



THE STORY OF *Everything*

LUKE 24:27

It was July 30th, 1967. As a freshly graduated high school student, the summer months were to be enjoyed before Joni would head off to college. She and her sister, Kathy, had made a trip out to Chesapeake Bay to enjoy some swimming. They put their towels down and swam to a raft out in the water. Eager to enjoy the summer, Joni and her sister jumped in. Except Joni dove in head first. Without realizing how shallow the water really was, Joni banged her head against the bottom fracturing her neck and becoming a quadriplegic. Her sister Kathy, who was in the water at the moment and didn't see what happened, was about to warn Joni of the crabs on the bottom, when she saw her sister lying in the water face down, limp. Lifting her up, she recognized that Joni needed help. And in that fateful moment, Joni's life would forever change.

For years, Joni would struggle with depression and anger. Her life that had looked so promising suddenly felt stolen from her. What was she going to do?

Suffering is a very real challenge to us. It doesn't matter if our sufferings are a result of an injury, injustice done to us at the hands of someone who was mean to us, or because of a foolish choice that we made. The consequences of suffering tempt us to become bitter and resentful.

John understood this. When John penned the apocalypse, he had been exiled to the island of Patmos. As a Christian, his refusal to bow to the political pressures had meant that he had been removed from society and was treated unfairly. As he was on the island of Patmos, he received visions from heaven. These visions were to sustain him as an old man in the face of trial, and they were intended to sustain Christians like him throughout the ages who would suffer for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation was never intended to scare Christians, but comfort them with the promise that God would judge evil and restore all that is good. So how does Revelation offer comfort to us?

Behold, I am Making All Things New

Since Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden because of their sin, sent east of Eden, we all have felt this sense of exile, that we're not quite home. There are whispers of it that come, and it makes us long for home. But we're not quite there.

I remember hearing the story of a woman who had taken her disabled son out skiing with a group of other families with children who had limited accessibility. There, on the slopes, her normally wheelchair-bound son could enjoy the freedom afforded to him by the special ski chairs they had for him. As she came down the first run, this mother was overwhelmed as she saw all the wheelchairs lined up, empty. A longing for home.

When we come to Revelation 21, there is no controversy over these verses. Christians are in unity when they read these verses. We are strangers here on earth, made for another world. We all are longing for home. And with pastoral grace, John paints the picture of home so that we might live with hope in this world where there is sin, sickness, sorrow, and suffering.

John hears the words: "Behold, I am making all things new!" (21:5). The former things pass away. This is what Isaiah saw in Isa. 65:17ff – there would come a day when the former things would pass away. And now John sees how Christ will fulfill this – the former things, with all of their flaws and sins and sufferings will be no more.

Richard Baxter, the Puritan pastor, said that from the age of 21 on until his death at 76 he did not have an hour that was free from great pain. During one such season at age 35, he thought he was going to die. He began to meditate on the wonders of the things to come, and the result were several meditations called *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. From his time contemplating the things to come,

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would daily reflect upon heaven for a half hour and encouraged others to consider the glories of the things to come. He said:

"If you would have light and heat, why are you not more in the sunshine? For want of this recourse to heaven, your soul is as a lamp not lighted, and your duty as a sacrifice without fire. Fetch one coal daily from this altar, and see if your offering will not burn . . . Keep close to this reviving fire, and see if your affections will not be warm" (from Timothy Beougher and J.I. Packer, "Go Fetch Baxter," in *Christianity Today*, vol. 35, no. 15, December 16, 1991, pp. 26–27).

Be Sustained by Longing for Home

Have you ever had a moment where you stepped into a place and thought to yourself, "I've been here before?" Six years ago, I flew into Thunder Bay en route to a speaking engagement I had. Because I had some extra time to myself, I thought I would drive around. I went past my elementary school, the first house I lived in on Begin Place. I went out to the country where my parents and grandparents had built their homes, and I saw all the trees that we had planted as seedlings now towering as giant, mature trees. I remembered playing street hockey at the end of the *cul-de-sac*, and baseball in the backyard. I sat there for a few minutes, seeing old neighbours come out.

Revelation 21 gives us that sense of "I've been here before." Notice how many echoes we have of coming back home to Eden. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" Genesis 1:1 tells us. Now, John sees a new heavens and a new earth. We are now returning to the beginning of the Bible. The grand history of redemption is coming to a completion.

And as we return to the Garden, Rev. 21:2 introduces us to a bride prepared for her husband, just like Adam met his bride Eve, becoming husband and wife as Adam declared his commitment to her "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." And just as this happy couple had a home in the garden where God walked and talked with them, so we see God dwelling with this happy couple in their home.

The world that God had made that was good had sun and moon, but this world now has no need for sun and moon (21:23) because God, who said, "Let there be light," is the light that has shone into our hearts. And the river that flowed in the middle of the garden of Eden, watering the garden, is re-pictured here – a river that flows in the middle of the city from the throne to the tree of life, which had been in Eden at the beginning.

We were made for another world, and when we come to Revelation 21, these echoes of Eden ring true. It's *déjà vu* all over again, to quote the great baseball theologian Yogi Berra. Creation is our home. When we get to this place that Jesus has prepared for us, we will return to the creation. We won't be disembodied spirits floating forever. Rather, we will be in the place where we've always belonged with resurrected bodies.

And so, we return to the place we belong, the creation regained, because the God who created at the beginning has planned out the end and has purposed that the work he began he will carry out to completion in the day of Christ Jesus.

Soothe the Sting of Sin with Hope

We know that this world is anything but paradise. Just like Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden and had to head East of Eden, we have fallen into sin and come under God's judgment. Adam and Eve, taking the forbidden fruit, not trusting in God's provisions and promises, ate and were sent

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into exile. And our sin has brought grief and pain and sorrow to ourselves, to our relationships, to the world.

We feel the pains of the curse. Broken relationships. Intense loneliness. Depression. Bondage. Addiction. Slavery. War. Abuse. We feel the curse.

But suddenly, the pain of the curse is reversed. The Lamb who was slain has overcome. And it begins immediately in 21:1. When the new heavens and earth appear, the sea is no more. The sea, which had been the place of chaos and terror, beyond our control, is no more. Everything that had been chaos and terror is gone. Everything we fought to try and control to protect ourselves from no longer threatens us. Everything is under the sovereign hand of God. The city of God is not just any city, but a holy city. A city without crime, where the streets have a name. A city where the roads don't deteriorate and crumble, where infrastructure is not wearing out. Now, the city is holy, set apart, distinct, and without any blemish. The sins of God's people are no more.

Similarly, we see that the broken relationship between God and humanity has been restored by the blood of the Lamb. A bride appears, ready to meet her husband. And throughout the Bible, this is the picture that is portrayed: God and humanity dwelling together in perfect harmony one day. Marital failure has been the story of the Bible – God's people failing God. But instead of betrayal, there is no hint of scandal or immorality. The reason there is no scandal is due to the groom laying down his life to pay for the penalty of his bride – with his own blood. And so, there is no more scandal, no more sin. The stain is gone – she is radiant and pure and beautiful.

And we see that all of this has been overcome: v. 4: And he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There have been so many tears – so many heartaches, so many pains from the Fall of Adam to this day. But when we arrive at the place God has prepared for us, the tissue of tenderness will wipe our tears away as he welcomes us home. The grief over sin, disappointment at loss, the hurt of betrayal. But now, there are no more tears, no more pain, no death. Christ has put death in its grave, overcoming it by his own death.

Ultimately, the curse is reversed because there is no more room for any sin and vice. In v. 8, we hear that God will punish forever those who have not turned from sin and evil (READ). If you do not turn from sin and trust in Christ, the curse is not reversed in you. But for those who say, "Lord, I have done wrong, I have been the problem, I am in need of your forgiveness and power to live a new life," the curse is reversed. And he will bring you all the way home.

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

John tells us that every tear will be wiped from our eyes. While there is physical pain, many of us know of a greater pain – the brokenness of relationships. Sadly, conflict is all too common of an experience East of Eden. Marriages break down, children rebel, long time friends are lost, co-workers become embittered and embattled, and nations fight against nations. We know the pain of the nations, which have warred against one another, now find themselves healed and reconciled (21:24; 22:2). Now, all of the old hostilities are not only ended, but hostilities are healed. Harmony abounds in a world of love. "No longer will there be anything accursed..." (Rev. 22:3). Anything that has been fallen will be redeemed. And the tree that Adam was forbidden to eat from and brought division in the world – the tree of life – is now the tree that brings healing to the nations. It was the tree that Adam was to come to in order to make right judgments. Now the nations come and find healing at this tree.

But God is not merely reversing things back to the way they were, but he is carrying us forward to his ultimate goal – newness. In these verses, the word "new" appears over and over: New heavens, new earth, new Jerusalem, he makes all things new. There is something about things being new. Who

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doesn't love opening a package with a shiny new phone, or being the first one to open the peanut butter jar and take the first knife-full? Or getting a new car, building a new home, or even better – bringing home a new baby?

But here is the promise of Revelation: "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The things that God has made, he will remake. We can start with the new Jerusalem. The place where we are heading is perfect. Jesus said that if he went, he would go and prepare a place for us. And now, this home is perfect. Not to get lost in the details, but the dimensions reflect completion, perfection. The construction materials of this city are of infinite value: jewels are beautiful, glorious; gold that is clear. It is a place where all of God's people can dwell – those from the tribes of Israel and those who have followed the apostles' teaching – all of those who have set their hope in Christ have a home. The dimensions reflect the perfect holy of holies. While the holy place in the temple was 30' by 30' by 30' (see 1 Kings 6:16), the new Jerusalem is 12000 stadia cubed – the distance from London to Houston as length x width x height. This New Jerusalem is described as the perfect holy of holies where God and humanity come together. The exile is over. God and man are together forever.

And these images here are the fullness of perfection: I remember seeing my beautiful bride the first time – in all radiance and splendor, in beauty and glory. But now appears a bride, without spot or wrinkle, adorned for her husband (21:2) – completely perfect. The relationship that humanity has had with God has been anything but wedding bliss. Sin is described as adultery against God – the act of great betrayal. Yet God has endured the longest worst marriage in human history so that in this moment, all conflict is overcome.

There is water in abundance, without cost or payment that satisfies the soul deeply – completely free. Or the image of v. 7: "The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son." These images are all of relationship, and they point to what it means to be at home: to have perfect relationships, in perfect harmony, where we "see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads (22:4). When the will is written, it is written in ink. There is no question if you will get the inheritance. It is secure.

But what makes this place so incredible is that there is no sun or moon – for God is its light. And there is no temple there. God had given his people instruction about how you could see his glory – he would descend to the temple and tabernacle. God could dwell with his people by sacrifice and holiness. But now, there is no evil here. This whole place is the dwelling place of God. His light radiates into every place. There is no darkness. There is only God in his glory and splendor and majesty and holiness and perfection radiating his light into every corner, every sphere, every place.

And at the center of it all is Jesus Christ. He is the husband waiting for his bride. He is the light of the world. He is the root of David, the Alpha and Omega, the temple, the Lamb – he is everything. He is our focus.

When Joni Eareckson Tada was asked what she would first do when she got to heaven and could run and jump with her new resurrected body, her answer astonished the Desiring God Conference attendees. No – she would not run and jump, but she would bow and worship the One who had made her life worth it all – in spite of the pain, in spite of the suffering, in spite of the losses. Why? Because Joni's life became something more beautiful from a wheelchair. She was able to minister to those with disabilities and advocate for them. She was able to articulate the hope we have not in having perfectly chiseled bodies, but in hope in the resurrected Lord.

We will have physical bodies, and see the risen Christ, with his nail pierced hands and thorn scarred forehead. But these scars will not be the reflection of an imperfect creation, but rather the reminder of the completed redemption that he has accomplished for us. Jesus Christ, in all of his splendor and

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glory, will be the radiance that welcomes us home. We will be with the One our hearts have longed for. And we will be with him forever. At home. In song. In ruling. In delight. Forever. And ever. Glory and delight will have just begun. But until that day, the Lion of Judah fights for us. And we go in the power of the Lamb who was slain.