

The Story (28) – The End of Time

By Ashby Camp

Copyright © 2015 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

I. Introduction

A. Today we complete our overview of the Bible's big picture. Next week I may go back and recap the story, but I may do something else. I'm just not sure yet.

B. The Sunday after that, December 7, which is the first Sunday of the new quarter, I plan to begin what I'm guessing will be a seven or eight-week class titled "The Bible and Homosexual Conduct." My goal in that class is to lay out the Bible's teaching on that subject and to explain why recent attempts to get around that teaching are groundless. I think it is a very important subject given the growing attacks on the biblical doctrine, and I encourage young folks, maybe junior high and up, to attend. They are under much pressure to deny the Bible's teaching to fit in with their peers, and this is a real spiritual danger.

C. The subject this morning is "The End of Time," the goal toward which all of creation is headed. It is the climax of "The Story," but far too many in today's religious world misunderstand it.

II. Creation Redeemed

A. The Fall

1. God in the beginning miraculously created all things, including human beings (Adam and Eve), during the six days of creation. The creation was at first an ideal place in which all things were acting in the way God desired. But soon Adam and Eve, who were to be God's representatives on earth, rejected his rule by disobeying him. By bringing sin into the human world, they spoiled God's very good creation.

2. As a result, creation is not now the way it is supposed to be. It is no longer a paradise where all things work together in peace and harmony under God's rule. Instead our world now includes things like anger, division, hatred, violence, destruction, death, decay, lying, stealing, suffering, sorrow, and pain. In that sense, it is a creation that is sick as a result of sin. It has fallen from its original state of glory, which is why Adam's sinning is known as "the Fall."

B. The Redeemed Creation

1. The story of the Bible, as I hope you have seen, is the story of God's work through the people of Israel to rescue his creation, which includes mankind, from its fallen state. People are the high point of God's creation, but his rescue effort includes all of creation because all of creation was harmed as a result of sin. That is why Paul in Rom. 8:19-22 says that creation itself looks forward to the day it will be freed from the consequences of human sin.

2. The paradise that was lost in Genesis is regained in Revelation and regained to a transcendent degree, regained in even greater form. Revelation pictures the restoration of all things promised by God through the prophets, the restoration mentioned by Peter in Acts 3:21. The curse that followed sin in Genesis is removed in Revelation, and the creation that was defiled by sin in Genesis is transformed into the new heavens and new earth in Revelation. This is the new heavens and new earth spoken of by Peter in 2 Pet. 3:13 and by Isaiah. The tree of life from which mankind was banished in Genesis because of sin is part of the eternal home of the redeemed in Revelation. All of this takes place in association with Christ's return. It is at that time that heaven and earth will merge, or as I often say, creation will be "heavenized."

3. Revelation 21:1-5 is breathtaking (ESV):

Then 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. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "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. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

4. As I have said numerous times, Jesus is the center of this entire effort. It was decided from eternity that to solve the sin problem that would infect creation God the Son would become the God-man Jesus Christ and would take on himself the penalty that all human sin deserved. This allows God to forgive sinners without making light of the horror of sin, without trivializing sin. It allows God to forgive in a way that is consistent with his nature, a way that expresses his love without neglecting his holiness and justice.

5. Christ's sacrifice is therefore the key to healing all the consequences of sin, even the damage it caused to the nonhuman creation. Thus Paul in Col. 1:19-20 speaks of Jesus as the one through whom God the Father reconciled *all things* to himself, making peace by the blood of his cross. He says in According to Eph. 1:7-10, God's will for the handling of the end of history, his will for the management of the completion of the ages, is to bring *all things* together in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20, ESV).

6. Our existence in this redeemed and transformed physical creation, the new heavens and new earth, will not be as ghosts, as spirit beings. Not at all; it will be as redeemed and transformed people, as physical, resurrected beings. I really do not have time to do this justice, but I feel I must say something about death and resurrection in light of the Gnostic tendencies of many in the religious world who deny or marginalize the physicality of our eternal existence.

C. Death

1. According to Scripture, physical death is the cessation of life in its familiar bodily state; it is not the end of existence. In other words, life and death are two different states of existence. Dying is a transition from one state to the other.

2. We are composed of two elements, a material component, the body, and an immaterial component, the soul or spirit. Physical death or loss of life involves the separation of body and soul/spirit. James 2:26 states, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." See also Gen. 2:7 and 3:19 (implied), 35:18 (Rachel's soul departing at death); Eccles. 12:7 (spirit returns to God); Mat. 27:50 (Jesus gave up his spirit); Lk. 8:55 (restoration of Jairus's daughter to life described as her spirit returning); Acts 7:59 (Stephen prays for Jesus to receive his spirit); 2 Pet. 1:13-14 (Peter speaks of dying as the putting off of his tent).

3. Death is a conscious existence. It is portrayed as such in Isa. 14:9-10,¹ Ezek. 32:21, 31, Lk. 16:19-31, and Rev. 6:9-11, and Jesus told the crucified thief (or rebel) in Lk. 23:43 that he would be with him that day in "paradise." "Paradise" carries a connotation of pleasantness that seems inapplicable to an unconscious state.

4. There is a distinction in the conditions of existence of dead people, in the state in which the spirits of the dead find themselves.

a. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk. 16:19-31 presupposes a distinction between the post-death conditions of the righteous and the wicked. The ungodly rich man is in misery and the godly poor man is in a state of blessing and comfort. Note that this distinction clearly is fixed. Verse 26 says a "great chasm" separates the two so there are no crossovers.

b. In Lk. 23:43 Jesus refers to the blessed, post-death state of the righteous as "paradise." He told the penitent thief that he would be with him in paradise that day. So death for the Christian is not viewed as an unpleasant prospect. On the contrary,

(1) Revelation 14:13 declares, "**Blessed** are the dead who die in the Lord."

(2) In Phil. 1:21-23 Paul says that to him to live is Christ and *to die is gain* and that his desire is to depart and be with Christ, **for this is far better**.

(3) In 2 Cor. 5:6-8 Paul says, ⁶Therefore, having confidence always, and **knowing that while being at home in the body we are away from the Lord** -- ⁷for we walk by faith not by sight -- ⁸we have confidence, [I say], and **would prefer rather to be away from the body and be at home with the Lord**.

¹ The inhabitants are referred to as "shades" or "weak ones" in that they are only a shadow or reflection of the full persons they were on earth.

(4) The writer of Hebrews says in Heb. 2:15 that Christ's death was intended to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

c. At the Christian's death, his or her spirit goes to be with Christ in heaven. Thus Paul in the texts just mentioned speaks of death as departing and **being with Christ** and **being at home with the Lord**. In Acts 7:56-59 Stephen saw heaven being opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, and then, while being stoned to death, prayed for the Lord Jesus to "receive his spirit." And in Rev. 6:9 the souls of Christian martyrs are pictured as being under the heavenly altar.

D. Resurrection

1. Life after death, life as a spirit with the Lord in heaven, will be far better than life in this world, *but that is not the end for a Christian*. It gets even better! When the Lord returns, which will occur in God's time, all the dead – all those whose spirits are separated from their bodies, which is death – will be resurrected, brought back to **bodily** life.

2. Christ's resurrection was the "firstfruits" of the end-time resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23). His resurrection serves as a pledge on God's part of the final end-time harvest. Our resurrection is tied to his, so much so that in 2 Cor. 4:14 Paul says "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also *with Jesus*." We are all the same harvest. He is the "*firstborn* from the dead" (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5).

3. And we, as part of the Lord's resurrection harvest, likewise will receive glorified and immortal *bodies* in our resurrection (Rom. 8:11, 23, 29; 1 Cor. 15:35-49; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Jn. 3:2). His resurrection body is the prototype or model after which our resurrection bodies will be patterned.

4. That is why Jesus said in Jn. 5:28-29 that "an hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good to a resurrection of life, but those who have done evil to a resurrection of judgment." This is the raising up that will occur on the last day (Jn. 6:39-40, 44, 54).

5. *Until Christ's return*, dead people exist as conscious, bodiless spirits in a place of blessing or suffering depending on their relationship with God at the time of their death. At Christ's return, they will be resurrected, meaning their spirit will be united with a glorified and transformed body that is suited for eternal existence, what Paul describes as an immortal and imperishable body, and they will then be assigned their permanent dwelling places. God's children will spend eternity in the love and joy of the new heavens and new earth. Those who are not God's children, meaning those who sinned and did not receive his forgiveness, will spend eternity in the sorrow of hell.

E. Let me finish with quotes from two (or three if I have time) well-regarded scholars.

1. First, Roger Olson, whose field is historical theology, writes in *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 311, 314:

The bodily resurrection of all people at some time after death has played a prominent role in Christian teaching throughout history. In spite of a pronounced tendency among untutored lay Christians to focus attention on immortality of souls and neglect bodily resurrection, the fathers of the church, medieval Christian thinkers, all the Protestant Reformers and faithful modern biblical scholars and theologians have emphasized the bodily resurrection as the blessed hope of believers in Christ. . . .

It would be impossible to discover any single point of greater agreement in the history of Christian thought than this one: *the future bodily resurrection of the dead is the blessed hope of all who are in Christ Jesus by faith*. Over two millennia the church's leaders and faithful theologians have unanimously taught this above the immortality of souls and as more important than some ethereal intermediate state between bodily death and bodily resurrection when Christ returns. And yet, as we lamented earlier, it seems that the vast majority of Christians do not know this and neglect belief in bodily resurrection in favor of belief in immediate post-mortem heavenly, spiritual existence as ghost-like beings (or even angels!) "forever with the Lord in heaven."

2. N. T. Wright is perhaps the best known Christian theologian in the world. He has written extensively on early Christianity. Listen to what he says about the idea that Christians will spend eternity with God as spirits in some nonphysical realm (*Surprised By Hope* [p. 194]):

Mention salvation, and almost all Western Christians assume that you mean going to heaven when you die. But a moment's thought, in the light of all we have said so far, reveals that this simply cannot be right. Salvation means, of course, rescue. But what are we ultimately to be rescued from? The obvious answer is death. But if, when we die, all that happens is that our bodies decompose while our souls (or whatever other word we want to use for our continuing existence) go on elsewhere, this doesn't mean we've been *rescued from* death. It simply means that we've died.

And if God's good creation – of the world, of life as we know it, of our glorious and remarkable bodies, brains, and bloodstreams – really *is* good, and if God wants to reaffirm that goodness in a wonderful act of new creation at the last, then to see the death of the body and the escape of the soul as salvation is not simply slightly off course, in need of a few subtle alterations and modifications. It is totally and utterly wrong. It is colluding with death. It is conniving at death's destruction of God's good, image-bearing human creatures while consoling ourselves with the (essentially non-Christian and non-Jewish) thought that the really important bit of ourselves is saved from this wicked, nasty body and this sad, dark world of space, time, and matter! As we have seen, the whole of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, speaks out against such nonsense. *It is, however, what most Western Christians, including most Bible Christians of whatever sort, actually believe*. This

is a serious state of affairs, reinforced not only in popular teaching but also in liturgies, public prayers, hymns, and homilies of every kind.

3. As Wayne Grudem states in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 613:

We as resurrected men and women will live forever in "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). We will live in a renewed earth that "will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21) and become like a new Garden of Eden. . . . In this very material, physical, renewed universe, it seems that we will need to live as human beings with physical bodies, suitable for life in God's renewed physical creation. Specifically, Jesus' physical resurrection body affirms the goodness of God's original creation of man not as a mere spirit like the angels, but as a creature with a physical body that was "very good." We must not fall into the error of thinking that nonmaterial existence is somehow a better form of existence for creatures: when God made us as the pinnacle of his creation, he gave us physical bodies.