

August 21 Lesson: The River of Life

Summer Quarter: Partners in a New Creation
Unit 3: The Great Hope of the Saints

Sunday School Lesson for the week of August 21, 2022
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Lesson Scripture: Revelation 22:1-7

The End of the Story Takes Us Back to the Beginning

In today's lesson we come not just to the last chapter of the Book of Revelation but to the last chapter of the Bible. Think about that. This is where the story of our faith culminates in the future. This is where, in God's faithfulness, the arc of human history is directed. We, therefore, want to take it all in as much as we can and ponder its meaning.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:1-2)

When we hear “the river of the water of life” mentioned together with “the tree of life,” we are hearing echoes of the Garden of Eden. We're told in Genesis that even before God had caused it to rain, “a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground.” It is referred to as a “*river*” that “flows out of Eden to water the garden.” (Genesis 2:6,10) We're also told that “out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, *the tree of life* also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:9)

This river of life and tree of life are present where the story of our faith begins in Genesis and present again where the story culminates in Revelation. The story of our faith began in the Garden of Eden, and at the culmination of the journey, there is a return to Eden—at last! This reminds us that there is an overarching epic story that runs through the Bible. The earlier we learn this story by reading the Bible in its entirety the better. Below is an excerpt from a book I have written entitled, Layered Bible Journey.

Reading the Bible is a means of encountering God and being transformed by the encounter. By reading the Bible we are able to read what God has said and the record of what God has done in human history. Best of all, God continues to speak through the Bible and to act in the lives of those who read it. Be warned, though. The Bible is not just a neat and tidy catalogue of life lessons. It is much richer than that. The amazing variety within scripture is one of the features that make the Bible so rewarding to read. After all, the Bible is not just one book, but a diverse collection of sixty-six books. Within these books there are many stories, and interspersed among these true stories are laws, histories, sermons, teachings, poems, songs, proverbs, prophecies, gospels, letters, parables, visions, and, yes, some

genealogies and census findings thrown in. What you have in this is the evidence of a real, continuing encounter between God and many generations of people. It is out of this continuing encounter that an overarching epic story emerges.

This is the story of God and God's people that runs through the Bible. The people in the Bible are often deeply flawed, so this is a story of conflict and redemption. It is also a story of relentless love as God perseveres with these flawed people. We all love a plot like this in a story. The plot takes us on a journey.

When the last chapter of the Bible takes you back to the beginning of Genesis, it is recalling the epic story running through the Bible. The revelation of the angel to John on the island of Patmos recalls the epic journey of redemption because the angel reveals the conclusion of the story. It serves as a recapitulation of the biblical story—a review of the story's main points. The point of this is to give encouragement to the New Testament Church by reminding it of its past, revealing its future, and showing the thread connecting the beginning and the end of the story.

When I think of Eden at the beginning and the end of the biblical story, I am reminded of a quote by T.S. Eliot: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." In this lesson, we will recall the story of our faith by starting in Eden and returning to Eden. We will ponder what Eden means in the future when we return to it at the culmination of the story.

Reviewing Eden in Genesis When It Was Paradise

In the second chapter of Genesis, the Garden of Eden is paradise. It represents God's ideal. In this garden paradise, Adam was given meaningful work to do: to till and keep the garden. At this point, there is no such thing as thorns and thistles. In the paradise of Eden, toil and frustration have not become a part of work. Work in paradise is simply a calling. In Eden, any effort that Adam puts forth will be rewarded many times over by the fruit of God's work. Eden is a picture of bounty and human fulfillment.

To address Adam's isolation, God created animals to become Adam's first companions. God gave Adam the responsibility of naming the animals. Imagine Adam exploring the beautiful diversity of God's living, breathing creation and learning to categorize it and give names to it. When Eden was still perfection, there was no threat or cause for fear posed by the animals toward Adam or posed by Adam toward the animals. Eden is a picture of harmony.

We learn however that none of the animals, amazing as they are, could serve as a suitable partner for Adam. This is when God created Eve. She was created from Adam's rib which helped balance the scales between the sexes. The first woman came from a man, and after that every man that has been born has come from a woman. This is the quintessential picture of mutuality and the basis for true partnership. Adam recognized what he shared with Eve and their loving interdependence when he said, "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." There is no competition, no conflict, or shame, but a picture of innocence, mutuality, and harmony.

In the paradise of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve both freedom and limits: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden [freedom], but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat [limits], for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Genesis 2:16-17) This command was given while Eden was still paradise. This tells us that limits do not diminish our lives but instead maximize our lives. It sounds counterintuitive, but God-given limits increase our freedom and capacity to enjoy true fulfillment.

Being Expelled from Eden and the Tree of Life

In the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve disobeyed God by transgressing the limits God lovingly gave them. They ate the forbidden fruit. They wanted God-like knowledge so that perhaps they would not be as dependent upon God. Their actions amounted to a declaration of their independence. As a consequence, they learned what it means to exist on their own. There was a loss of the harmony that once existed between them and the animal kingdom. Also affected was the spirit of partnership between man and woman. Thorns, thistles, labor, toil, and frustration became a part of work. Labor pains and infant mortality became a part of child-bearing. Humankind’s mortal nature became an ever-present reality.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. Due to the sin of Adam and Eve, it became necessary for God to prevent their access to the Tree of Life. In time, they would have been granted access to the Tree of Life had they not transgressed God’s command, but we will never know what that story would have looked like. The Lord banished Adam and Eve from the garden by setting the cherubim and a flaming sword “to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24) At this point in the story, we learn that if humankind is ever to return to Eden, it will not be by the same way they were made to leave.

Soon, Cain murdered Abel. In the generations after Cain, unrestrained vengeance and evil created a world so wrought with violence and suffering that God had made the decision to flood the earth and bring an end to what God had started. The only question for God was whether to end the human experiment altogether or use this opportunity to start over and continue the experiment. God decided to begin again. The ark that God instructed Noah to build represented God’s desire to preserve a remnant of humanity who would constitute a new beginning for the human race. The rainbow is a sign of this covenant.

The Long Journey Back to Eden

This begins God’s beautiful story of redemption with all of its exquisite twists and turns. According to Genesis 12, God took the initiative and chose a couple, Abraham and Sarah, to become the objects of God’s special favor so they could model the blessings of a relationship with God. God made a covenant with them and their descendants to bless them as they, by faith, followed God’s leading. They were chosen for this blessing to become a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Their descendants would grow into God’s people Israel. When they were eventually enslaved in Egypt, God delivered them. God gave his laws so they could know how to model a life of blessing, and led them back to the land where God had first sent Abraham and Sarah. We see the covenant people become the nation, Israel. An important concern throughout is whether or not they will

choose to live faithfully under the reign of God. In the beginning they will live under God's reign without a king, then they will ask for a king. We see God make a promise to King David that his reign will last forever. When we see David's dynasty come to an end, we struggle to see how God was keeping his promise. This is when we hear of the promised coming of God's Messiah.

The story of the New Testament is about the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God. We see in his story that Jesus is not just another main character. Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, explain how he is the central character of the Bible and all of human history. Then, we see the story of the Church. After Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted to heaven, we see how his reign is manifested on the earth through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is sent to Christ's followers, they become Christ's hands and feet, his Body, in the world. We see how the Holy Spirit fills flawed men and women, calls them to lead and serve, and restores within them the image of God.

So, when we come to the Book of Revelation, we see a dramatic presentation of the struggles faced by the saints of the Church as they seek to be faithful when beset by temptations and trials. We are made to understand that the upheavals faced during these turbulent times are making way for the breaking in of God's reign. By the time we get to the last two chapters, the future culmination of God's reign unfolds before our eyes. God announces, "Behold, I am making all things new...It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." (Revelation 21:5-6)

The Return to Eden in the Last Chapter of the Bible

The last chapter of the Bible shows us the source of the water that satisfies every thirst. It is the River of Life that flows from the throne of God and the Lamb through the center of the city along its "Main Street." Reaching across both sides of the river is the Tree of Life, producing twelve kinds of fruit for every month of the year. In other words, there is no season during the year that the Tree of Life doesn't produce fruit. Droughts and famines are a thing of the past. As we picture the culmination of God's reign, we see the original bounty that existed in Eden being restored as it was before the Fall. The leaves of the tree provide for the healing of the nations. In the new creation, we see the original harmony of Eden being restored.

"Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." (Revelation 22:3-5)

Nothing accursed will ever exist in the new city—the new creation. In the new Eden, the consequences of a fallen humanity will have been dealt with through the finished work of Christ. All that happened to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from Eden will no longer be a part of the human experience in the new creation. Thorns and thistles and the like that frustrated human fulfillment will not be found in the new creation. Nor will the pains, fears, and sometimes perilous nature of childbearing be found. All the ancient enmities will be gone that grew out of the conflict between Adam and the serpent, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, as well as their descendants.

There will be no need for the descendants of Adam and Eve to try to hide from God like they did when they rebelled against God in the garden. The experiences of shame, blame, regret, and jealousy will be gone. In other words, sin and death will have been dealt with finally. The darkness within the collective heart of humankind will be overcome by the light of God's countenance, majesty, goodness, holy nature, and radiant love. There will be no need for lamps or even a sun for the Lord God will provide all the light needed. The saints of God can live fully in the light of day because their sanctification will have been made complete through the work of the Holy Spirit.

They will have been refined by their trials and their patient endurance. Any compulsion to rebel or live independently from God will have departed. The picture of God's servants worshipping God before the throne of the Lamb is a picture of the relationship between humans and God as it should be. When all is right in our relationship with God, there is no other place we'd rather be than seeing God's face. There is no other name we would want imprinted on our foreheads than the name of God.

What We Do with this Vision of Eden Now

This vision of the new creation is obviously about the future and not our present reality. We know this. We experience it. There is too much separation between God's future vision and our daily experience not to notice the tension. The question is, "What do we do with a future vision in our present daily living?" The fact that this vision is of the future should not mean that it's too remote in time or too removed from our daily experience to take seriously.

And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Revelation 22:6-7)

God is saying in no uncertain terms that this vision is not only true, but it is trustworthy. In other words, this vision is worthy for us to place our full trust in it. One reason that is given is that the God who imparted this vision is also the "God of the spirits of the prophets of old."

It was the practice of the prophets of old to show God's people what was to take place in the near future. The prophets who gave warnings of coming judgement did so in order to awaken God's people out of their complacency. If people are complacent, if they aren't alarmed about their present bad behavior, or its consequences, then let them see the future before it happens. If they see the future, they can start making changes in the present. This is what it means to live in the present in light of the future.

The prophets who gave a message of hope gave it to people who needed to be brought out of despair. If they could be told about a brighter future ahead of them and see it, they could begin to live in the present in terms of that more hopeful future. They could anticipate it and be lifted up by that sense of anticipation.

Both kinds of messages, whether of warning or of hope, were sent to energize God's people—to move them forward out of the status quo! Knowing God's future is not just about the future. Knowing the future before it happens has an effect on our present lives. Why postpone what could begin making a difference now in our lives?

The Book of Revelation is a prophecy for New Testament saints. It is filled with messages of both warning and hope. Moreover, the vision is communicated through rich, action-oriented symbolism and dramatic metaphors. The vision of a future Eden is intended to fire the imagination so the follower of Christ can live not only faithfully, but also imaginatively.

We are also told that the vision does not come to us in a vacuum. The One the vision is about is coming soon. We are blessed as we keep the words of this New Testament prophecy because we are living in anticipation of the coming King! The imminent return of Christ means we live life with a sense of urgency. More will be said about this in the next lesson.

Prayer

God of the prophets, You sent your messengers to show us the future. May you continue to fire our imaginations and guide us with visions, that we may lead lives with hope and a sense of purpose, Through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God now and forever, Amen.

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