

The Story – The Beginning and the End

We've spent eleven months looking at the unfolding story of God's redemption. We've finally reached the end. Or have we? Every story has an ending but our story, the story of redemption is actually a beginning. It ends in a place where everything is made new.

The story of redemption in one sense is a story of the way back – the way back home, back to how God intended us to be, back to how God intended “it” to be, how life in God's holy presence was meant to be. The story began in Genesis, in a world that was new and pure, a world created and deemed good by God himself. Because of sin, that perfect world God created was marred and broken. The innocence of God's creation was lost and the human family was banished from the garden and from God's presence because of our rebellion and sin. The story of redemption takes us from that tragic beginning to the end in a world made new, a new home, a new order of things, and the broken relationship between us and God redeemed by God himself through Christ.

In the last book of the bible we get a brief glimpse of what that new home and new world will be like. John sees a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. John hears a voice from heaven 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! Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.’”** **Revelation 21:3-6** The old order of things will have passed away and everything will be made new. That's redemption. That's what it means to be redeemed.

Let's go back to the beginning, back to the garden where we began our story eleven months ago. Through what we call “the fall of man”, Adam and Eve's sin, we lost everything. You may remember Milton's epic poem from High School, *Paradise Lost*. Through sin we lost Paradise and much, much more but through God's redemption, through Jesus Christ, all we lost is redeemed and restored, made whole, complete, and new. What did we lose?

We lost something of the image of God. The bible says God created us in his image. We were created to reflect the image of God, but when sin entered into the world and into us, God's perfect design and image was flawed and marred by sin. We still bear the image of God,

each of us, but that image has been distorted by sin. Instead of living as God designed, instead of living at our full potential as God's creation, we settle for less, we live by our own sinful desires, we reject God's order and choose our own way.

When we surrender our life to Jesus, we are redeemed and made new in him. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in our heart and life and begins the process of making us like Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit grows in us so we reflect his character. Our mind is renewed by the word of God so we make choices that are pleasing to God and in line with his word. Paul said we are new creations in Christ and that God has destined us to be made "conformable to the likeness of his Son." The Spirit of God is at work in us to restore the likeness of Christ, to restore the image of God that was distorted and marred by sin.

While that work continues now by the Holy Spirit, (we are redeemed and being redeemed) in heaven, in his presence, redemption is complete, finalized. The apostle Paul says all creation is groaning for final redemption, for things to be made right, to be put back the way God created and intended. But not just creation, **"...but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." Romans 8:23-24**

Haven't we already been adopted as sons and daughters of God through Christ? Yes. That's the firstfruits of the Spirit he is referring to. But here he is talking about the completion of it all, the final step, the last piece put in place when these bodies are fully redeemed and everything is made new, made as it should be. Think of this...

In heaven we are fully human, as God made us and designed us to be. No longer marred by sin, no longer broken by pain or limited and shaped by weakness, we are finally and fully who God created us to be! Revelation 2 says, **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." Revelation 2:17** Think of this: that name God gives you is the name he chose for you when he thought of you and formed you in the womb. That name, known only to God and you reflects who you were meant to be, before sin marred you and robbed you of your true, God given identity. Heaven is where we discover our true and full identity and where we live as we were meant to live. Nothing diminished by sin or failure or weakness. Fully. Completely. Redeemed!

We lost our home. We were made to live in God's presence eternally, but through sin we lost our home and now we live as strangers and aliens in a strange land. If you wonder why you feel unsettled, restless, looking for something, it's because we don't fit, we don't belong here. We long for eternity, for eternal life, for that eternal home, because that's what we were made for, to live with God in that place he prepared for us for eternity. We can't find the words at times, but that longing for heaven, for home, for eternity, it's there. The bible says, **"He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."** Ecclesiastes 3:11.

That restlessness you feel, it's supposed to be there. It is proof of something eternal. It's proof we weren't made for this fallen world, we were made for another country, a heavenly home. In that place we call heaven, we will finally belong. Peter Kreeft said, **"We have a homing instinct, a 'home detector', and it doesn't ring for earth. That's why nearly every society in history except our own instinctively believes in life after death...we have been trying to get home. Earth just doesn't smell like home. However good a road it is, however good a motel it is, however good a training camp it is, it is not home. Heaven is. Heaven means not just a pleasant place but our place, not just a good [place] but a good place for us. We fit there, we are fully human there."** ...Peter Kreeft.

We are looking for home, for that place where we fit, but Genesis tells us God placed an angel and a flaming sword to bar the entrance to the Garden of Eden. We can't go back, so the way home is forward, through God's redemption. We are saved, redeemed, through Christ we are given a new relationship with the Father whose house we are invited to live in, the house with many rooms that Jesus said he was preparing for us in John 14. At the end of the journey we will be welcomed into his eternal presence and we will be home. Finally, home. Home with our Father. You see, another thing we lost in the fall,

We lost our relationship with our heavenly Father. Sin separated us from God. Sin made Adam and Eve hide when God came looking for them in the Garden of Eden and sin still makes us hide. Sin still separates us from God but through Christ and his redeeming grace, our sins have been forgiven. Through Christ and his sacrifice that broken relationship has been redeemed and restored. The sin that separated us from God is no longer there for the bible says, **"...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them."** 2 Corinthians 5:19

In heaven the evidence of that redeemed, restored relationship is everywhere apparent. We read it at the beginning of the message, that passage from Revelation 21. **“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.”** **Revelation 21:3-4.** The relationship is restored. He is our God and we are his people and he will personally wipe every tear from our eyes as he welcomes us home and says, “Well done. Enter into the joys of the Lord.” Matthew 25:23

In the Garden of Eden, sin robbed us of so much. We lost something of the image of God, our home, our relationship with the Father and so much more. So much was lost, but redemption is about getting back what was lost and heaven is the place where redemption is full and complete and final. **Heaven is redemption’s story completed. What’s been lost or stolen through sin, through redemption we get it back!** Thomas Howard wrote, “I announce to you redemption. Behold I make all things new. Behold I do what cannot be done. I restore the years that the locusts and worms have eaten. I restore the years which you have drooped away upon your crutches and in your wheel-chair. I restore the symphonies and operas which your deaf ears have never heard, and the snowy massifs your blind eyes have never seen, and the freedom lost to you through plunder, and the identity lost to you because of calumny [slander] and the failure of justice; and I restore the good which your own foolish mistakes have cheated you of. And I bring you to the Love of which all other loves speak, the Love which is joy and beauty, and which you have sought in a thousand streets and for which you have wept and clawed your pillow.” Thomas Howard.

Ah, redemption! The day will come when we, the redeemed, will be finally home in God’s presence. The plan and story of redemption carried to completion in our lives. We will be fully and entirely redeemed in every possible sense of that word. We will look back over our life and see how God worked, how he took every moment and every experience, (“all things”) and worked them for our good because we loved him and we were called according to his purpose. We will look at the journey and what God has done by his grace and we will say, “You alone are worthy, because with your blood you redeemed and purchased men and women for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” And he will look at us, complete in him, restored to him, in eternal fellowship with him, home with him, his image restored in us, his purposes fulfilled and complete in us, all the brokenness mended and healed in us, and he will

look at us and say, “behold, I’ve made all things new.” And then he will say as he did at the beginning, “This is good. This is very good.”

The bible says, “**No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him...**” **1 Corinthians 2:9** I can’t explain what heaven will be, but it will be home, it will be what we have been longing for, it will be eternal, it will be the full manifestation and revelation of redemption for us, in us. It will be glorious beyond measure and it won’t be the end. It will be the beginning!

Many of you have read C. S. Lewis’ books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In his conclusion in *The Last Battle*, there is this conversation between Lucy and Aslan. “You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be.” Lucy said, ‘We’re so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often.’ ‘No fear of that’, said Aslan. ‘Have you not guessed?’ Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. ‘There was a real railway accident,’ said Aslan softly. ‘Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands – dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended; this is the morning.’ And as he spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them.” “**And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.**” ...C. S. Lewis

All of this life has been only the cover and the title page. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him...” **Heaven means redemption’s story goes on forever and every chapter is better than the one before!** Can you see it? Do you understand? **Heaven’s not the end, it’s the beginning!** Home with Jesus, living as we were meant to live!

How do you get there? You can’t earn your way. The only way to heaven is through Jesus Christ and his redeeming grace. Jesus said he was the door. You have to come through him. If you’ve not made Jesus the Savior and Lord of your life, you can do so today! Open your heart to him, ask him to forgive you and make him the Lord of your life. Confess your sins and he will be faithful and just and he will forgive you and give to you eternal life.

