

WHAT THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR¹

At long last we start our sermon series on the "hereafter," which means simply the future or the ultimate destiny of things. Usually, we think of the hereafter as a way of talking about heaven or hell and our personal destiny after we die. And we're going to talk about that. But today I'm going to talk about where history is headed. You see, our personal destination and the outcome of history are related. It makes sense to talk about where everything is headed first.

Here's a question: what do you think, are things getting better and better or worse and worse? It's a tough question. The Book of Proverbs has a saying about not complaining all the time about things getting worse. I think it's easier to think everything is getting worse. "Young people nowadays just don't know...And then you fill in the blank. Kids don't know what hard work is, or how to have fun or what family values can mean. There's a delicious smarminess about seeing everything as a signal that the world is going "down the tubes."

Of course, we could also think that things are getting better and better. We're living in an era that has greatly benefitted from science and technology. The modern mindset assumes that progress is unstoppable. Each new invention or

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innovation gives the impression that knowledge and prosperity will continue indefinitely.

Now, I don't know how you are answering the question of better or worse. But doesn't it make sense that how you answer that question determines how you live right now. If you think that things are getting better and better on their own, then you can sit back and wait. Even when great evil rears its ugly head you can think, "This too will pass." If you think there is ultimately no hope for the world, the wisest thing is to get out. Barricade yourself away in your own world or hope for heavenly paradise in a better place. I detect this longing for heaven in Appalachian gospel music. Some of you may know something of a life working in a coal mine or as a share cropper, with mouths to feed, bills to pay, backwoods isolation. Suddenly, the old hymn makes sense.

Just a few more weary days and then
I'll fly away.
To a land where joys will never end
I'll fly away.

It's significant that the first Christians neither believed that the world was getting better nor worse. What they believed was that God would one day do for the whole creation what he did for Jesus when he raised him from the dead. And what God did for Jesus was to breathe life back into his body and bring him

alive into the world again. What God did not do for Jesus was to separate a soul from a dead body and carry the soul out of this world to a better, spiritual place where God the father lives.

If we apply the resurrection victory to this world we might say that one day God will restore all things in this world so that they—at long last—are what God intended them to be.

Here's a jarring fact: the Bible says very little about going to heaven. What the Bible talks about is heaven coming to earth. How often do we repeat it in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come?" We don't say "To thy kingdom may we go."

Put differently, the big tension isn't between things in this world and things up in heaven. The big tension in the Bible is between how things are now and how things will be in the world to come which God is bringing.

Let's look at our Bible passage from the Book of Revelation. The image here is of God's ultimate wrap-up of all things. The commanding image here is of a new heaven coming to be joined with a new-created earth. It's all cast as a sublime marriage ceremony. For heaven and earth to be joined is like a man and woman being married. They were made for one another. They are only complete when they are joined forever together in love.

After the completion of our text there is a curiosity. The New Jerusalem established in the world has no Temple. Strange. But isn't the function of the Temple to be a substitute for God's presence in the world? It seems that if God has completely moved into the world, the Temple would be obsolete.

So, to summarize, the ultimate destiny of this world and all here peoples is to be renewed and joined to God. The action will take place in the world as we know it. Everything you see is slated to be renewed.

The spirituality teacher and theologian, Dallis Willard, has made the observation that the overall climate of interpersonal relationships is vastly cooler and more distant than humans were designed for or what we've settled for. We pay our bill at a restaurant and exchange perfunctory words with the cashier. "How was your meal?" "I'm putting this on my MasterCard." What if Dallis Willard was correct? What if the conversation really should be, "I hope you're well, can I do anything for you? You've got such kind eyes..." And so on.

If in fact we're in the habit of relating with one another at only a thin fraction of our potential, then there comes a day when all inter-personal exchanges and friendships will be immeasurably more cordial.

So what are we saying this morning? The hereafter for this world will be worked out in this world. There's something precious and permanent about what God has created. It will never be discarded or left behind. There's something precious and permanent about what God has created that will one day be perfected. Someday God will realize the potential of this world with here peoples and natural resources, and will move in with us. Be married to us.

That sheds light on what we do. We certainly don't get permanent riffs going between ourselves and others. We don't trash the world by over-consuming its resources. We don't ignore the world.

Instead, we begin the work now of setting aside false gods. We love simple and vulnerable peoples. We work each day as if we're God's partner in the perfecting of creation. We make friends. We keep misunderstandings from becoming feuds. Because a grand marriage is coming. And we don't want to be caught unprepared.