

“The End of the Story”
Revelation 22:1-5
November 15, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

We’re beginning a new sermon series today on the mission of the church. Just as vibrant organizations have a clear sense of mission that guides the entire organization, so fruitful churches also must be clear and unified about their mission. Such unity around a mission is all the more important today in light of the sharp divisions we see in our nation. None of us wants to see such divisions afflict the church. We want to be unified behind a single mission.

One of our greatest resources in this endeavor to have a unified mission is the fact that we don’t have to decide what that mission should be. Every member of this church has confessed that Jesus is Lord. We all believe that God’s word to us in the Scriptures is authoritative. So deciding on the mission of the church becomes the straightforward matter of understanding what the Bible says our mission should be. That is the task before us in the next three or four months.

We want to begin our quest to find what the Bible says about the church’s mission by going to the end of the Bible and considering how this story ends. The Bible is a unified story from Genesis to Revelation. It is this unified story that provides the context for what the Bible teaches about our mission. If you don’t know the context, it is easy to come to the wrong conclusion. If someone says, “Go Bulls,” it would mean one thing in a Chicago arena and something entirely different in Pamplona, Spain where people run in front of chasing bulls every July. Context makes a difference. The context of the Bible is this big story of God’s work to restore the Garden of Eden as the place where humanity would live with God forever. The mission God gives us fits within this big story.

Revelation 22 continues the account begun in the previous chapter, where heaven is described as the new Jerusalem. It comes down out of heaven, meaning that eternity will not be spent floating on clouds somewhere, but in a material world called the new earth. The new Jerusalem is still being described in our chapter, but the imagery changes to the Garden of Eden. The new Jerusalem, heaven, is described here as an enhanced version of Eden, complete with a river, the tree of life, God’s presence and God’s people.

I. A River

The garden of Eden had a river, and it served **“to water the garden”** (Gen. 2:10). The prophet Ezekiel picks up this imagery and expands upon it at

length. The prophet speaks of a river that flows from the temple in Jerusalem into the Dead Sea. But wherever the river flows, life flourishes. When it flows into the Dead Sea, it turns its salty waters into fresh waters. Instead of a sea that is completely lifeless, it teems with life (Ezek. 47).

We encounter this same river in our text. It is called **“the river of the water of life”** (22:1) because it brings life, just as Ezekiel’s river did. We know from what Jesus taught that this river is ultimately a picture of the Holy Spirit. **“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’”** (John 7:37-38). And then it is said that **“he said this about the Spirit.”** So the waters of this river in the completed garden of Eden are available to us already as we bring our thirsty souls to Jesus and trust in him.

Notice what is said of this river in our passage. First, we are told that it is “bright as crystal.” That means that it is the purest water imaginable. It is unlike the muddy waters we sometimes consume, only to be sickened by them. I think of the muddy waters of trust in such empty things as money, success and the approval of people. Such things cannot touch the deep thirst of the soul. Only God can do so with the pure water of the Spirit.

Notice next that this river flows right down Main Street of the new Jerusalem, which speaks of the fact that it is easily accessible to all. Figuratively speaking, you walk out your front door and have access to this river. And it is a river, ever flowing with fresh water from the throne of God. It will never run out and it will be ever fresh and life-giving.

It is a common experience of us all that we live in this world with some unquenchable thirst. We know down deep that things are not as they should be, and we long for things to be put right. Nothing is untainted by the sin and rebellion of the human race. Even the closest friendships are imperfect and have an element of dissatisfaction about them. The best moments in life are tainted by the certainty that it will soon come to an end. Some element of thirst, even for the Christian, is an inescapable part of this world. But such thirst itself is momentary, to be quenched fully and permanently when we are able to drink deeply of this river flowing from the throne of God.

II. A Tree

The first garden of Eden had a tree of life, and this one does as well. The tree appearing here is an amplified version of the one in the first Eden, because this one is on **“either side of the river.”** And it bears fruit not just annually, but every month. Further, it bears not a single kind of fruit, but **“twelve kinds of fruit.”** And its leaves have such potent healing powers that it is sufficient for the healing of the nations. Nations that have been in a perpetual state of

animosity since the beginning of time, animosity resulting in gaping wounds upon the people of the earth and the earth itself, will be healed by the leaves of this tree.

Why is this tree called the tree of *life*? Obviously, it is a tree that brings life, but what is the nature of this life? Is it simply the extension of life? It does include the extension of life, for the citizens of heaven will indeed live forever. But as we all know, the mere extension of biological life is not such a great thing in itself. The old song says, “Tired of living, scared of dying.” True life, the kind that God brings to us, goes beyond mere perpetual existence into the realization of the purpose for which we were created—to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Have you ever noticed how often in Scripture our life with God is likened to partaking of a meal together? When God came to Abraham, they shared a meal with one another. When the prophets spoke of the end times, they used the imagery of a feast. When we commune with God today, we do so by means of a meal called “the Lord’s Supper.” And here, one of the elements of our eternal home with God is described as the eating of fruit from the tree of life, a tree nourished by the river from God’s throne.

Throughout the Scriptures, our life with God is likened to eating. What does that teach us? Three things come to mind. The first is enjoyment. There is something deeply satisfying about eating a freshly picked Chilton County peach in the summer. One of those peaches that is so juicy that it runs down your mouth, and that is also incredibly sweet. It is an enjoyable experience. But if all you had to eat was peaches, you would soon grow weary of the monotony. So this tree produces a variety of fruits in order to keep the enjoyment fresh. Such is life with God, eternally enjoyable.

Second, eating pictures the satisfaction of a need. Our bodies tell us when we need to eat by the sensation of hunger. Hunger says, “You have a need, and it needs to be addressed.” Further, hunger increases the enjoyment of food. I believe this teaches us something about our future home with God in the new Jerusalem. We will still have needs, but they will all be met in a way that increases both our joy and our love for God as the one satisfying those needs.

Third, eating from the tree of life pictures the peace of heaven. Sharing a meal together is an indication of peace and harmony. We dine with friends and family, not with enemies. Heaven is marked by our peace with God. It is no accident that the Greek word used for tree here is often used elsewhere in the New Testament for the cross on which Jesus died. The ultimate tree of life is the cross of Christ.

III. A Throne

Next is a throne. It is the throne upon which sits God and the lamb, and as a result of this throne there will be no more curse. A throne is a place of rule. In the first garden of Eden, the rule of God was overthrown when Adam chose self-rule instead of God-rule. The move to self-rule brought about the curse, and now the restoration of God's rule brings the lifting of these curses. The results of this curse are described explicitly back in chapter 21. **“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”** (v. 4). The peace we all long for will never fully come until God's reign is received. Heaven is filled with those who have received this reign. Even now, Jesus taught us to pray that his kingdom would come and that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. That prayer will be answered ultimately in the new Jerusalem and the new Eden.

It is the same in your life even now. Submission to the reign of God in your life brings joy and life. It is the first installment of the lifting of the curse.

IV. A People

The first garden of Eden was not complete until God created Adam and Eve to occupy the garden. Its whole purpose was to provide a place for God to dwell with man. The prophet Ezekiel refers to Eden as the “garden of God” (28:13; 31:9). It is God's home built for the express purpose of living there with his image bearers. The Bible begins with this garden, and here it ends with it. Everything in between is basically God's rescue plan for bringing these fallen image bearers back to live with him again in the garden of God. God's rescue plan will work, and these remaining verses describe the benefits that come to us as a result of its success.

First, as God's servants we will worship him. Sanity will be restored as humanity transitions from the self-worship of the first garden to the God-centered worship of the final garden. People everywhere want joy and happiness in life, but what is often missed is that the source of such joy and happiness is the worship of the true God. So our final home with God, a place of great joy, will be marked by the true worship of our God.

Second, it says that they will see the face of God. Moses asked to see God's face and God said that he couldn't do so without dying. Sinful man cannot see the face of God and live. That explains why something is missing from this last Eden that was present at the first. There was a terrifying angel, called a Cherubim, posted at the entrance of the garden to prevent sinful Adam and Eve from returning. It was posted there not for God's protection, but for man's. There is no such cherubim here, for mankind will be able to see the face of God, which speaks of intimacy.

Next, it says that the name of God will be written on their foreheads. That speaks of ownership and character. We write our name on the things we own, so to have God's name written on our heads means that God owns us. And since God owns us, we are secure in his protection of us. The name of God also indicates character. God's sanctifying work in us will be done and we will be holy just as God is holy.

Then it says that we will enjoy the light of God. God's light refers to God's truth. All falsehood will be gone forever in this renewed Eden, including the falsehood of self-deception that plagues us all. In the first garden, after Adam's sin, he hid. No more hiding will be needed in this final garden, because the light of God will shine in our hearts, resulting in our living in the truth of God's love for us.

Finally, it says that we will reign forever and ever. Ironically, those who did not seek power, but rather sought the Lord, will be given all power in the end. The meek will inherit the earth. The same was true of Jesus, who is referred to frequently in Revelation with the humble title of the "Lamb." He did not seek power, but now all power and authority has been given to him. And we his followers are given power also. Adam and Eve were told to subdue the earth for God, but were unable to do so after their sin. But now that sin has been taken care of by Jesus, our original mandate to subdue the earth can be realized. We will also sit with him in judgment on the unholy people and angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

CONCLUSION:

Brothers and sisters, this is your future if you know the Lord Jesus. This is your story. Is this the story you're living in right now? There are some alternative stories that tempt us. One of those is the victim story, in which a person seeks to escape blame by finding others to blame and embracing the victim identity for him or herself. Then there is the orphan story. I don't have a Father in heaven and everything is up to me. If any good is to come in my life, it is up to me to make it happen. These, and many more that could be named, are false stories.

The one true, big story is that God is remaking Eden and opening it up for any who will repent of the pride of self-trust and instead put their faith in Jesus. This is God's work, not ours. But there is a mission God gives to us within this big story, and we're going to get more specific about that next week as we begin looking at the Great Commission texts of the gospels and Acts.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Revelation 22:1-5

1. Can you think of examples in your life in which a clear sense of mission led to energetic and united efforts among a group of people? It could be something as simple as the time my son and I undertook the goal of cycling the entire Blue Ridge Parkway from south to north (490 miles).
2. If you had to state now what you think the mission of the church is, what would you say? Do you think there is adequate clarity about this in today's church?
3. The first step in understanding the church's mission is to make sure we understand the big picture of the Bible. Today's passage teaches that God's intent is to get us back to Eden. One of the features of the garden of Eden in Genesis and the final Eden described here is the river. What does the imagery of a river communicate to you, and why do you think a river is included as one of heaven's primary features?
4. Heaven is described as both a city and a garden. Chapter 21 of Revelation says that heaven is the new Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God," while chapter 22 employs the imagery of a garden. If heaven is both a city and a garden, what do these two images teach us about it.
5. There is also a tree of life in this new Eden. Can you think of any reasons why our life with God in its perfected form in heaven might be described by the act of eating?
6. The leaves of the tree of life are said to be for the healing of the nations. What kind of healing do you think this is talking about? How do the nations need to be healed?
7. Verse 3 says that the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in this new Eden. God's throne speaks of God's rule and reign. In what area of your life do you most long to see the reign of God grow stronger?
8. Is there some other big story (a meta-narrative) that tends to fight for preeminence in your life other than this true big story? Some possibilities are the victim narrative, the orphan narrative, the materialist narrative or the entertainment narrative.