

The Bible: Our True Story
Act Six—
“A New Heavens and Earth”

Passages: Rev. 21:1–8
Matthew 24:3–14

The thesis undergirding this 10-week sermon series is quite simple: Life is a story, and the Bible is a cosmic reflection of that story. Indeed, as we've seen, this Story of Life is so big that it stretches back to a time before the world was made...a time when only God existed! It also extends forward in time, through Creation and the Fall, through the time of the Patriarchs, the Prophets and the Kings; through the time of Jesus, His cross, resurrection and subsequent elevation as King; to His disciples, the early church; and then forward to us, today! That's why we call it cosmic—For everything in creation is part of this story!

But, of course, every story has an ending! And that's what we want to look at today—How does this Cosmic Story end?

Let's pray.

So, what will be the ending of our cosmic story? How will the story of the human race (and the story of our planet and our universe) finish?

Lots of people imagine that the earth will end with some sort of disaster! Many films have this as their central plot:

On the Beach (made in **1959**) was a post-apocalyptic film starring Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner, based on Nevil Shute's 1957 novel. The story was set in a then-future 1964, in the months following World War III. This nuclear conflict has devastated the northern hemisphere, polluting the atmosphere with nuclear fallout and killing all life. While the bombs were confined to the northern hemisphere, air currents are slowly carrying the fallout south. The only areas still habitable are in the far southern hemisphere, like Australia.

Dr. Strangelove (1964) Stanley Kubrick plants a smile on our faces while our planet is being destroyed in this, the ultimate, Cold War-era comedy.

Planet of the Apes (1968)

This groundbreaking 1968 Sci-Fi adventure wasn't sold as an end of the world scenario, but that's its biggest surprise. A crew of NASA astronauts crash on, what they believe to be a far off planet, millions of light years from Earth. This world is filled with talking Apes who keep human beings as slaves and consider them inferior. Our hero (Charlton Heston) searches for a way to get back home, but at the end of the film he makes a startling discovery: this is home. This is the earth.

War of the Worlds (2005)

Steven Spielberg's version of the classic H.G. Wells story about an alien attack on Earth was released in theatres just four years after the attack of 9/11. It's hard to forget Spielberg's scenes of large scale destruction as seen through the eyes of a single family: a divorced dock worker (Tom Cruise) desperate to keep his kids safe.

Melancholia (2011)

This Lars von Trier film about how two sisters – one a chronic depressive, the other an emotionally-stunted control freak – deal with the possibility of extinction as a mysterious planet heads directly for the earth.

Of course, most of us laugh at these films! For deep, down inside, we have a far happier ending in mind... where we our grandkids “live happily ever after”. But, will that be the case? Can we be sure that evil won't win? Can we be sure that the bad guys won't get the upper hand? **Can we be sure that some tin-pot leader in North Korea won't initiate a nuclear war that annihilates the planet?**

You know, the Bible is often interpreted as a Story with a very unhappy ending! Many Christians believe that the Bible speaks of

the end of our planet...the end of life as we know it... when everything on earth will be destroyed!

(Watch this YouTube clip!)

Quoting from **Matthew 24** and various texts from the **Book of Revelation**, many Christians are convinced that the destruction of the planet—by wars and nuclear bombs, by fire, flood and a variety of extreme natural disasters—is a sign of Jesus’ return to earth! And they go on from these terrifying scenes to point out that, if you believe in Jesus, He will lift you up from this earth (in what is called “the rapture”) and take you to a new heavens and a new earth. (Indeed, that’s the only part of their story that is Good News!)

In other words, for them, the Gospel is fundamentally a story about **escape!** “Jesus died for me so that I might **go to heaven.**” And until that day, Jesus will help me escape from all my difficulties: He’ll help me to overcome my anxieties and depression; He’ll help me find parking places when I need them; and He’ll make my business successful and give me everything I want... until the day of the rapture and I can get out of this mess of a world! (Some Christians even take perverse delight in knowing that climate change is real or that this N. Korean dictator might start a nuclear war!)

But, is this really the Gospel? Not as I understand it! Indeed, this Gospel of escape actually undermines the true Gospel of Jesus Christ! How?

Think back over the last 9 weeks of this sermon series. The first thing we learned is that the Gospel is God’s Story, not ours! Indeed, it’s a Good Story...Good News... that began in eternity; inside the life of the Trinity; well before the earth or human beings were even created! Now, it’s true that you and I have become part of that good story, because the Gospel is about perfect relationships; about love, service, devotion, connection, intimacy, and self-sacrifice that all flow from the Triune God. But

notice; we are the offspring of that Story, not the Parents! Since eternity, the Father, Son and Spirit have doing something that we have only recently entered into.

The second thing we learned is that **the Gospel is the Good News that this creation is essentially good!** From the very beginning, when God looked over all He had made, He said, “It is very good!” Since then, God has not changed His mind! That’s why Jesus came bearing human flesh—He came to bring back its original value and worth! He came to sanctify it and restore it. And that’s why He died and was raised again; to resurrect humankind to a new life on this **good** earth, as God’s vice-regents over His **good** creation.

The third thing we learned follows on from that: The Gospel is the unfolding story of God’s determination to re-establish His Kingdom on this fallen earth-- His people in His place, under His gracious rule. And so, even when humankind rebelled against God’s rule (and were evicted from God’s place and stripped of their title as God’s people) this Good News of God’s Kingdom would still not change! After all, how could the Triune God allow His creatures to stop Him from fulfilling His plans? Indeed, that’s what the Old Testament is all about—it’s about God’s determination to redeem what Satan had stolen; to renew what sin had tarnished; to re-vivify His creation corrupted by death! In other words, **the Gospel is the Good News that our God is a determined Lover** who will not rest until He has brought all things back into the glorious harmony of His original plans and purposes for this world! For **His** Kingdom will prevail! He will not rest until He has re-established **His** people in **His** place, under **His** rule....until He has re-ignited **His** eternal dance of life on this earth! That is why Jesus Christ was raised to the right hand of God the Father, “**so that He might reign until all His enemies are put under His feet! The last enemy to be destroyed is death!**”

What this means is that the word “**Gospel**” cannot be united with the word “**escape**”, but only with the words “**redemption,**

restoration, renewal and salvation". Jesus Christ is not ditching this universe. He didn't come to take us out of the world! He didn't die so that you and I can go to some ethereal place called "heaven". Rather, Jesus came to save the world...the whole created order...from the destructive forces of sin, corruption, disease and death. Indeed, at the very present time, He is in the process of restoring it to its pre-Fall perfection... and to the beauty of its original relationships! Jesus Christ is calling the entire created order back into the cosmic dance of life!

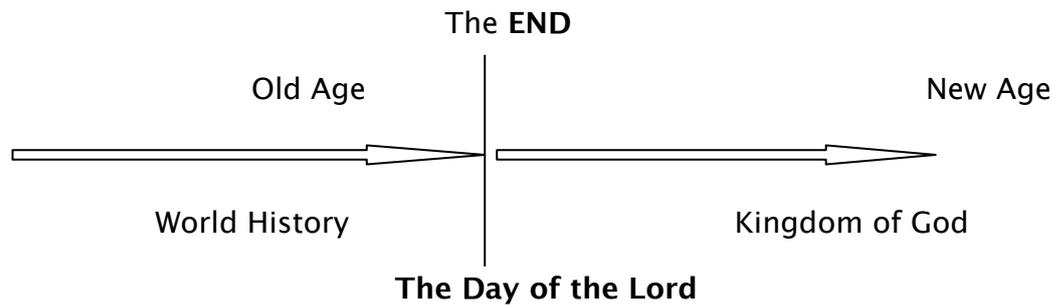
With this in mind, it's worth going back over **Matthew 24** to see what Jesus really said about "**the end of the age**".

(vv1-2) It's been a day or two since Jesus cleansed the Temple and kicked out the money-changers, and Jesus and His disciples are back at the Temple in Jerusalem. As the disciples admire the craftsmanship of the Temple, Jesus points to the temple stones (massive hand-hewn boulders) and says, "Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

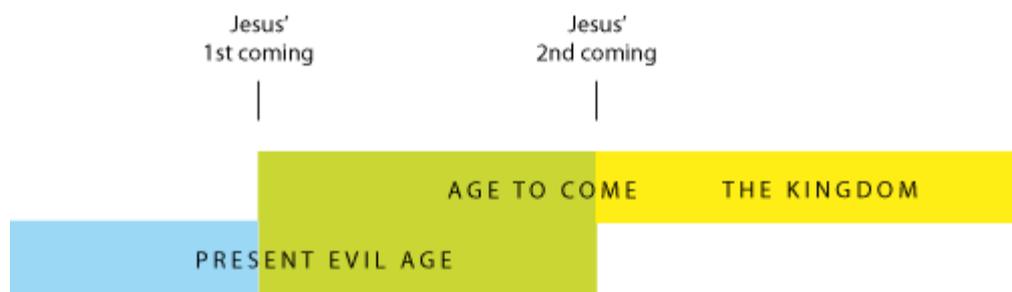
Of course, it's a statement that was meant to arouse their curiosity and so, at the first opportunity, they come back to Jesus and ask (in verse 3), "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and **the end of the age**?" They, no doubt, are thinking that Jesus will do another one of His 'triumphal entries' into Jerusalem and that, **this time, He will come with an even greater fury!** The imagine Him destroying the massive structure of the Temple, thus ushering in a new age of liberation from Rome and a newer and better Jewish religion in a newer and better Temple.

This, in fact, was a very common worldview of the Jews in Jesus' day, developed from Old Testament prophecies, in which the history of the world was broken down into two halves. On the left half of the time-line is the present evil world. Suddenly, however, this present evil world is interrupted by the Day of the Lord. The in-breaking rule of God's Messiah brings an end to all evil. The

evil world is totally replaced and establish His Kingdom of perfect righteousness. Clearly, the evil world order is totally destroyed and replaced by a new world order. (See the diagram below.)



But Jesus had a different view of history! Jesus knew that He was first going to die, be raised from the dead and taken into heaven, and that, from there, He would begin a transition period in which “the Kingdoms of this world” would gradually be overturned and become “the Kingdoms of our God and of his Christ”. This would be the time in which Jesus would reign “until all His enemies are under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”



Jesus also knew that the time between His first and second comings would contain all sorts of trials and tribulations for God’s people as they awaited the final consummation of God’s kingdom at Jesus’ return to earth. They clearly wouldn’t escape... but, by His grace, they would cope! That’s why, in Matthew 24, Jesus gives His disciples a series of warnings about what they can expect to happen in this ‘in-between’ time.

(Matthew 24:4–5) **"Take heed that no one deceives you; For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ, and will deceive many'".**

(Matthew 24:6–7) **"And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars... For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom**

against kingdom.” (This was how the stones of the Temple were eventually torn down...by the Roman army, in 70AD!)

(Matthew 24:7–8) **“And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows”**

(Matthew 24:10, 12) **“And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another . . . And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold”.**

Now, a lot of Christians see these things happening today and get worried that the end must be nigh! But think again-- Jesus was simply making a list of things that would happen between the day of His departure and the day of His return! Moreover, in verse 6, Jesus cautioned them: **“See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.”** Then, in v. 8, Jesus referred to these things as simply “the beginning of “birthpains”.

Even though we may experience **“a time of great distress, such as has never been from the beginning of the world until now, and will never be again”**, Jesus still makes it clear that this time of trial and tribulation should not cause us alarm. **“For the sake of God's chosen it will be cut short”** (verses 21–22). In other words, God is still in control! And He will certainly not allow a North Korean dictator to derail His plans!

So, what are God’s plans for the end? It’s simple, really! The Scriptures make it clear that **Jesus will return to this earth to bring to completion/ perfection what He began in the first visit!**

Let us be very clear about this point: Jesus will not return to do something totally new; He won’t come back after the earth is destroyed to create a totally brand new heaven and earth. Rather, He will come **to complete** what He began through his life, death and resurrection. After all, in the Gospels, didn’t Jesus heal the sick and raise the dead? Didn’t He touch blinds and deaf ears so

that these people might once again rejoice in this good creation? Weren't all of Jesus' miracles about renewing this broken earth and making it whole again? The same focus that Jesus had in the Gospels will be, quite simply, the point of Jesus' return—to bring His full salvation to this universe...making everything new! He is coming back to heal the world and put it back together again, as it was meant to be, in a renewed heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells.

Despite what many have claimed, this is the clear message of **Revelation 21!**

v.1 John sees **“a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had passed away.”** What does he mean by that? He means that everything that corrupted the first heavens and earth has now been dealt with! It has been destroyed in the lake of fire. This means that the old heaven and earth have been liberated from everything that held it back. They have undergone a renewal—a resurrection! The old has passed away; behold, all things are now made new!

v.1 **“There was no longer any sea.”** The sea represents turmoil and danger; any threat to life. These, too, have been dealt with by Jesus!

v. 2. **I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”** John sees us, God's people. We are the new Jerusalem; we are the bride of Christ, and we've been finally set free from every sin and stain. We are pure and fully devoted to Jesus, coming down from our heavenly experiences with Him to live on, and to rule over, this earth.

v. 3 **And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.** With His return, Jesus is forever physically present with us, and our relationship is restored to its pre-fall perfection.

v. 4 **‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’** With Jesus’ return to earth, every remnant of our former fallen world will be healed. It will be a new beginning. It will be the happy ending that we all long for! But it will require that Jesus must return to personally make it happen! (At this point, let me read an extract from Naomi Reed’s book of her experiences with lepers in Nepal.)

There’s only one verse left in Revelation 21 that we need to focus on, and that’s verse 5.

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

These words neatly summarise the ending of the Bible’s cosmic story! Although lots of people have imagined that the earth will be destroyed by some sort of disaster, they are wrong! The Bible makes it clear that the only thing that will be destroyed is evil, along with all the forces of corruption that hold this world back from being perfect once again. God’s agenda has always been (and will always be) to **make all things new!**

So, don’t worry about men like Kim Jung Un. Rather, pray for him! May he give up his warring madness and see that the Kingdom of God has already begun to break to reign on this earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen!**