

"They Will Reign Forever"

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Happy Father's Day. Would you turn with me to the book of Revelation, chapter 22, verses 1 through 5.

If you'd like to follow along in the Pew Bible, it's the very last page. It's very easy to find. Revelation 22, we're looking at 1 through 5 today.

So for the last few weeks in our series, we've been considering the ultimate future, the ultimate hope of God's plan for creation. Where is God taking his world, his people?

That's what we've been looking at. And today we come to the final part of that future vision in Revelation 22. So let me pray, and then I'll read for us.

Father, as we return again to this powerful book of Revelation, we ask for your Spirit's help to illuminate your word.

[1 : 03] Just as your Spirit inspired it long ago, we pray that his work would continue now to unfold and cause to work in us this word that you've given.

We pray above all that we would see Christ so that we might, as we just sung, cling to him and become the people, the humans, the church you've created us to be.

We ask this in his name. Amen. All right, let me read. 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 through the middle of the street of the city.

Also, on either side of the river, the tree of life, with its 12 kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

[2 : 13] And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

So, the moral philosopher Alistair MacIntyre once wrote, I can only answer the question, what am I to do, if I can answer the prior question, of what story or stories do I find myself a part?

I can only answer the question, what am I to do, if I can answer the prior question, of what story am I in, right? In other words, he's saying, you don't know who you are, you don't know how to really live, until you know the story you're a part of.

You need to know what story you're in, in order to really know who you are, and how to live. But that's sort of the big question, isn't it?

What is the story we're a part of? And the Bible comes to us, you see, just at this level. Because the Bible's not primarily a set of rules that we're supposed to follow, although it has some of those.

[3 : 30] The Bible's primarily a narrative. It's a story. In fact, the Bible claims to be the true story of humanity and the world, and most importantly, of God.

And it's in that story that we find who we really are and how to really live. That story begins in a garden in Genesis 1 and 2.

And in Revelation 21 and 22, we see how the story ends. And of course, you need to know how the story ends, right? You need to know where the story's going to really make sense of the whole thing.

Now, I think that everyone has kind of an ending in mind when they think about the story that they're in, right? Whether they've articulated that or not, we all sort of have an ending in mind.

That's just kind of how meaning works. That's sort of how we work as human beings, right? Think of some of the broad cultural movements that vie for our attention and our allegiance today.

[4 : 38] You know, the so-called conservative movement wants to return to a golden age of the past. That's their future, right? Or the so-called progressive movement wants a sort of revolutionary

advance to a utopia that can be created through our kind of human revolution.

What's interesting is that both of those movements, if you look at it through history, is that both of those movements are actually borrowing elements from the Christian faith that precede them.

And they're both wrong. As we see here in Revelation 22, the story does end in a garden. The language here is full of obvious allusions to the Garden of Eden, isn't it?

But it's not merely a garden. It's not just a return to the past. Because this garden is also a city.

There's a street. And there's gates and there's foundations.

It's the New Jerusalem. So the Bible says the story ends in a garden city. It's both a return and an advance.

[5 : 46] It's neither strictly conservative or progressive. It's something else altogether. But here's the biggest difference. All these other human movements say that it all comes down to what?

To human effort to get there. Humans are at the center of all of our human movements, aren't they? Whether it's conservative or progressive, we have to get there through what we do.

But what's at the center of this vision in Scripture? God. God. The future belongs to God.

The story ends in a garden city that's also very much a temple. That's where God's ultimate future is headed for his people.

God dwells in the center of this garden city, filling it with his presence. In fact, John says, not just God, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there.

[6 : 47] The throne. The sovereign rule of God. Now that's significant. This image of the throne being in the garden city.

If you've been following Revelation, you'll remember all the way back in chapter 4 and 5, where is the throne in chapters 4 and 5? It's in heaven, right?

And it's glorious and it's wonderful. But what's happened here in chapters 21 and 22? The throne has come to earth and it's made all things new.

It's a new heaven and a new earth. The kingdom of God has arrived in fullness. The reign of heaven has come to earth. That's what John sees here. That's how the story ends.

So you see, the Bible story isn't a picture of humans kind of climbing up to God, scaling a stairway to heaven. No.

[7 : 51] The Bible story is about God's kingdom, his rule, his reign, his throne coming down to us. And what's at the heart of our passage this morning, Revelation 22, 1 through 5, is that it shows us what happens when the throne arrives, when the kingdom is consummated.

So what will it be like when this story ends, when the throne of God arrives? Well, according to what we see here, the throne of God brings total healing.

When God's reign arrives in fullness, it heals. It heals everything. We see here the healing of creation, the healing of the nations, and even the healing of our very selves.

What God has in store, the great conclusion of this story we're in, is the throne of God bringing total healing materially, socially, and personally. So let's look at each of those three things in turn and then consider how we might live now knowing that's how the story ends.

So first, in this ultimate future that God has in store, the throne of God brings healing to creation, to the material world. Now, to appreciate the fullness of how this passage starts, you have to go back to the beginning of chapter 21 where the whole section begins.

[9 : 23] And there we read that John sees what? He sees a new heaven and a new earth because the first had passed away. And then in verse 5, God says, Behold, I'm making all things new.

Now, when we looked at these verses a couple weeks ago, we pointed out a tension because on the one hand, the new heavens and the new earth seem radically distinct from the first. But on the other hand, they seem intimately connected to the first, don't they?

After all, God doesn't say, He doesn't say, I'm going to make all new things, right? He says, no, I'm making all things new. But one thing is for sure.

The ultimate future that God has in store does not leave this material order behind. The new heavens and new earth will not be immaterial or ethereal.

It will be the healing of creation. In chapter 22, verse 1, back in our passage, John sees a river flowing from the throne with life-giving water. Now, this is the fulfillment of a passage in the prophet Ezekiel.

[10 : 31] If you were to go back and read chapter 47 of Ezekiel, we're shown water flowing from a totally renewed temple. And as the water flows, it gets deeper and deeper.

And as the water flows deeper and deeper, it brings flourishing. The deserts are watered, the plants grow, the fish jump. And on both sides of the river, trees grow.

Ezekiel says, with all kinds of food that don't wither and their fruit doesn't fail. And he says, their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.

And all of what Ezekiel saw so many years ago will come to fulfillment, Revelation 22 says, in the new heavens and new earth. When God's kingdom is consummated and he makes all things new, that's what Ezekiel was looking forward to.

This healing of creation. Now consider then, consider how different the throne of God is compared to human thrones or human empires.

[11:41] Right? What do most human kingdoms leave in their wake? Sadly, not the flourishing that we see here. Instead of life-giving streams healing the material world, most human empires bring greed and burning and destruction.

Right? And this is our first clue that the kingdom of God is on a different level entirely than human kingdoms. Don't think that God's throne is just some elevated version of a human throne, some sort of projection of human authority to the nth degree.

No. God's authority, His rule when it comes in fullness will be totally different. It won't mar the earth. It'll mend it. When God created all things and called them good, He meant it.

And He will not abandon His material world in the end. Now I wonder if this changes how you and I approach this material creation we inhabit.

You see, the created order isn't a mere resource to be consumed for our own designs. That's how human empires think. No, no.

[12:59] This created order is a good gift from God. And first and foremost, it's a testament to God's majesty. Imagine walking into an artist's studio.

Imagine walking into an artist's studio. Perhaps she's a sculptor, right? Seeing a newly finished sculpture and saying, you know, I could probably melt that down and make something useful out of it.

Right? How absurd would that be? Friends, it's the same with the world around us. The creation is something to steward wisely.

Remembering, first of all, that it doesn't belong to us. And it, too, in the story that we're a part of, has a role to play. It will be healed and it will flourish in the future that God has in store.

But it's not just creation that's healed. The second thing we see is at the end of verse 2, what John describes as the healing of the nations. As the river flows from the throne of God, John says, the tree of life is there.

[14:08] Now, I admit, it's a bit confusing at first how this tree of life is on either side of the river. Perhaps John is speaking kind of collectively.

In other words, perhaps there's a whole grove of trees. That would align with Ezekiel's vision that we mentioned earlier. Or perhaps, perhaps the tree's branches are so great that they stretch to either side of the river.

I think if we try to overthink it, we're sort of missing the point because either way, the most important point here is to pick up the obvious allusion to the opening chapters of Genesis. Genesis. In the midst of the old Eden was the tree of life.

And here, in this new Eden, we find the tree of life once again. And humans have access to it. But as we've said, this isn't just some return to the beginning.

It actually surpasses. It exceeds the first. In this garden city where God's rule is consummated, the trees line the river.

[15:08] There's a whole grove. The fruit grows every month. And the leaves don't just keep something alive. They heal.

The leaves heal the nations. Of course, we don't need any convincing that there needs to be healing of the nations, do we? Human history has been a long, tragic saga of feuding and war and ethnic strife.

But beneath the shade of those trees, in the new heaven and the new earth, in the garden city of the fullness of God's reign, the enmities and animosities, the wrongs and retributions, they'll be healed.

Again, how vastly different is God's throne from any human throne? Read any account of human history. What happens when a new human empire rises? Or when a new king or queen takes a

throne?

It's rarely ever peace. Or what happens when a human revolution succeeds? When the old system is torn down and a new one takes its place?

[16:20] Does the new order abolish conflict and enmity? Does it bring healing? So often it does not. But the reign of God is completely different.

When God's rule arrives, it will heal the nations. Now, given that God will accomplish this work in the future through His own sovereign reign, does that mean we should not pray and work for peace here and now?

Well, I think it's just the opposite. After all, God says He'll redeem a people from every tribe and tongue and nation. Every nation, every ethnicity is worthy of dignity and honor and respect. People from every nation will gather under the leaves of those trees and be at peace. If I knew I was going to eat dinner with you later today or spend the afternoon, you know, we'd spend dinner eating together, would I spend the afternoon just sort of saying terrible things about you and harboring all sort of gossipy half-truths about who you are?

Right? I hope not. That's going to prove for an awkward dinner, isn't it? Well, friends, you see, the story that we're in ends with the nations at peace.

[17:39] It ends with us gathering under those trees together. The story we're in ends with the nations at peace.

It ends with our relationships at peace. And so we do our best to forgive and live at peace now. That's the story we're in.

Of course, it won't be perfect in this life. Some relationships, tragically, won't be reconciled until the new heavens and the new earth. Some boundaries, wisely, will have to stay in place until we gather on the banks of the river in the new Jerusalem.

But even so, the words of Jesus are still true. Blessed are the peacemakers. Not the warmongers, not the conquerors, not the powerful.

Blessed are the peacemakers. That's how the story ends. But third, we see not just the total healing of the material world and the social world.

[18:49] In verses 4 and 5, the throne of God brings the healing of our very selves. It's personal. Our very identity is healed. His servants will worship Him, the end of verse 3 says.

They will see His face and His name will be on their foreheads and night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever. Who are we as humans? What were we created for? What's our purpose? Look at how the story ends.

On the one hand, we were created to be worshipers of God. His servants will worship Him. Verse 3. You see, friends, we were created to behold God in all of His beauty and let our hearts feast in delight.

It's like a kite catching the wind and soaring and being awash in the rays of the sun. We were made to soar higher and higher, awash in the joy of God.

[20:04] Father, Son, and Spirit. As the psalmist said so many years ago, in Your presence there is fullness of joy.

At Your right hand, God, are pleasures forevermore. Joy, pleasure, the worship of God. You see, one of the great lies that we've come to believe is that happiness can be found by looking within. The lie that says if we follow our heart, if we're true to what we feel, then we'll find the authenticity and the happiness that we so desperately lack.

And so, hearing this message over and over, we've turned completely inward, looking for the answer to wholeness to happiness inside.

And then we're told that in order to be our authentic selves, we need to not just find it, but create it. Right? The voice of our time says, go your own way.

[21:15] Chart your own course. And at first, that feels pretty authentic, doesn't it? It feels very brave, right? But then you start to realize something.

You start to say, wait a second. If every movie, if every advertisement, if every song, if every social media post blares at me the same message, go your own way, am I not just conforming to the crowd around me when I go my own way?

Aren't I just following what I'm being told to do? I mean, how authentic is it to go your own way when that's what everyone around you is telling you that's what you should be doing? Being true to

yourself and following your feelings just might be the most hackneyed approach to life that there is. But you know, there are plenty of companies and plenty of brands and plenty of advertising agencies that would love for you and I to keep believing this. Why?

Because our culture of identity construction has been totally commodified. What do I mean by that? In other words, if you're going to create your true self, you're going to need to buy some stuff.

[22 : 32] Right? You want to be a rugged individualist? Here's a company ready to sell you a truck, some \$400 pair of boots, and just the right pair of jeans, and you will be the rugged individualist.

So you create that identity and you project it to the world. And it doesn't really matter which identity you choose. You want to be a Baptist pastor? Shop at J.Crew and buy a couple shirts, right?

There you are. It's all swept up into the market. And social media is ready to create and sell them to you. Now look, I know that all sounds a bit cynical, but it's not that far from the truth.

And the truth is, we're all caught in it, whether we like it or not. It's the air we breathe. But friends, look at the throne of God. When we look not in, but out of ourselves to God, when we lose ourselves in the wonder of His glory, when His name is on our foreheads, not the name of some brand or some logo or some niche, radicalized identity, then we'll find the wholeness and joy that we've been looking for.

It's not by looking in the mirror that we find our true selves. It's certainly not by looking to the consumer culture around us. It's by looking into His face, into His face.

[24 : 05] They will see His face, John writes in verse 4. They will. Of course, in the arc of the Bible storyline, that's an astounding statement, isn't it?

For to behold the face of the holy God always meant certain death for sinful human beings. But in the new heavens and new earth, where our sin is removed never to return, when the throne of God is there and creation is exactly how God wants it, we will behold His face and live.

Listen again to how 1 John describes it. We read it earlier. Behold, we are God's children now. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is.

And where does this beholding of God's face take us? Well, in the rest of our passage, we see that it leads to what? To reigning with God.

You see, friends, humans weren't just created to worship God, but to reign with Him. We see this again in the opening chapters of Genesis.

[25 : 25] God creates humanity and tells them to have dominion, to rule over the earth. God puts humanity in the garden and tells them to work it and to keep it, to cultivate and create it in such a way that all of the material world, in increasing measure, gives voice to the beauty of God who made it.

You see, the Garden of Eden wasn't just a garden. It was a project for humans to work and keep and to expand its boundaries ever more and more so that all of creation, through the work of the image bearers, would give praise to God.

And John's telling us here that this original vocation of what makes us who we are has not been lost. Though we have fallen so deep into self-centeredness and despair, though we have refused to worship God and instead worshipped created things, though our identities have become fractured and wounded as a result, becoming like the very things that we worship, though all of this has become true of us in our fallen state, that's not how the story ends.

Our original vocation will be restored. Our identities will be healed. We will be a kingdom of priests once again.

Priests who worship and behold God face to face and co-regents who rule and reign under our loving King. Again, do you see how utterly different God's throne is from human thrones?

[27 : 10] When we give ourselves in worship to this King, we become kings and queens. Our dignity is restored. But the kingdoms of this world tell us that we should spend our lives worshipping ourselves.

And what's the result? Not dignity, but despair. Jesus said, if you save your life, you'll lose it.

But if you lose your life for me and my sake, you'll find it. And the vision John receives at the end of the story is of the ultimate finding of life. The people of God reigning with God forever and ever.

And when you think of it, this ending, it is an ending. But it's not really an end, is it? To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, that this life is just the opening pages of the real story that will go on forever into eternity in the new heavens and new earth with every chapter better than the one before.

So what we see here is total healing, materially, socially, personally. But how can this be? I mean, it sounds nice, right?

[28 : 31] But it's a bit too good to be true, isn't it? The new heavens and new earth, the consummated reign of God flowing forth and total healing. I mean, how could that ever come about?

Well, John tells us something very important in verse 3. Look again at the beginning of that verse. And again, in the sort of like short phrases of this end of the story, John says, no longer will there be anything accursed.

No longer will there be any curse. The way we know this future plan of God can and will come to be, the reason we know the story will end as God says it will end is because, friends, God's already dealt with the main problem, the curse.

Verse 3, after all, is another allusion back to the very beginning of the story. In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve rebel against God, they come under a terrible curse and all humanity with them. God renders this verdict over them in their sin, a curse of death spiritually, relationally, personally, materially, and in that moment in Genesis 3, it seems like the Bible story is going to end just after it got started.

[29 : 56] But it's not the end. The rest of the story of the Bible is how God deals with the curse of sin, that gnawing brokenness in all of us.

And over hundreds of years, God reveals himself and he calls out a people and through that long history, he shows through many ways and many signs and through sacrifices and all sorts of means, he shows us how costly sin is and how the wages of sin is death and how the real need is for a substitute who can somehow undo Adam's sin and draw humanity out from under the curse. But the history shows that a second Adam is hard to come by. God uses Noah to rescue humanity through the flood, but Noah sins just like Adam.

God uses Abraham to begin a new people, but Abraham too is flawed and sinful. God uses Moses to bring his people out of slavery, but Moses too is imperfect and is even barred from entering the promised land.

God uses David to establish an earthly kingdom. David slays Goliath. He defeats the Philistines, but not even David can undo the curse of Adam, for he too is sinful.

[31 : 19] And by the end of the Old Testament, though God has been faithful to his people, though God has preserved them and kept them and given them many means and signs of his mercy and grace, still the curse remains. And none of Israel's leaders, none of the people's leaders have been able to undo what Adam had done.

But then, when the fullness of time had come, after years of waiting and longing and hoping, God sent his son, born of a virgin, born under the law and its curse to redeem those who were under the law.

You see, Jesus Christ lived the life the first Adam should have lived. He listened to and obeyed every word of his heavenly Father. When the serpent tempted him in the wilderness, he passed the test where Adam had failed.

And in his perfect obedience, he alone was able to deal with the curse. Through his sacrificial death on a tree, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.

How? By becoming a curse for us. The penalty that Adam deserved, Christ paid.

[32 : 42] And three days later, he rose from the dead to prove that the curse had been broken and that the new creation was not just a wish or a hope, but a reality. Began and ready to be unfolded and consummated in God's time.

But you see, the death and resurrection of Jesus, it doesn't just guarantee that God's plan will come to fulfillment. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the only way for you and I to share in it.

You see, on the cross, the curse of sin was reckoned to Jesus so that the blessing of his obedience could be credited to all those who trust in him.

in the new heavens and the new earth, there's nothing under the curse. But the only way for you and me to escape the curse is to unite ourselves to the new and better Adam, Jesus Christ.

You see, through birth, we are all in that first Adam. We're all in sin. We're all under the curse. But through faith in Christ, we're credited to the righteousness of Jesus, the new Adam.

[33 : 55] And the curse no longer holds over us because he's exhausted the curse through his own death. And if we share in Christ's death through faith, we will also share in his resurrection life in the

new heavens and new earth.

The invitation of this passage then is this. You see here how the throne of God brings healing. And how could it not?

For on the throne is the Lamb, the Lord Jesus, the new and better Adam, who lived, died, and rose again to abolish the curse of sin and usher in the new creation. We've seen the healing this throne will bring when Christ returns and God is all in all, when the rule of heaven comes to earth and makes all things new.

We'll see his face and reign with him forever. The throne of God and the Lamb will heal all things. The question is, the question is, will you submit to his throne now?

Will we entrust our lives to this healing king, the one who will mend creation, heal the nations, and restore our humanity?

[35 : 10] Will we bow our knees before his throne now and give our lives to this king? And if we have come to entrust our lives to him in saving faith, will we go on to obey what he commands?

Will we live now under his rule, his healing and saving rule? Surely his commands are for our good. His throne will heal the cosmos.

How could we not trust his commands now to be for our good? So we will obey them. Will we obey them?

Even if his commands seem countercultural, even if they seem costly, even if they might exclude us from privilege and power, even if they might exclude you from the cool kids table, right?

Will we take the radical move, the truly radical move, to live now in light of this great story that we're in, bow to his throne, and obey his word?

[36 : 18] And will we not just obey what he commands, but will we trust him in whatever he permits?

Will we trust him in whatever he permits that it will be for our ultimate good? There's an old hymn that says, whatever my God ordains is right.

His holy will abide. I will be still whatever he does and follow where he guideth. He is my God, though dark the road.

He holds me that I shall not fall. Wherefore, to him I leave it all. The throne of God and the Lamb that will heal all things is the same throne ruling your life right now, Christian.

Though the cup may be bitter at times, though the road may seem dark, he is working all things for your good. You are not now at the story's end, but you know the ending, brothers and sisters.

[37 : 28] Your road is not one that leads in circles and ends in despair. Your road is the highway of the king and your journey ends in the new creation. Where the leaves of the tree of life bring healing to the nations.

Where the water of the river of life brings flourishing and joy. So trust him now. And when the story ends and you stand before his throne, it will be worth it.

Every sorrow, every step, every valley, every act of obedience, it will all be worth it. when we see his face and we reign with him forever.

Let's pray together. Father, we pray the words that Jesus taught us.

Thy kingdom come. May we look with longing and hope to that great day when you return and your story comes to its mighty conclusion.

[38 : 36] And would we live with perseverance and joy now, knowing that your kingdom is on the move and your promises are sure. We pray this in the mighty name of Christ, our new and better Adam, the Lamb on the throne.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.