

“Can God Still Surprise Us?”

Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Revelation 21:1-7

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And so, finally, after more than four months of telling the story of God together, we arrive at the final chapter that is anything *but* the final chapter. How do you conclude a story that has not ended yet? How do you bring a sense of closure to a story that future generations will keep on telling one another as they keep living in it? The revelation that was given to John is surely one of the most contested and misunderstood chapters in our entire story. Many of those misunderstandings have come from an attempt to partition off John’s revelation and those like it – Ezekiel’s and Daniel’s and Zechariah’s – and assume that their stories intersect only with the stories of our generation; it’s the assumption that they must tell *our* future, or maybe even our present. But when we put this last chapter in the context of the larger story, and we realize that John the Revelator has a message not just for us today, but also for all generations of the church, we begin to see that this chapter is not off by itself from the rest of our story. It is a conclusion that does not end the story, a final word that keeps getting repeated through the generations, a summary that is so deep that it leaves nothing out.

But how does this exceedingly strange, imagination-bending book fit in the larger scope of our story? There’s nothing else like it in the New Testament; we haven’t seen a chapter like this for a long, long time. We had wonderful stories of Jesus’ teachings and healings and parables about the kingdom of God, and we’ve had descriptions of the movement of the Spirit and growth of the church in Acts, and we’ve had Paul’s deep theology and exhortations to the young congregations he planted. But then we turn the page to this chapter and encounter a Jesus who is burning with the glory of God, whose appearance sears itself into your mind, and if we were to continue through John’s revelation we would meet demonic monsters and terrifying beasts and civilization-ending cataclysms. It really doesn’t seem in keeping with the story so far, and it certainly seems like an odd and unexpected way to end it.

The question, I think, is this: after all we’ve read and lived and experienced in the story of how God has worked to redeem His creation, after thirty chapters of this story filled with heroes and villains and twists and turns and grief and hope, after it seems like we’ve seen just about everything God can possibly do to save His people from their troubles, is it possible that God can still surprise us? Do we think we’ve seen it all and we understand how God operates – we’ve got Him in a box small enough for us to grasp it now – and now we can predict what He will do next? Do we think we’ve got a grip on this story by now? But then John the Revelator comes along with one last word, and maybe God *can* still surprise us.

It is a message – and a surprise – intended for churches and Christians in trouble, who are wondering what God is calling them to do now in their time of crisis and uncertainty. We think we’ve got a handle on God by now; we’ve seen His tricks and heard His word, so we think we know how to expect Him to save us. But we’re waiting, and He’s not living up to our prediction. The first generation of Christians are growing old and dying off, but Jesus has not yet returned. We *thought* that He’d intended to return soon. Can God still surprise us, or has He just let us down? The churches in the Roman Empire are being persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed; where is God’s salvation? We thought we knew what it looked like, and it’s not happening like we thought it would, so can He surprise us with a salvation we didn’t see coming, even now after we’ve seen so much of the story?

And now, twenty centuries later, we sometimes think we've got this salvation thing figured out. We've seen God do miraculous things, pull miraculous saves at the last minute; we've seen Him speak directly to prophets to guide His people, we've seen Him raise the dead and feed the hungry and give sight to the blind, we've heard His commands from the thundering mountaintop. We read the words of this story and we think we've got a handle on it. We think we can turn this Jesus of our story into what we want Him to be. Sometimes we think we can tame God, or at least we think He ought to behave according to our expectations. We might even read John's revelation and think we can figure it all out, we can chart it and timeline it and use it to predict God's enemies. But if we're listening to John, we hear the resounding message that this story is not over, but it will be completed on God's terms, and He is more than able to surprise us with His salvation.

John begins with a vision of the glorious, lordly Jesus speaking directly to His church by speaking directly to several local churches. He does not tell them how He will save them from their trouble. Instead, He simply and repeatedly calls them to remain faithful, to persevere, to hold fast to their commitment to Him. That's nothing new at all; the message all throughout our story has been that God is looking for a people who will be faithful to Him and trust Him in the hard times. But that is only the beginning of the revelation. The vision suddenly expands to include all of heaven and earth, and all of history and the future, and our story is put in the context of its consummation. John picks up the theme that has shown up from time to time, the subplot dealing with where all of this is heading. What is the point of history? Will God accomplish His ultimate will, and how? Is there meaning in suffering? How will it all end?

The story so far has been a glorious one filled with unexpected salvation and glory, but a lot is riding on its ending. One of the current theories for how our universe will end says that it will keep on expanding and expanding for trillions and trillions of years, until the galaxies are so far apart that they cannot be seen. The stars will likewise begin to go out as they spread to unimaginable distances, and they will run out of fuel and go cold. Eventually all matter will fall apart into a diffuse soup thinner than gas, spreading and spreading farther and farther, colder and colder, until atoms themselves fall apart completely and all energy is wasted. At that point in the unimaginably remote future, time will literally stop: if there is no energy, there will be no movement, there will be no change, nor can there ever be again, and that will be the cold, dark, empty end. It's frankly terrifying to think that that's how it will all end, even if it happens in the far, far future.

Or maybe some might say that the story never ends; it just keeps going and going pretty much like it always has with wars and suffering and death. Maybe humanity can pull itself up and build its own heaven through its own efforts using technology and politics and economics. But then what would be the point of our story with God so far? What would be the point of God's work with His creation if it comes to some other unsatisfying end? It's not salvation. But John says no, God still has some tricks up His sleeve. The ending flows out of the rest of the story; there is continuity because God has promised all along that He will save and redeem and make things right, but it's still surprising. The story of all of creation and the story of each of our lives does not have to end in cold, dark death and futility.

Hold fast and persevere, John tells the churches, in that message that we've heard over and over again. And as we persevere, John gives us a glimpse behind the curtain of what else God is doing.

Ezekiel was given a similar glimpse many years before, when God's people were in exile and Jerusalem was threatened with destruction. He was given a glimpse into the movement of God's Spirit, His presence among His people, and the meaning of their suffering could be tracked along with the movement of the Spirit. The presence or action of God's Spirit made sense of what was happening to them. John takes up that same thread, but now there's a surprise. In John's revelation, it's not just the presence of God's Spirit that makes sense of what's happening; the presence of God is now revealed in the Lamb Who Was Slain. We are ushered into the heavenly throne room of God, and as the eternal worship of God takes place, suddenly the focus shifts onto the Lamb.

From that point forward, this Lamb Who Was Slain, the most defenseless of creatures that offered its own life up, is given the authority to accomplish God's plan of surprising salvation. We see evil fighting back against Him, and we learn that evil exists because creation is in rebellion against this Lamb, and we see that history is given meaning only when it is brought to completion by this Lamb. The Lamb who is, of course, Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the entire story. It cannot make sense apart from Him, and the whole of creation simply flounders without Him.

John's revelation flows directly from the rest of our story, even though it seems so jarring. Ezekiel had promised that God would save His people with a surprise, and John takes up much of Ezekiel's imagery and recasts it in light of Jesus. Ezekiel's salvation was so surprising that God could even give life to a valley of dry, desiccated bones, devoid of any sort of life. This nation of people resurrected purely and impossibly by God's life-giving Spirit then goes on to live in a re-created nation of Israel, one that is made holy and protected by God's presence among them as He gives them new boundaries, new rulers, new priests, new holidays, and a new temple.

John takes Ezekiel's story, and the overall story of God saving us, and he places its end in that same massive city that descends from heaven for the people of God, but Ezekiel removes its temple. There is no temple, John tells us, because "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." God Himself gives it its light, and life-giving water pours forth in rivers, and healing trees bear fruit regularly. Again, this Lamb becomes the focal point of God's act of salvation and redemption. And in between the call to perseverance in the beginning and the heavenly city in the end, there are struggles and persecutions, battles and monsters, meteors and plagues. There is massive turmoil involved in finishing this story, because those who are opposed to it will fight to prevent it. Re-creation and salvation are not easy to accomplish. They can't always be predicted.

We have only just begun seeing the ways God can save us. Even after all the stories we have told, we have barely scratched the surface of the cosmic importance of Jesus and His actions for us. The last word of the Bible is a nearly indescribable vision that shocks us away from thinking we've got it all figured out. John takes all those familiar images from our story up to this point, and he imbues them with new power; he mixes them in ways we haven't seen and uses them to point us to Jesus Christ, the one who makes sense of history and gives us the surprising hope of salvation.

He confronts us with God's continued ability to surprise us. We need this, especially here at the end of our story, when we think we've heard it all, because people have always had a tendency to underestimate God's ability to save. That's the point of our faith: to trust Him when there is no way. Sometimes we get comfortable with the world and our place in it, and salvation sounds a little mundane. Do we try to tame Him and make Him do tricks for us? Other times the darkness seems too

strong, and we begin to wonder if even God can save, since none of our expectations of Him seem to be panning out. Do we give up on God? No, He can still surprise us with His salvation!



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