

“Living in Christ’s World: When We Grow Up”

Reading: *John 15:1-17; Revelation 21:1-14*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Before we talk about the ending of the book of Revelation today, we’re going to talk about the ending of the book of Daniel. There are a lot of parallels between these two books of the Bible, but there’s one small tidbit in Daniel in particular that I want to begin with. Like the book of Revelation, Daniel contains a variety of revelations about how God will fulfill His promises to His people. In the last few verses of Daniel’s book, after he’s given us some hints about what the end of God’s plan involves, in 12:4, there’s this statement about the time of the end: “Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.” It’s kind of a cryptic statement. What does it mean? Is it just saying that people will learn more and more things before the end? One way that some people have tried making sense of it is by suggesting that it should have read, “Many will go here and there to increase *evil*,” because the difference between *knowledge* and *evil* in Hebrew is only the tiniest of lines, and maybe a scribe in antiquity mixed them up. And the thinking is that maybe that makes more sense of what we expect before the end: things will just get worse and worse until God saves us.

What I love about that one little verse with its confusing words is that it inadvertently encapsulates several different views of what’s going to happen before the end of the world. Some people think it makes more sense for knowledge to increase; we just keep getting smarter and smarter, learning more and more, as science and technology march onward and improve our lives forever. Other people think it makes more sense to say that things just keep getting worse; evil increases and the world goes downhill until the end. But in both cases, that verse includes another view of how the world will go forward: whatever people are chasing, whether it’s knowledge or evil, they’re spending their time going to and fro, chasing the wind, endlessly pursuing their goals. Some people say the world is getting better, and they’re right: we can cure diseases that used to kill millions, we’ve sent robots out to explore the universe, we can do things and know things that would have seemed like magic not that long ago. But some people think the world is getting worse, and they’re right, too: people are still desperately lost, and atrocities still happen, and the very technology that promises to save us sometimes also threatens to end us. What’s consistent is that futility: we’re not sure where we’re going; we just seem to be going to and fro. We can make a good argument either that knowledge or evil are increasing, that we’re getting better or worse, but one thing that’s certain is that the course of rebellion against God, that futile reaping of the whirlwind, will continue.

Today in our reading from Revelation, we get a partial glimpse of what God’s final plan looks like. We colloquially call it “going to heaven,” but that’s not accurate: it’s a new creation, new heavens and new earth, the end result of a long, painful process of purging and purifying and dismantling and re-creating the world that has gone so far astray. But what does it mean for us? What good is heaven, anyway, if it’s off in the future or after we die? Our theme for these recent weeks has been “Living in Christ’s World,” and my claim has been that this book of Revelation with all of its weirdness and difficulty shows us like no other book what it means to live in Christ’s world. It shows us like no other book what the implications are of the resurrection of Jesus we celebrated at Easter. If He is raised from the dead, that means God’s work isn’t done yet, and it means that He is Lord of all creation and is going to return to claim it and rule it as its King. And John’s Revelation is intended to tell us how we ought to live through the time of waiting, as we endure opposition from God’s enemies and witness the work of God both great and terrible in re-making His world.

How many of us here today would say that we knew exactly what we wanted to be when we grew up? I always assumed it was pretty rare for a person to know from a young age what they wanted to do with their life, and then actually follow through with that. How many of you, if you jumped into a time machine and traveled back to meet yourself as, say, a ten-year-old, would surprise that younger version of you with what you ended up spending your life doing? That's actually a pretty recent development in human history; for most people for most of history, you didn't think about or wonder about what you were going to be when you grew up: you were going to be a farmer, and you were going to farm the same patch of land that your ancestors had been farming for a long, long time. There simply weren't any other options. Now, though, we wonder, and we think about it, and sometimes we surprise ourselves and sometimes we disappoint ourselves, and we chart our course through life.

People in ancient times used to know almost exactly what their futures held. The world changed very, very slowly, and when it changed faster, it usually did so violently, so you didn't want it to change. You just assumed things would go on as they always had. Not so now. Now we wonder about the future, we speculate, we assume the future will be vastly different than the present. We're not sure where we're going. We can't agree on whether we're going into greater knowledge, or greater evil. We can't even agree on how we got here.

I've been thinking recently about how there are moments in life that you really can't see beyond. There are moments like getting married or having a child that so radically change the course of your life that though you can speculate about what they're like, you can't really imagine. For the most part you can kind of plan ahead and think about what life will be like in the next few years or so, but then sometimes there are those moments that change things so drastically and make life so different that you just can't picture them. I think back to life before my daughter was born, and even though I tried to mentally prepare myself for what it would be like to have a child, things have changed so much that I really couldn't imagine. Getting married was much the same way.

When we start talking about the end of the world and heaven and eternity, we struggle to know where we're going, how we're going to get there, and what it all means for us now. What are we going to be when we grow up? What is life going to be like for eternity? How much are we even capable of understanding? Is it just going to be sitting around on clouds all day eating bon bons? What about justice, making things right, rewarding the good and punishing the bad? How can we know what to do if we don't even know where we're going? Maybe Daniel was right: whether we're chasing knowledge or evil, maybe it's all just going to and fro. Maybe the world is just caught in futility.

But what becomes clear as we get to these last few chapters of John's Revelation, if we're paying attention, is that God knows exactly where things are going, and He knows how to get there. There are a lot of ways to interpret these last couple of chapters and their vision of the completion of God's work, but what John works hard to communicate to us is that God remembers His promises, and He's going to fulfill those promises in the end. The end of the story looks an awful lot like the beginning of the story. We don't remember the beginning because of course we weren't there; we've only heard the story re-told. We try to picture it, but it's so different than what we've lived that we

can't really imagine it, and so we can't really imagine what it will be like again. We don't remember where we came from, so we don't know where we're going or how to get there.

God made a very good creation in which everything had a place, everything had a purpose, and everything was in harmony with one another and with God. Everything has been made new, in the end, but the new looks a lot like the original. As John reveals to us where we're going, he tells us about a future version of that beginning, but it's infused with all kinds of images from the story of redemption. The wounds from sin are healed, but the signs of salvation are everywhere. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, we're told, and God will dwell with His people as He always intended. And as we go beyond what we read, John describes life-giving waters, just like in the story of the Garden of Eden at the beginning, and there are trees whose fruit bring life and healing, and there is light and purity and harmony and the presence of God in abundance. But now we're not in a garden, we're in a city: there are more people welcomed into God's presence than there were at the beginning: God's people are gathered in peace around God's throne in God's redeemed world. It's a re-imagining of the very good beginning, but it has all the greatest hits of the middle: the city is founded on the Apostles to remind us of the faithful witness of God's people through the ages, and the foundation is decorated with precious stones that remind us of the priests who mediated so much of God's work, and the city itself is the New Jerusalem, the center of where so much of God's work took place.

That futility of going to and fro, wondering about the future, struggling to find a path to who knows where, has given way to the fulfillment of God's promises. No more futility, only fulfillment. John's point is that God remembers His promises from all through history — the end looks like the beginning with bits of the middle all throughout, because God remembers. We wonder, but God remembers. Through all the struggles of life and the tribulations of history, through all the persecution and futility of a world that is rebelling against God, we wonder. We're not sure whether we're chasing knowledge or evil, but we know we're going to and fro, and we wonder. But God remembers. We worry about futility, but God promises fulfillment. So don't give up on God.

Maybe you noticed an odd little tidbit in our reading for today. Jesus tells John that "those who are victorious" will inherit God's promises, but then He lists the sort of people who will be excluded. The list is pretty standard stuff from a New Testament perspective; there are several places in our Bible where the writers of the New Testament will give a list of the sorts of sins that cannot be present among God's people, and though there are variations in those lists, they tend to be fairly predictable sorts of things: in this list He mentions "the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars." No surprise that those things would keep you out of God's city. But the list begins with something unusual, something that gets our attention: Jesus first mentions those who are "cowardly." Obviously cowardice isn't something we want to encourage, but since when did God consider cowardice bad enough to put first in the list of things that will send you to the lake of burning sulfur?

Being a coward is a sin in God's eyes when it means that you fear persecution or death more than you trust God. The cowards are those who give up on God because of their present difficult circumstances. They think God must have forgotten or failed in His promises because they haven't yet seen the end. They trade the promise of fulfillment for the futility of life apart from God. It's one of

the main points of the whole Revelation: don't be weak, don't give in to fear, don't be faithless because everyone around you is running around to and fro with no direction.

Don't give up on God. He remembers. We are not called to build the kingdom of God on earth. We're not called to solve all the problems in the world, or have all the answers for the world. What we're called to be is faithful. We're not called to grow up to be super-saints, we're called to be faithful to Christ and let Him do the work in us. We're called to be faithful to the methods and the goals of Christ's kingdom, because He is alive, He is Lord, and He remembers His promises. We're called to live in hope of what God is doing, to live oriented toward the goals of the new heavens and new earth rather than running to and fro after who knows what. It's here, in John's Revelation, that we catch a glimpse of the results of all of our faithfulness. All of our prayer, our worship, our sacrifice, our witness, our suffering, our commitment to God's truth, our acts of re-creation — all of those things the world thinks are silly and pointless and futile — are here shown to be effective in accomplishing God's faithfulness. God remembers His plan, and He invites you to be a part of it. Don't give up on Him.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)