in Revelation may not be literal in the sense we think of it, they show us that evil is personified and something we must face and stand against.

Why is this important? Really, it's a summation of what we've seen throughout the whole of *The Story* as we've been reading it together. You wouldn't believe how many many of you in the congregation at various times came up to me as we were reading the Old Testament and said, “I can't believe how these people knew they were the chosen ones of God and yet acted so sinfully all the time!” That's what makes the Bible so believable – we know how true it is even now. We turn on the news and we hear of peoples' depravity towards one another. The media makes depravity into entertainment. We need to realize once and for all that we are not nice people who do bad things. We are fallen creatures who are not good; our nature has been completely corrupted. Without the transforming influence of God, we are unholy and totally selfish. We are evil. As Colossians 1:21 put it, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.”

This isn't to say that we can't be changed. As Colossians 1:22-23 continues, “But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation -- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.” It is God who empowers us through the Holy Spirit to stand firm against the evil in the world and the evil in our own hearts. While our job is to hold fast against temptation, it is not something we do in and ourselves – we can't. The key is holding fast to God – praying to Him, trusting in Him, relying on Him – and that is what makes standing firm possible. Evil and wickedness will not win the day; they will not triumph. If we stand firm and stand up for righteousness, we will have the victory through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let's be clear – no human being is beyond the reach of God. No person is so evil or so wrapped up in sin that God can't pluck them out of it and save them out of their wretchedness. But as Christians, we have an obligation to stand up against the evils of our society and our culture – and most importantly, the evil in ourselves. Doing nothing is not an option. That means sometimes we do more than confront concepts – we confront people. Scripture teaches us that we should attempt to “gently restore” the wayward with great patience, speaking the truth in love. But Scripture is also clear that we are not to be “of this world,” nor are we to accept into the fellowship of God those who refuse to turn from evil. We aren't Don Quixotes chasing after windmills or crusaders looking for the next great battle – we are simply redeemed sinners called to do God's work, to lead others to salvation by standing up for the truth and facing the real evil in this world head-on.

The second thing I see as the Bible comes to the close is this: *Jesus is everything*. Revelation has many titles for Jesus – Lord and Christ, the Lamb who was slain, Faithful and True, the Word of God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and Last, the root and offspring of David, the Bright Morning Star. Jesus opens the scrolls that no one else can open because by His actions of saving us on the cross He was shown to be worthy. Jesus leads the charge against Satan and all the forces of evil. Jesus' book of life determines a person's final destiny. Jesus offers the water of life freely to all who are thirsty, so that they might come to Him and have their fill, so that they might wash their robes in His river of life and be clean before Him. For all this, Jesus is worshiped throughout the book.

When you read Revelation, you come to the inescapable conclusion that Jesus is the be-all end-all of life. Learning about Him, knowing Him, loving Him, accepting His salvation, growing ever closer to Him, sharing Him with others – that's the point. Many wonderful things spring out of Him – love, kindness, good deeds, fellowship with others – but the rest is all window dressing at best. You could say that everything else in life is relative – everything's worth is relative to its importance to Christ.

In our evening Bible study last week, we talked for a little while about 2 Timothy 2:3-4, where Paul says, “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer.” That was a very convicting verse to me. I spend a whole lot of time at the church, writing sermons, talking to people about Jesus...but I'm also very protective of my own time. I'm easily distracted by the Internet and my hobbies. My selfish sinful self wants to give the God stuff as little time as possible so I can do the stuff I want to do. But that's not my calling as a Christian. I'm called to die to self. I'm called to please my commanding officer. And the last thing I want when judgment finally comes is to be charged with dereliction of duty. To do that, I've got to be a prayerful person, a Scriptural person, someone who stays mindful of Jesus in everything I do.

I encourage you this morning to do a heart check. Is Jesus your everything? Is your life organized around His calling and purposes for you, or is it organized around what you want? Because the first point we talked about this morning, standing up against evil in ourselves and in our world, can only happen if He is. If He's just a sideline, just a nice thought for Sunday mornings, it's not going to happen. But if He is your everything, you will be one that on the final day is told, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The last point in Revelation that all of us can take home is this: *time is of the essence*. One reason people think they can figure out the dates Revelation refers to is because it is very detail oriented, especially in regard to time. Gentiles will reign over Jerusalem for 42 months; prophets will speak for 1260 days; there is a 1000-year reign of Christ; on it goes. But whether these numbers are literal or had some significance to the early church we don't understand is uncertain. What we do know is that the time is short. In both Revelation 3:3 and 16:15, Jesus warns that He comes like a thief, surprising everyone without warning. And four times in Revelation, Jesus says, "I am coming soon."

For nearly 2000 years, people have been waiting for that event. Peter and Paul both wrote letters that dealt with Jesus' return because even way back then, there was an expectation that Jesus would return within their lifetimes. Throughout the centuries, believers have looked around at the moral depravity around them and said, "Surely now." And in many eras, believers longed for His coming, suffering as they were under hardship and persecution.

But now, we often don't say, "Jesus, come." We're too comfortable. If Jesus were to come today, there are places I'd never experience, movies I'd never see, songs I'd never hear. Sometimes we wouldn't mind God waiting a bit longer so I can have my fun and then get my act together. But if I focus on the things of this world I'd miss out on rather than the glory of God arriving at last, then I *am* of this world and I am not the servant of Christ that God expects me to become. It's another heart check for me – am I waiting and praying for Jesus to come, to free His servants around the world who are persecuted for the Gospel and bring the justice the world has been longing for since sin entered the picture? Or am I hoping that He doesn't come so I get some more time for myself?

Are you ready? Because whether Jesus comes back to Earth today or a couple thousand years from now, your time is short. When we had our car accident back in February, the ambulance driver told Catha, "Be glad this didn't happen ten years ago. Ten years ago, you'd have all been dead." He was referring to the safety features in our car and what not, but it made a huge impression. My knee could have been my head or my heart. I could have been facing the judgment seat of Christ three months ago. I could face it before the day is through. And so could you. Now is not the time to think you have all the time in the world.

When Jesus said, "I am coming soon," He was giving us all a warning. I honestly believe that God has always had it in mind to save billions of people, some who weren't even conceived a day ago. He may plan to save billions more generations from now, and that is why He has not yet come. But whether we meet Him at death or at His coming, there is not going to be another chance to get it right, not another moment to accept Him, not another day to while away. The reason no one knows the day of His coming is because we need to be ready right now. Are you?

I'm proud of us reading the story of Scripture over the last few months. We have traveled together on a journey through time. We've seen God working in history to save His people. We've seen how Jesus is at the center of it all and asks to be the center of our lives. We've seen true evil, but we've seen that it won't succeed. God wins the day. And we need to be prepared, for the end is in sight. Let us join together with all the saints throughout history, praising God for His Son's victory and awaiting the day when our King returns.