Revelation

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[0:00] A Brazilian writer by the name of Fernando Sabino penned this somewhat famous phrase, everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, then it's not the end.

It's a phrase that's been used in a movie or two, a book or two, a TV show or two. It's also a quote that would not be completely out of place in trying to summarize the book of Revelation. That's how it's felt up to this point. Even in the sections that we've skipped over, we've just jumped from chapter 12 to chapter 19, but all the bits that we've looked at and the bits we haven't looked at have made it really clear life is tough, but it won't always be that way.
The church is under persecution. Christians are struggling. In fact, the whole of the scriptures up to this point resound with this cry of God's people, how long, O Lord? When will justice come?
When will you fix this? And then here in Revelation, over and over, there is the promise that justice is coming, that very soon God will make it right. And today, finally, in the second last scene of the book of Revelation, we reach that moment. But this scene doesn't open with the vision of an event. There is an event or two in there, but this vision that John sees here in chapter 19 is actually a vision of identity rather than a vision of an event. As we get to this final act in history, we need to almost go back to the beginning. We need to look at Jesus again as he is, as he has shown himself to be, and as he will always remain. And so look with me at verse 11, at this vision of Jesus, this timeless vision of Jesus.
I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This is a description of who Jesus is. It's true that he does things that qualify him and justify these titles, but this picture is Jesus in his glory and splendor. He is the victorious king. He is the victorious one who rides in on the horse. The one who has already won the battle against
[2:59] Satan on the cross. The one who has already done what needs to be done, and the one who already now sits on the throne in heaven and will forever sit on the throne in heaven. Before we get to the end, we must remember who Jesus is. He is the king who reigns with all power and authority and majesty.

For the church of the first century suffering fierce persecution, and for our church suffering the daily temptation towards apathy or laziness or compromise, for all of us we must be reminded that the struggles we face, the battles we engage in daily, are just the fading evidence of an already beaten resistance, because the victorious king is on the throne now. Before we worry about what comes next, John begins, God begins, by revealing Jesus to us again. Jesus will not make some late arrival that will suddenly turn the tide of the church's battle in history. He is not the warrior waiting for just the right moment for the final showdown. He is on the throne now. He has sufficient authority and power now. He is the king of kings and the lord of lords. He is the one who judges. He is the one who will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God almighty. He is king now.
And having seen Jesus, now we get to the event. Now we get to the finish line. Now we get to the final battle. But it's not much of a battle. I don't know if you noticed this, but the battle is actually over before it even begins. Listen to what the angel says in verse 17. John sees the angel standing in the sun and the angel cries out in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, come gather together for the great supper of God so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals and mighty

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men of horses and their riders and the flesh of all people free and slave, small and great. Come gather together for supper. There is about to be a whole army laid waste, a feast for the birds. But the armies haven't even gathered for battle yet.
So far all we have is the angel predicting what's going to happen when the army does gather for battle. In a second the armies will gather in opposition to God. The kings of the earth and those who have opposed God will gather together for battle. But this angel is already confident that this is not a battle. The outcome is already decided. Before the battle takes place, he invites the birds to feet on the spoils. Because listen to how it plays out. Verse 19, I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But, so the scene is set for an epic showdown between good and evil.
But verse 20 kind of, it's an anticlimax. The beast was captured. With him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. The two of them are thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The leadership of these armies that would oppose God are beaten before the battle can happen. And the armies that remain in verse 21 are killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse. And all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. No sooner has this apparent opposition to God and to Jesus' kingship gathered as an army to face off with Jesus as they are defeated. The beast is thrown into the lake of fire. The false prophet, their representative of Satan, they are thrown into the lake of fire. There is no power for Satan when he stands in the presence of a victorious king, Jesus. And everyone else in this battle is cut down by the word of God.
[7:03] Cut down by the sword that comes out of Jesus' mouth. There is no battle here. All there is, is the exertion of authority and power that Jesus already has. The battle was fought when Jesus came to earth the first time. The battle was fought at the cross. And so Jesus uses the authority and power that he was given when he rose from the dead. We looked at this last week in chapter 12. He was snatched up to heaven. He sits on the throne now with the name above every name, with authority to rule and to judge. And so he exercises that authority which he already has. The end of time will not be a battle between Jesus and Satan. It will be the final destruction of an already defeated enemy in the devil. It's there again in chapter 20. John's kind of tells this story in two sequences, if you like.

In chapter 20 and verse 7, we get the same thing using different words. When the thousand years are over, we're going to come back to that. But when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. Gog and Magog are just cities out of the old. It's a person and a city out of the Old Testament that fought against God's people, Israel. So it's just representative. Satan's going to go out and gather anybody who doesn't call Jesus their Lord and gather them for an apparent battle with the king. It says, in number, they're like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. So the tension is building. This numerous army that is too numerous to count is gathered in opposition to Jesus as king. They are led by Satan himself. But again, anti-climax. Have a look at it. Verse 9. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.
There is no battle. Those who oppose God will be destroyed. Verse 10. The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever. The nations are gathered, same as they were in chapter 19. They're deluded by Satan into thinking that there is some possibility that they can rule themselves, that they can oppose Jesus. But there is no battle. There is no victory for those who would work to undermine the rule and reign of Jesus. Even as they surround the people of God, they are destroyed. It's the same scene described twice. It's the final showdown between Jesus and his enemy, but it's not really a showdown. It is the inevitable conclusion to the victory that Jesus won on the cross. Satan has been defeated. The battle has already been won.
I don't know that that many of us take a whole lot of interest in the rugby league state of origin. I personally don't, and I'm thankful that my Bible study group doesn't because it meant we could still have Bible study on Wednesday nights for a few weeks earlier in the year. But I remember this year's state of origin, it struck me as strange that they needed to play a third game.
You know, given it was the first time New South Wales had won in nine years, and maybe they wanted to savour the moment. But it's a best of three series. So once you've won two games, the

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third one seems a little bit redundant. But they did play a third game, and something strange happened, because in that third game, Queensland won quite convincingly. But at the end of the game, New South Wales was awarded a trophy. And Queensland was looking somewhat dejected and forlorn, having ended a nine-year winning streak. And approaching that final game, there may have been a sense of hope. There may have been a sense that there is a chance for victory, but actually the outcome was already decided. It didn't matter what happened in that last 80 minutes of football, the trophy would be awarded to the team that had already won the victory, that had already done what needed to be done to win the trophy. And in the same way, we may look at life and feel like
[11:23] God is on the losing side at the moment. We may feel like we are on the losing side at the moment. We may feel like Satan is taking all this ground in our lives and in our cities and in our world, but we need to understand that the victory has already been won. When we get to the end of time, it doesn't matter what happens between now and then, you can be assured that the victor will receive the crown and the victor is Jesus. When he died on the cross and rose again, Satan was emptied of his power. His greatest weapon, death, was defeated. And so Jesus is already exalted.

His rule and his reign aren't open to challenge. They are established and they will be established forever and ever. Let me tell you why this is incredibly good news. Because the victory that we long for in life, the freedom from sin and temptation, the freedom from sickness, the freedom from death, the freedom from Satan is inevitable. Because the battle has already been won.
No matter how much you struggle, no matter how many times you stumble, our hope is certain. Because it's already won. Because the fight has already taken place. Because Jesus is already on the throne. Because of the cross, what we hope for is inevitable. One day Jesus will return and bring the justice that we so desperately desire.
This week, when I was working on this sermon, I, for a break, went for a wander down the road and ended up in a shop buying a pair of jeans. It's amazing what you do to procrastinate when you're struggling. While I was in there buying a pair of jeans, I was just chatting with the girl who was selling them and taking my money from me. And she asked me innocently enough, have you got much planned for the weekend? Now, as an Anglican minister, that's an open goal.
So I just casually said, oh, weekends are pretty busy for me with work. And she kind of let it go for a sec and then said, oh, what do you do? After I told her I was an Anglican minister, she didn't believe me at first. But eventually said, okay, fair enough. Doesn't seem to be joking.
[13:51] And we ended up having a conversation for quite a while. She asked me a question, what's the difference between Catholic and Christian? Do you actually believe Jesus is real? You know, are you allowed to get married? Is your wife a Christian? Does it affect the way you raise your kids? All these questions over and over and over. But the main question that stuck with me was, does believing that there is more than this life give you hope now?

I had some fantastic answers about five minutes later. But in the moment, I fumbled out something like absolutely. I struggled to elaborate, but I knew I wanted to say yes, and I wanted to say it strongly. So I said, absolutely. It is really tempting for us, even as we wade through a book like Revelation, to get excited about the finish line that God is painting for us. And it is exciting.
But we've got to understand that the hope that he gives us is not just about the future. It's a hope that transforms now as well. As we get to this end point of Revelation, and as we see what is the final scene, we know this is the final scene because Satan is being defeated and cast into the lake of fire forever. He will not come back from there. This is the light in the sand where Jesus is making things right. As we have our eyes lifted to that glorious destination, there is still the need for a pastoral word. There is still the need for us to wrestle with the reality of pain and suffering and doubt because we're not there yet. As exciting as this picture is, we've got to admit that sometimes we're not that excited. As much as we want to get there one day, we are easily distracted.
And so we come to chapter 20, which I believe is a pastoral word for the first century church, but for us as well. Now, before we go into this section, I want to acknowledge that chapter 20 verses 1 to 6 are some of the most confusing verses that I've come across in scripture.
Lots of people who love Jesus have different opinions about what is really going on here. I read a lot of commentaries and had a lot of people tell me different things. Throughout generations, people have argued about this and people have used this passage in some really unhelpful ways, but I want us to focus on what's the key here.

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[16:17] A quick reminder, when we read prophecy, which is what Revelation is, we need to remember that it's highly symbolic. What that means is these are pictures which point to realities, not pictures of reality. It's a subtle difference, but it's important. So when we look at chapter 9 and verse 11 and we see Jesus depicted as a rider on a white horse, that seems normal enough. So we go, he must be riding a horse. But that's not the point. The symbol is that he is victorious. That's why he's riding a horse. The symbol is he's pure and holy. That's why he's dressed in white. They're symbols that point to truth. The blood on him is pointing us to the blood that he shed, which was the means by which he won the victory over Satan. It is symbolic. And so when we look at this passage in front of us, we need to try and wade past the getting stuck on details and understand what is Jesus trying to say to us? What is this vision trying to point us to? And I think there is a clear emphasis.

We see Satan bound at the beginning of chapter 20. And I think that's pointing us back to what Jesus achieved on the cross. Last week, we saw him cast out of heaven and being effectively bound and limited. I believe that's what's going on there. But then it shifts in verse 4. And this is where the pastoral word comes in, I believe. Verse 4 says, I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.

This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. Now, we've got to remember that this letter, this book of Revelation was first written to a first century church, to a martyr church, to a church that was very familiar with its members being killed simply for trusting in Jesus. We have a much more comfortable version of what it is to be God's church. But even today, our experience of being a Christian is the exception rather than the rule. God's church faces opposition in the world and this church, when it was receiving these words, knew what it was to have their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and husbands and wives and children killed for refusing to bow down and worship the Roman Emperor.

The victorious vision of Jesus in chapter 19 rubs with that experience. The idea that he is riding in to restore all things rubs against the experience of burying a loved one. Maybe it even rubs against your experience of following Jesus now. It rubs against the times where you fail in temptation again and again.

It rubs against the times where you doubt God's faithfulness, where you wonder whether or not he could really love you. And so again, God wants to remind us, as we look at the end and it may seem distant, remember, God will vindicate his people. Although they are dying, although they're being tossed aside and treated like they are nothing and worthless, they will reign with Christ in victory and authority.

[20:10] God will not forget those who trust in him, who remain faithful to him. He is taking the hope of future and transforming the present with it. Those who have lost loved ones, those who may face death themselves, are being reminded that your hope means death is no longer to be feared.

Don't fear the first death, Jesus encourages us in Luke's gospel. Fear the one who can throw body and soul into hell. When we trust in Jesus and our eternity is secure, there is nothing to fear in this life.

Because our end remains secure. The victory of the cross and its future benefits give us hope now. Not just an idea, not just something to look forward to, but it redefines our experience now. It redefines our reality now. So that even as we suffer, even as we find difficulty in life, we have a hope that is stronger than anything life can throw at us.

Stronger even than death. Christian hope allows us to see the right finish line. And it's not our death. Because that will come for everyone.

[21:29] It is what is talked about in these last few verses here. One of the things that I like to do, although I'm liking it less and less the older I get, is running.

It tricks me into thinking that I'm sort of healthy and that maybe I'll get even healthier. And occasionally, when I run, because I'm in so much pain and just thinking this is ridiculous, why did I

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do this?
I play mind games with myself. And so I create finish lines that I have to get to and then I give myself permission to walk or to have a break. One day I got particularly ambitious and I decided that I would run to Gordon and back.
For those playing at home, it's about 10k. I was feeling extra ambitious, so I thought I would do it on the other side of the train line, which basically goes like this, from here to Gordon. The problem with this is, you can only see as far as the top of the next hill.
And so in agony, I would start my way up a hill thinking, this must be the last one. If I just get to the top of here, I'll be at Gordon and then I can have a break and turn around and come back. And it must have been seven or eight times that I was absolutely devastated to discover that there was another hill.
[22:39] The downhill didn't soften the blow of knowing that there was more work to come. When we have the wrong finish line in view, we will only be disappointed.

Because as I got to the top of each hill, I'd achieved what was my goal, but it wasn't actually my goal because the real finish line was getting to Gordon and then getting back. A danger for us as Christians is we get distracted by right now.
We get distracted by the reality of death and think that it's the finish line. And so we think that everything that's going to satisfy us and make us happy has to be achieved between now and that line.
And so we try things, we grab things that we think will make us happy, and the reality is we're disappointed because it's not where we're going. It's not what we were designed for.
It's not the end point. It's not the finish line. Our hope for eternity gives us the ability to see that the true finish line comes when we face God.
[23:42] Physical death will be a reality for all. But Jesus says, do not fear those who can only harm the body. Fear the torment of eternal judgment because that is the finish line for everyone.

Have a look with me at verse 11. These are some scary and difficult verses to read. Having seen the final victory, having seen Satan cast into the lake of fire, John sees this.
I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened.
Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.
Everyone will face God's judgment.
[24:57] The good and the bad. King, slave, small, great, man, woman, all will stand before God and give account for the lives they have lived, the good and the bad.

Did you catch there? Earth and sky disappear. There will be nowhere to hide. Those who have died are brought back from the sea and death and Hades and then those places are destroyed. Remember, this is symbolic. The point is, there is nowhere else except for in front of the judgment seat of God. Everything that exists and everything that has ever existed will stand and be held accountable for the lives that they have lived.
This is a scary thing to talk about. Judgment is a word that we try and avoid as Christians. We avoid it in a room like this even when we're among friends. We especially avoid it when that helpful non-Christian friend asks whether or not we think they'll be judged.
We like to water down that possibility. We like to step around it. And there's a rightness to that because there is a gravity of this that we must understand.
[26:10] This judgment is final. This judgment is an eternal fork in the road. It's the difference between eternal delight in heaven with our maker or eternal torment.

This is the finish line which should dictate how we run. This is the finish line that should dictate how we live. This is the great equaliser.
It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. all will stand and face their creator. It's good and right that we feel the weight of that.
Especially for those of us who have loved ones who we know right now are on the wrong side of that ledger. It's good and right that there is something to be feared.

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Judgment is scary. Unless verse 15 if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire.
[27:20] If your name is in the book of life judgment is not to be feared. It might be embarrassing as your life and your deeds are made public and laid bare but if you have placed your trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus then your name is in the book of life.

And this will not be your finish line. This will be your entry into heaven. Our judgment is in no way based on the good or bad that we've done even though they're going to be there and they're going to be in the books the difference between the lake of fire and eternal delight in heaven is one thing. Those who have their name written in the book of life. And so if you are trusting Jesus then judgment is not something to be feared.
It's something to be excited about. It's something to be anticipated. Even as we wrestle now with the pain of people in our lives who don't know Jesus and this is all of my family right now my brothers, my sisters, my mum, my dad we must understand that even in these few verses there is incredible hope because it doesn't matter what they have or haven't done to this point.
It doesn't matter what they will or won't do from this point forward all that matters is that they accept the offer of Jesus to forgive them and wash them and have their names written in this book of life.
[29:04] So long as there is breath in them there is hope and there is opportunity. And if you're sitting in this room tonight and you hear about judgment and it is something that scares you I want to encourage you that Jesus invites you to trust him so that judgment is not scary but exciting because judgment becomes the beginning of heaven for those whose names are in the book of life.

This is the final act. What we see as we jump into the next chapter and we're going to next week is that the new heaven arrives. And so this judgment is actually a part of God preparing a perfect eternity for us.
This is an essential part of God removing all that is sinful and sick and all that is opposed to him. This is a necessary part of God fulfilling all his promises to us.
This is part of God giving us all that we have hoped for and all that he has promised. This final judgment will mean the end of the old way of things and the beginning of God's perfect new creation.
And so if you believe that Jesus died to forgive your sins then the idea of judgment is not something to be shy about or nervous about. It's not even something to be afraid of.
[30:26] It's something to look forward to because it marks the beginning of heaven for you. It marks the arrival of everything that God has promised and everything that you could ever want.

This passage in Revelation is the moment that we've been building to the whole way through this book. We've had little glimpses of heaven on the way through. We've seen the lamb on the throne. We've seen the churches gathered around.
We've had these little bits of excitement but now as we're getting to the end John is no longer having to look from earth to heaven because heaven has come to earth. Earth and sky have been destroyed.
Justice has come. The finish line is in view and it is inevitable. Jesus' final, complete, full, glorious victory is here and it's not scary.
Everything will be okay in the end and if it's not okay then it's not the end. It's not a bad summary of Revelation but it probably doesn't do it justice really. Everything will not be okay in the end.
[31:35] Everything will be perfect in the end. Everything will be beyond our deepest desires and hopes. God's perfect creation for all eternity.

And so maybe a better summary is that picture in chapter 21 and verse 1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. That's the summary.
That's where we're going to. That's the point of all of this. Everything that we've looked at is that that is the guaranteed finish line for those who know Jesus. A new and better heaven and earth. A new and perfect heaven and earth.
That is our hope. So that means right now as you suffer you know that it will not last forever. That means that right now as you face difficulty and hardship you know that there is nothing that anybody can do to you that will take away what is best and that is your eternal home in heaven. What a hope we have in this king who rides the white horse. What a hope we have to share with those who don't yet know it. You don't have to do anything.

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[32:50] You just have to trust this king. What a hope we have to rest on no matter what life throws at us. Because the victory is won and the end is inevitable.

Let's pray. Father God we want to ask that you would help us help us as we struggle help us as we doubt help us as we feel the pain of those around us who don't yet know you.
Help us as we deal with persecution in our own life as we deal with temptation as we deal with failure. Help us to understand that it's not a battle that can be lost.
That you have won the victory irreversibly and all we await is that final ceremony that final celebration our eternal home.
Father if there are people in this room who don't yet know the hope that we have been talking about who don't know what it is to be forgiven who don't know what it is to feel safe even in that final judgment I pray that right now you would give them the assurance that you have forgiven them in Jesus.
[34:25] I pray that you would give us boldness to speak about the hope that is in you. Protect us from being timid or shy or apologetic. May we boldly declare that there is a finish line for all creation but that in you there is the offer of life and forgiveness for more than just now.

Father thank you so much for Jesus. Give us this vision of Jesus this vision of our King victorious and powerful and may it release us to live lives of peace and joy and hope that bring all glory to you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen. We have had a great challenge placed before us in the end here.

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