

Sunday, 1 May 2016

[Living with our roots in the future](#)



[Rev 21:10, 22- 22:5](#)

My mother in law used to read the end of a mystery novel to figure out if the book was worth reading. ... Well, in our reading from Revelation, we get to the end of the story. Revelation is a complicated book. It is so full of symbolism and allusions you really need to have the rest of the Bible in your mind to grasp all of them. For example, our passage today is drawn heavily from Ezekiel 40—48. Throughout the book we see the numbers 12 and 7 and multiplications of 12 and 7. 7 symbolizes perfection and 12 symbolizes a kind of completeness. If the 12 tribes of Israel are present, then they are all there. If the 12 Apostles are present, then they are all there. No one is missing. The number 1000 symbolizes greatness and abundance, so we find 1000 used to multiply with other numbers to show the symbolic greatness. For example, Revelation speaks about people numbering 144,000. That is 12 times 12, which is 144, which is then multiplied by 1000. It is a number meaning everyone is there who is supposed to be there and it is a great number of people. There are jewels and precious materials, which are symbolic of

the beauty and splendor of God. It is one of those books that is incredibly powerful and beautiful, but which has also led many into very strange places. So it's important to remember that Revelation is full of symbolism. We should be careful about reading it literally, but that doesn't mean it isn't telling us truth. Some truths are so beyond our comprehension that they have to be conveyed in poetry or symbols.

In our reading, we are at the end of the book of Revelation. It is not speaking about life after death, it is speaking about life after "life after death" (as NT Wright says). This is the end goal. This is the new heaven and the new earth. It is the ultimate healing of creation. In this part of Revelation we see the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth. The popular idea about heaven and earth is that we leave earth and go to heaven, but we see here that the ultimate end of all things is a renewing of creation. We don't necessarily dwell in heaven for all eternity. We might for a time live in some kind of after death state, but that is not our ultimate end. Our ultimate eternal home is the renewed earth. The Bible talks about resurrection as being our ultimate future, not a disembodied life. The New Jerusalem comes out of heaven to earth. Revelation says Earth will be our ultimate home.

Even though John is speaking very symbolically, I still think he is speaking truth. As Christians we are invited to see this as our future. The early Christians read this and saw this as their future- A future that could never be taken away from them. In the midst of persecution and difficulty it gave them courage to live today. And it has the same power for us. Bishop NT Wright has said, "the genuine Christian hope, rooted in Jesus' resurrection, is the

hope for God's renewal of all things, for his overcoming of corruption, decay, and death, for his filling of the whole cosmos with his love and grace, his power and glory." In Revelation John is showing us a vision of that ultimate end.

If this is true, then how does this effect how you live today? If it is true that God's ultimate end is the renewal of the earth, and that the earth will be our eternal home as the heavenly city descends from heaven to earth, then how does that effect your thinking about species extinction? How does that effect your thoughts about living in balance with the earth?

In Romans 8 Paul says that the creation is groaning in expectation for the children of God to be revealed (8:19,22). The creation is not yearning for its own destruction, but for its renewal and release from the curse. When God renews a human being He does not destroy that human being and then replace them with a new human being. God is renewing you... and he is renewing creation in a similar way. So the way we treat this earthly creation matters because it will be our eternal home. We will have to learn to live with it. We will have to learn to live with it as Adam and Eve were originally intended to- as caretakers, managers, and gardeners.

So if the earth is going to be our eternal home, and it's not going to be a different planet, but a renewed planet, then what does it mean to live now as if we will have an eternal relationship with the earth and the creatures we share it with? (And, yes, when that eternal kingdom is mentioned, it does mention animals. e.g. "the wolf will lie down with the lamb"- Is 11:6, see also Is 65:25). How can we live now as we will live then, which will be

in harmony with creation?

Interestingly, in the New Jerusalem there is no temple. A temple is a place of Divine presence. It says where God is. But, it might also imply where God isn't. So where is God in this new city if there is no temple? ... God is present with His people the way he was present with Adam and Eve in the garden. God is present with his people by indwelling them. The Holy Spirit dwells in the church, the body of Christ (Mt 18:20, 28:20, Jn 4:21, 1 Cor 15:28; 1 Pet 2:4-10).

We also read that there is no night in the city. We shouldn't think about some city in the arctic where in the summer the sun doesn't actually set. This is symbolic. The darkness is symbolic. The darkness is when we get surprised, it is when we are afraid. Enemies and dangerous creatures jump out at us from the dark. The light of God fills the city and guides the steps of the inhabitants. God's light penetrates and dispels all the dark sin that tries to hide in the corners of our lives.

Next we read that the nations will be there (21:24-26). It seems like something of our nationality will remain. The gates to the city will never be shut, which means there is no danger to shut them against. In ancient times you would shut the gates at night to keep your enemy from sneaking in and attacking during the night. In the New Jerusalem human beings have learned to live in peace.

If that is our future, then how does that effect how you live now? If we will be living eternally with other people, what will have to change in our character to make that possible? ... If the

nations are going to be there and we are going to living peacefully together, then there will be no place for racism. ... If we have a tendency to get in fights and then try to avoid those people, do we think that is really a way we can live in the New Jerusalem? Is that in God's vision? An eternal avoidance, where you stay on your side and I'll stay on my side and we'll hope we never meet? No, it is important now that we develop the character to be forgiving and reconciling people because we will need the character to live with each other for all eternity. That is why we have to learn to root out pride and self-centeredness. This is why we need to root out sin and replace it with virtue. The Holy Spirit will it help us with this transformation as we gaze on Christ and the work he has done for us and the example he gave us. But the Holy Spirit will not force us into transformation- Not if we don't want it, and don't put energy towards it, and don't make it a goal of our lives. In verse 27 it says, "But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." ... So if we know we will live eternally with other people, how do we have to live now to prepare for that?

We also read that God will be incredibly present to His people. His presence will be undeniable. We will see by God's light. God's light will fill our whole lives. Life giving water will flow from the throne of God (22:1). God will provide the tree of life for food and for healing (22:2). God's servants will worship Him (22:3) and they will be marked by His name and see God's face (22:4; Ex 28:36-39).

If that is your future how does that effect how you live now?

How do you prepare for that eternity? If God is going to be constantly present to you, how will your life have to change? I heard someone say once that the saints are those who can endure the gaze of God. If we are going to have a very close eternal relationship with God, what will have to change? Does that change how we worship now, or pray now, if we think about it as preparation for eternal intimate relationship with God? ... Presumably we are going to have fulfilling work to do in the eternal reality, but there will be no separation from that work and the presence of God. As we work we will be bathed in God's presence. How do we prepare for that? Surely, thinking about God only on Sunday and forgetting about him the rest of the week won't prepare us for such a reality. What does it mean to live now preparing for God's eternal presence in our life? God will be constantly and deeply with us- eternally bathing us in His light. If that is going to be joyful, how do we prepare for that?

The Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas once said that the Christian community "has its roots in the future and its branches in the present". We are like a tree with our roots planted in the future, and our branches are in the present. We are to live now knowing that that future is secure, and preparing to live in that situation eternally.

The alternative is chilling. If we are destructive to the creation (spitting on the Artist who created it); If we want nothing to do with other people, or we are constantly in some kind of battle with people; If we are constantly trying to avoid God- then what kind of future reality are we preparing for? That sounds like a frightening reality. And one I hope we never get to experience.

As Christians we have our roots in the future. Our Identity is marked by the future promised to us by Christ. Our roots are in the resurrection. Our roots are in Jesus' victory over sin, evil, and death on the cross. Our roots are planted in the promise of life that will never end. If we really truly believe this, then how will we live now? How will we need to be changed to prepare for living in that reality? May we be so transformed that we learn to live in harmony with our fellow creatures on earth. May we be so transformed that we learn to treat each other as people of the eternal and peaceful kingdom. And may we be so transformed that we learn to feel joy as we endure the eternal loving gaze of God. AMEN