

**Sermon Series: God Is...**

**Sermon Title: Already - Not Yet**

**Revelation 21:1-7**

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These past several weeks we have been exploring together things we know to be true about God. We saw how God is both wild and predictable, vast and personal, and compassionate and just. Today we wrap up our series “God Is” by looking at how God’s saving work in the world is both already accomplished and also not yet fully realized. Already, not yet. God’s kingdom is already here. Christ inaugurated it with his life, death, and resurrection. As Jesus said from the cross – it is finished, it is accomplished. God saved the world through Christ, once and for all. And yet that salvation is still arriving. It’s not yet fully here. We wait for Jesus to return to make God’s promised salvation complete and to bring God’s kingdom fully on earth as it is in heaven. So salvation is both already and not yet. In each expression – the already and the not yet – we find hope. And hope changes everything.

Our text today is from the book of Revelation. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ according to John*, as it’s often titled, is one of the toughest books of the bible to understand. Someone once told me that to avoid being too discouraged, just read the first three and the last three chapters. That’s not bad advice. Revelation is more like a book of poetry, and it’s full of symbols that were meaningful to particular people and situations in John’s day and time. It’s also replete with scripture references. According to Eugene Peterson, within the 404 verses in Revelation there are 518 direct references to scripture.<sup>1</sup> People in John’s time were generally more biblically literate than we are, so it was easier for them to decipher all the symbolism. Today we’re going to stick to the advice I was given, and we’ll read from the second to last chapter, chapter 21. Hear these words about the life of the world to come, the salvation that is already and not yet.

**Revelation 21:1- 7** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 Then he said to me, "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*

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, p 369.

*spring of the water of life. 7 Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.*

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

I can't wait for the time we just read about to be here. It's obviously not here yet, as mourning and crying and pain and death are very much a part of our everyday existence. It seems like more and more these days I find myself longing, almost aching for things to be different. For the world to be a better place. I join my voice to cry out with the psalmist, "How long, oh Lord?" How much longer before Jesus returns and sets all things right? How long must we wait until you make all things new? How long will we be stuck in the not yet?

I've mentioned before that I grew up in a church that placed a lot of emphasis on believing the right way. It was very important in that church to think correctly about who God is and what God has done. I was taught that if I thought correctly, if I believed the right way, then one day I would be able to get to heaven. For a long time I thought this was pretty much the entire reason for faith – to believe the right things about Jesus so that one day I could get to heaven and be with him forever. As I look back on that time in my life I realize that I spent a lot of my spiritual energy looking only to the future – the not yet – without fully considering how my faith impacted my present circumstances – the already.

But what good is it to have all the right answers for someday in the future when life in the present suddenly becomes a mess? How does knowing about heaven help put food on the table? Or keep a struggling marriage together? Or heal a sick body? Is the assurance of heaven *someday* enough to get us through *today*? Is life really just about hanging on until I fly away? What good is a "not yet" faith in an "already" world that's falling apart?

I recently started rereading NT Wright's wonderful and challenging book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. A pastor friend of mine tells the story of a parishioner walking into his pastor's office with his hands trembling as he clutches this book. He says to his pastor, "If this book is true, then my whole life has to change."<sup>2</sup>

The premise of NT Wright's book that had this man so out of sorts is that many contemporary Christians seem more preoccupied with getting to heaven someday than we are with participating in the kingdom of heaven today. That was once true of my own faith journey, and so I can relate to that parishioner's predicament. I had inklings that there must be more to faith than waiting around to die, but I hadn't yet received the language or the theological training to understand that God's salvation was much richer and more complex than I'd originally been

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/april/surprised-by-n-t-wright.html>

taught. I only had part of the story. The full story is that salvation is both already and not yet. Salvation is not just about getting to heaven someday; it's also about following Jesus today. That truth changed my understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

In Luke 17:21 Jesus told his disciples, "*The kingdom of God is among/near/within you.*" That means God's kingdom is here now and we're called to participate in it now, not just wait around until we someday go to heaven. When I began to understand the reality of already not yet, I realized, like that parishioner, my whole life has to change.

Fortunately, God is very much active in the life-changing business. Listen to how Paul explains it in Second Corinthians 5:<sup>3</sup>

2 Corinthians 5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

This is an "already" version of John's "not yet" revelation. Paul's words echo those of Jesus revealed to John in Rev 21:5 where Jesus says, "See, I am making all things new!"

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. This is the mystery we celebrate at our baptism. God joins us to Christ and claims us as God's children. Through the grace imparted in that baptismal water, everything old in us has passed away. All the parts of us that pull us into sin, all the parts of us that draw us away from God, all the parts that make it difficult for us to love God and neighbor above all else. Those things belong to the old way of life, and they pass away, drowned in the transforming waters of baptism. Now everything has become new. Right then and there we are made a new creation. We belong to God, sealed by the power of the Holy Spirit until the day of our redemption. You see, Baptism is also already not yet. In Christ, we are already a new creation. But we are not yet all God has intended for us to be. So we spend our lives living into our baptism, striving to become more and more like Jesus until he returns. When Christ comes again he will make another new creation, making all things new.

But before we get to the not yet part, I want to take a deeper look at the already. Because that's the part that I somehow missed before I went to seminary. Once I began to understand that (and I'm still very much learning), that's the part that made me realize my whole life had to change.

Let's look again at the Apostle Paul's words from second Corinthians 5.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On screen please 1 Cor 5:17 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> On screen please 1 Cor 5:17-20

*2 Corinthians 5:17* So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! *18* All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; *19* that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. *20* So we are ambassadors for Christ...

Since we have been made a new creation, we have a responsibility. And it's not just to sit around and wait for Jesus to come back! Paul says we have work to do. We are to be ambassadors for Christ, carrying out the ministry of reconciliation, actively participating in God's kingdom coming on earth now. There's hope in the already – God is with us, making all things new – and we're called to be ambassadors of that good news.

What that means is that since there are people whose lives are a mess, we're called to enter that mess with them and share God's love in the midst of it. That's being an ambassador for Christ, participating in God's coming kingdom now. Since there are people who don't have enough food on the table, we're called to share our daily bread. Since there are people whose marriages are falling apart, we're called to help them stay together so long as that's possible in a healthy way. Since there are people who are sick, we're called to lay hands on them, pray for healing, and walk with them either until their illness passes or they enter God's eternal rest in the company of the saints. This is the mission we are called to participate in. This is God's ongoing work of making all things new not just *someday* but *right now*, and it gives us hope and purpose for today regardless of how messy or difficult our present circumstances are. This is what salvation looks like in the already.

When I began to receive that truth, my entire understanding of what it meant to be a Christian changed. I still believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for the sins of the world, even mine, and rose again in order that I and whoever believes in him might have eternal life. I believe that with all my heart. But following Jesus is about so much more than just believing the right things so that one day we'll be with him in heaven. What changed in my heart is the sense of urgency for how to live out the time between now and heaven, the time between the already and the not yet. The kingdom of God is among us, and we're Christ's ambassadors for it. So our mission in the time God gives us on earth is to bring hope and reconciliation by pointing people Christ while God continues making all things new.

Certainly part of the hope we bring now is connected with our hope for the future, as we read from Revelation 21. It's a hope that one day God will make *all* things new – heaven and earth and everything in them. All of it made into a new creation, fit for eternity – a place where God comes

down to dwell with us and be our God and wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Our hope for this time and place rests in Jesus, who says in verse 5: “See, I am making all things new.” We know this is true because Jesus has begun this work already. He started with himself. When Jesus rose from the dead he became the firstborn of the new creation we are all waiting for. His resurrected body is fit for eternity, and one day when he raises us from the dead, ours will be too. Christ is already, we are not yet.

And so as Christians, we live in the tension of the already and the not yet. But as ambassadors for Christ, we participate in the coming kingdom by pointing people to the one who was and is and is to come. We wait, hope, and trust in one who transcends time – the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. The One who proclaims with His death and resurrection, “It is done, finished, accomplished.” And also, “I am making all things new.” Until He comes again, may we believe with our hearts and demonstrate with our lives the hope to which He has called us. Because hope in Christ changes everything, now and forever. Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Amen.