

HEADED FOR UNITY AND PEACE

SERIES: ONE KINGDOM.
INDIVISIBLE.



Catalog No. 20200712
New Creation
Final Message
Paul Taylor
July 12, 2020

New Creation

I was driving on the highway the other day and passed some of those road signs that point out when food and gas are available at the next exit. It reminded me of when we actually needed those signs. Driving was so different before Google Maps.

One of the hardest things before Google Maps was driving somewhere you had never been before. I remember driving before the internet when you'd have to pull out a paper map, look up your destination, and then figure out for yourself how to get there.

If you're trying to get somewhere, you need to know what the destination looks like. Back then we had maps which showed us our goal. Now we have Google Street view.

We need something like that, otherwise, how do we know how to *get there* if we don't know what *there* is?

Or as Yogi Berra put it, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else."

Today is our final week in the collaborative preaching series called One Kingdom. Indivisible. We've been teaching this series along with over 20 other churches in the Bay Area. In this series, we've been looking at the whole narrative of the Kingdom of God throughout Scripture.

Our goal has been to understand how we are unified as the kingdom of God and how we are supposed to interact with the world around us. Today we look at the end of the biblical story so that we know where the destination of history is headed. We need to see the end, so we know where we're going.

The great news is that at the end of it all, we are headed for unity and peace.

Having a clear picture of the new creation helps us to live in this creation. I used to use a GPS device to go geocaching with my children when they were little. The device had a big arrow on it, pointing in the direction

you needed to go. If you veered off course, the arrow turned red and pointed you back on course.

That's what this image from Revelation today can do for us. It can help us to go in the right direction. It can also warn us when we find ourselves going in a different direction.

If we notice a mismatch between the kinds of actions we're taking now and what we know that the future is going to be, then we know we aren't acting in line with the kingdom of God. That's when it's time to rethink, ask others for input, and re-evaluate.

Don't get discouraged if that's the case. We can't expect to stay perfectly oriented all the time. Sometimes there's a tree in your way, and you have to walk around. Sometimes you get confused and stop paying attention to the GPS. The important thing is to be willing to be corrected. Don't think you've failed if you're off course; we're all figuring this out. Allow the Spirit to re-orient you, guide you in a better direction, and keep moving.

This morning we'll begin by seeing how the future of the world is certain according to Scriptures. Then we'll look at a high-level summary of what that future will be like. We'll conclude with suggestions of how we should live in the meantime.

Kingdom of God will arrive

The book of Revelation paints a breathtaking picture of how Christ will return to complete his work of redemption. In vivid detail, we see the ultimate defeat of evil. We preached through this incredible book during the 2018-2019 school year. All our sermons are online at pbc.org/sermons if you're interested.

We're going to start today by looking at one of the most encouraging verses in the book.

Revelation 11:15:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”

Think about this phrase: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” This is the promise God makes in the book of Revelation, and it is a beautiful promise.

Think about the kingdom of this world we live in and all the issues around us: pandemic, racism, politics, oppression, poverty, injustice. The list goes on and on. But we have this incredible promise, and we know how the story ends. “The kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.”

With this proclamation, the New Testament story of the kingdom of God is complete. Two weeks ago, we heard of Jesus proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. Last week we heard of the church living as the kingdom of God amid the kingdom of the world.

Now we hear that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of God. This is how the story ends, although it might be better to say that this is how the story begins. The new creation begins here and lasts “forever and ever.”

Knowing the end of the story changes everything. We have a certain knowledge of how it all turns out. We know that the kingdom of God will prevail, so we hope for the kingdom of God.

Hope is a major theme of the entire Book of Revelation. It’s probably the main reason the book was written. We need hope all the time—maybe even more so now.

Listen to what the Russian author Dostoevsky said about hope:

To live without hope is to cease to live. Hell is hopelessness. It is no accident that above the entrance to Dante’s hell is the inscription: “Leave behind all hope, you who enter here.”¹

The Book of Revelation gives us hope because it shows us a picture of what is to come, and it also tells us how hope is sustained. If hope is a fire, Revelation shows us what the logs are that we throw on the fire to keep it burning. Two of those logs are worship and suffering.

The book of Revelation is permeated with worship. It begins with worship—almost every page shows groups of people and heavenly beings worshipping God—and it ends with an incredible doxology of worship.

Worship fuels our hope. It is a clear acknowledgment that we cannot live independently. Worship orients us toward God. We are all of us tempted to put other things in place of God: ourselves, our spouses, our friends, money, reputation, legacy, success. But when we worship the one true God, we acknowledge that he is our only hope. Worship fuels our hope.

If worship is one of the logs, then suffering is the other. You can’t read through the book of Revelation without noticing how much God’s faithful people suffer unjustly at the hands of the world powers.

In Revelation, God finally relieves the suffering of his faithful ones. But the message is clear. The path toward the kingdom of God is not an easy one. Faithfulness to Jesus does not mean you avoid suffering. In most cases, it is the opposite. Our suffering contributes to the kingdom of God.

Jesus does not give us a life of convenience. He does not relieve all our suffering in the here and now. He calls us to live in a counter-cultural way. He calls us to sacrifice, and he calls us to obey even when it is difficult.

When we suffer, we have two choices. The first is to despair and let our pain overwhelm us. Many people succumb to this temptation. But if you combine your suffering with worship, then you get something different. When we suffer in the knowledge that we serve a good and powerful God, then our pain leads us to hope.

Suffering with worship leads to hope. This is what it feels like in the kingdom of this world as it transforms into the kingdom of Jesus. Our suffering combines with our worship and gives us hope. Suffering plus worship equals hope.

I love watching the 49ers play football. However, when they play on Sunday mornings, I have to record the game and watch it later in the afternoon. Sometimes people let the score slip before I can watch it.

But if I know the 49ers win, I don’t usually mind that much. I can watch them make mistakes. I can watch them fall behind. No matter what happens, it only adds to the fun of the game because I know I’ll be happy when it’s over.

Imagine if you had that kind of confidence about your life—if you knew without a doubt that your life would end in celebration of the victory of Jesus. Then you could see the pain and the confusion and the dark moments and the joys and the accomplishments in a whole different context. It would all just be part of the exciting drama that you knew ends well.

But we do have that kind of confidence. If you have received salvation from Jesus, you know that you are headed toward that moment when the kingdom of the earth becomes the kingdom of Jesus. This should change everything. You have real hope. We can live differently.

We know that the kingdom of Jesus is coming. This is where history is headed. But what is that direction? What will the new creation be like?

Kingdom of God will bring unity and peace

We can't fully answer the question of what the new creation will be like in a part of a sermon, but I'd like to highlight two primary aspects of the new creation. Each of them comes as the final culmination of the entire biblical story. All of history has been moving toward these goals.

The first is from Revelation 7:9-10. Listen to how the people of the Kingdom of God are described:

Revelation 7:9-10:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

This is an incredible picture. It makes me think of the Bay Area Blessing video that was released a month ago as well as the Blessing videos that have been released from regions all around the world.

In most of those videos, there's a scene where all the voices appear on a video grid singing at once. As more people get added to the grid, each individual image gets smaller, but the overall sound and effect get larger. This is what I imagine now when I think of "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all the tribes and peoples and languages."

The kingdom of God is headed for an incredible unity across all the demographic lines that we know of. This is why we should be concerned when we observe that today the kingdom of God is divided by those same lines.

It should bother us that white evangelical Christians tend to vote drastically different from black and Latino evangelical Christians. It should cause us to stop and think when American evangelical Christianity has such different goals than evangelical Christianity in Asia or Latin America or Africa. If we're headed for this kind of unity, why so much division now? If we share the same theology, how is it that we apply that theology to the here and now so differently?

These questions should be unavoidable if we really view ourselves as the kingdom of God. If our kingdom allegiance is stronger than our political alliance, we need to be exploring these discrepancies. I don't pretend to have the answers to these questions, but it worries me that I don't see many people even asking the questions.

In the new creation, Jesus brings together all these people. It is a beautiful picture of unity. Do our actions here align with that image?

The other picture comes later in Revelation. Not only is the new creation characterized by unity, but by a deep sense of peace.

Revelation 21:4 and 22:1-2:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

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 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Notice the lack of pain and death in the first passage. Think about how many of the issues we care about involve death. The current movement around racial justice has been at least in part catalyzed by black men being killed by law enforcement officers. Abortion involves the death of unborn children. Immigration

concerns people wanting to find a place where they can support their life. Concern for the poor looks at the crushing experience of life in poverty. Without death, we'd have no need of politics! There would be nothing to argue over.

What's pictured here in Revelation is a deep sense of what the Hebrew language captures as "*shalom*." We usually translate that word as "peace." That's about as good a word as we have in English, but the Hebrew concept is much deeper. It's a holistic well-being, not just lack of conflict and anxiety, but the permeating sense of rightness.

Here's a Jewish scholar's definition of *shalom*: "In the Bible, the word *shalom* is most commonly used to refer to a *state of affairs*, one of wellbeing, tranquility, prosperity, and security, circumstances unblemished by any sort of defect."²

This is the picture in Revelation: everything is as it was meant to be for everyone. Again, this should cause us to ask some questions of our opinions on earth. Are we only trying to make our lives work? Are we advocating for the things that matter to us? Or are we seeking a whole earth *shalom* for all people? To put it bluntly: are we trying to win the game, or are we trying to bring peace?

At the end of the story of the kingdom of God, we see a kingdom of unity and peace. The kingdom of God will bring unity and peace.

The question for us is: Do our efforts today work toward that end? Are the things we are involved with lining up in accordance with those values as our true north? If unity and peace were arrows on a compass, would our lives be pointed in the same direction?

When I hold pre-marital counseling with couples, I tell them that planning a wedding is a great exercise to prepare for marriage. Many of the issues which will come up over the next several decades are previewed in wedding planning: financial planning and spending; expectations of in-laws; balancing perspectives and preferences; intimacy and physical connection.

I tell couples not just to try and "get through" the period of engagement, but to view it as a time to learn skills which will serve them well for years to come. All the difficult conversations, along with the fun and exciting ones, can truly prepare you for a lifetime together.

That same principle is true for us in our lives. We are preparing ourselves for eternity. We have a basic picture of what life will look like in the new creation; however, just as a young dating couple can't really imagine what it will be like to be married for 50 years, we can't completely imagine life in eternity.

Think about our political efforts. Think about how we relate to the world around us. Do our efforts line up with the eternal goals of unity and peace? I'm not sure they always do. Sometimes we seem to create division and discord. But those efforts won't last.

Only when we work towards the kinds of values that are in line with the new creation can we be assured that our efforts will not be in vain. We won't always be able to see in this world how we're making a difference, but if we are aligned with God's will for his kingdom, then our work is eternal.

Be a garden of God

We've seen that the new creation is assured. We have a unique hope based on our knowledge that God's kingdom will prevail. We've seen a bit of what that kingdom looks like—it is characterized by unity and peace. So where does that leave us?

I'd like to return to a phrase that we've seen come up over and over again throughout this study. God used it when he gave his people an identity after rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. We saw it again given to the church in 1 Peter, and it shows up several times in the Book of Revelation.

Revelation 1:5b-6:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

We are a "kingdom of priests." As we hope for, worship, and suffer towards the eternal kingdom of unity and *shalom*, our role is to be a kingdom of priests.

The general idea of a priest is one who stands between. A priest mediates between God and man. This was the central cry of the Reformation: the priesthood of all believers. If you know Jesus, you don't need a priest. You have direct access to God.

But for those who don't know Jesus, we are like priests. We proclaim the gospel to them, and we show them what the kingdom of God looks like. As one of the other pastors put it, "the church creates mini-kingdoms where the glory of God is on display."

In my family's front yard, we have several planter boxes. They are little gardens where we grow vegetables. Those gardens are cared for well. They are like miniature fields with plenty of water and perfect soil. We monitor the growth of our plants.

We couldn't make our whole yard into a garden. The best we can do is to have a few planters. But within those planters, everything is perfectly suited to growth.

That's the church. We are like little planters of the kingdom of God. Within our communities, we are supposed to thrive. We have the gospel of Jesus; we have the fruit of the Spirit; we have forgiveness and grace and truth and sympathy. We love because God first loved us. Be a garden of God.

When you get to the book of Revelation, the new creation itself is pictured as a garden turned city. The tree of life is at the center, bringing healing and growth. We can't do that—that's God's work to complete in his timing.

But as we wait, we can create a picture of that new creation within our communities of the kingdom of God. Even that isn't easy. Many communities, even of faithful believers, are full of weeds and overrun by neglect and division.

But this is our call—to create in us an example of the kingdom of God. We are characterized by unity and peace. Our suffering combines with worship to produce hope. We become a foreshadowing of the kingdom of God to come.

Conclusion

We wanted to do a series like this because it's too easy for the church to mirror the culture. Our culture is divisive. Our culture picks sides. Our culture demonizes and exaggerates and polarizes. While we might expect that behavior in the kingdom of the world, those things have no place in the kingdom of God.

We cannot let the politics and social issues of this world dictate the way we treat each other. We have a

higher calling. By tracing the kingdom of God through the whole of Scripture, I hope we've been able to see that calling.

It's hard to end a series like this because it feels like there is so much more to say. We've hardly begun to answer the questions that are in our world; however, the goal of this series has not been to give us the answers to all of our questions. Our hope has been to help us see a theological grid from which to ask questions. That grid has to do with our unity as the kingdom of God and God's work throughout history in and through his people.

It began in creation when God launched a massive group project for people to work together to bless the world. But division happened immediately and thwarted our efforts to bless the world.

When God rescued his people from Egypt, he called them to be distinct. He defeated the world power that oppressed them and gave them a Law which would define their character.

But God's people failed to live up to that Law, so one thousand years later, he sent them into exile to be transformed into the kind of people God intended. That transformation would shape them into people who bless the world, even in partnership with those who might stand against God.

Then Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. His death and resurrection offered people from any ethnic and social background the opportunity to be restored to God and united with each other. His message offered a third way of relating to the divisive world.

Then the early church worked to live out this message. They came together in the midst of their diversity. They loved each other and paid special care to the oppressed and vulnerable around them.

Today we've seen the grand conclusion to the story. All of history wrapped up into the kingdom of God when Jesus returns to sit on his throne. A world of unity and peace. This is our destination.

There are a lot of stories which define who you are—your family stories, your ethnic background, your personality, your political opinions, the groups you resonate with and the groups you dislike.

But if you are a follower of Jesus, then this story of the kingdom of God is your primary story. This is your identity. Find your place in this story. Orient yourself to the true north of our common destination. Depend on God. Make unity primary. And get to work.

Endnotes

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, quoted in *AZ Quotes* <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1416201>.

2 Dr Aviezer Ravitzky, "Shalom: Peace in Hebrew," *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shalom>