

We've come to the final message in *The God Story*, a series designed to provide you with a high-level overview of the Bible. In connection with the series, many of us have been reading *The God Story* book by Alain Emerson and Adam Cox. If you haven't picked up a copy yet, it's certainly worth reading even after the sermon series is over. You can find it on Amazon.

Throughout the series, we've been talking about how the story of scripture is *the* overarching story that's meant to shape our lives. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre famously said,

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?"¹

Accordingly, the premise of this series is that your story and mine— and the story of Cornerstone— are not self-contained stories. Rather, they are sub-plots connected to an infinitely greater master story— The God Story. And it's only as you learn to live into and out of the grand narrative of scripture that you discover the best answers to life's important questions such as, "What am I to do?" or "How am I to live?"

Today's final installment of The God Story is called *The Revelation*.

Last Sunday, Pastor Dave unpacked the part of The God Story that tells of the staggering growth and multiplication of the early church. Of course, that growth didn't come without challenges from the "dark trinity" that the Bible refers to as *the world, the flesh and the devil*.² That is to say, the first Christians faced the seductions of the idolatrous culture they lived in, the temptations of their own human self-centeredness, and the deceptions and persecutions of Satan.

Speaking of persecutions, some sixty years after the church was born, the apostle John was banished to a Greek island called Patmos. This took place during the cruel reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. There, on that rocky, remote island, John received a heavenly vision that he recorded in a book called *Revelation*.

In the original Greek, the book is called *apokalipsis*, from which we get the word apocalypse. It means an unveiling, the pulling back of a curtain, a disclosure. In other words, a *revelation*.

Although he was isolated from the wider church because of his exile, the vision John was about to see would not only come to shape the church both in his day and every generation thereafter. It would also point to how history itself will ultimately unfold.

I invite you to listen deeply now as I read the following words that John wrote in Revelation chapter 1 to the churches of his day. I'll be reading from the NLT, the New Living Translation:

I, John, am your brother and your partner in suffering and in God's Kingdom and in the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, p. 216.

² 1 John 2:15, 17

God and for my testimony about Jesus. It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. It said, "Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.

"Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen. This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. ³

Revelation can be a complex biblical book to interpret. That's because it blends a highly symbolic form of biblical literature called apocalyptic with two other biblical genres—prophetic writings and pastoral letters. Most of the imagery we find in Revelation is deeply rooted in earlier parts of The God Story, especially the Old Testament.

Now, what do you think comes to mind for most Christians today when they think about the book of Revelation? *The end times*. And some parts of the book certainly do point ahead to the end of history, to the glorious conclusion of The God Story, which isn't really an end at all, but a new beginning.

However, contrary to popular opinion, it's important to appreciate that Revelation is not primarily about the end times. As Emerson and Cox explain in their book:

Revelation is not about a secret predictive code we have to crack to work out when the world will end. It is first and foremost a letter to encourage the early churches in their cultural context. Despite all the speculative end-time controversies connected with Revelation, it is a book written in real time, to real Christians, who were part of actual churches in the first century. ⁴

In Revelation, John conveyed the vision he received from Jesus to encourage the actual churches of his day to stay true to Jesus in the face of daily pressures from the world, the flesh and the devil.

In fact, at the time John wrote Revelation, Roman emperors saw themselves as gods, and everyone was expected to declare that Caesar is Lord. Christians put their very lives on the line when they countered such idolatry with the bold pronouncement that "Jesus is Lord".

³ Revelation 1:9-20 (NLT)

⁴ Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story: Encountering Unfailing Love in the Unfolding Narrative of Scripture*, p. 197.

While you and I can be grateful that we don't face *that* kind of pressure today, how many of you know that each day we still face very real pressure and resistance from the world, the flesh and the devil when it comes to living faithfully for Jesus?

In light of these realities that all Christians face in one form or another, the book of **Revelation is a call to patient endurance, and faithfulness to Jesus.**

In chapter 1, we've already seen John speak of:

I, John, am your brother and your partner in suffering and in God's Kingdom and in the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us.⁵

Seven times in total, the words "patient endurance" are used throughout the book.

For example, in chapters 13 and 14, John writes about how:

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.⁶

So as much as it is anything else, the book of Revelation calls the church to patient endurance and faithfulness to Jesus despite the challenges, resistance and suffering we may face in doing so. It's Jesus' way of saying to his people, both then and now:

Don't give up. Don't give in. I am with you. And I will come again to make all things new.

I wonder how many of you needed to hear those words just now? *Don't give up. Don't give in. I am with you. And I will come again to make all things new.* What other words might Jesus have for your heart as this message continues to unfold?

In the time that remains, we're going to focus on two visions from Revelation given to strengthen our patient endurance and faithfulness to Jesus. Then, in conclusion, I'll briefly wrap up the series with some takeaways about what it means for us to live more fully and deeply into The God Story.

The first vision from Revelation given to strengthen us in patient endurance and faithfulness to Jesus is:

1. **A vision of heavenly worship** (Revelation 4-5)

When trials and tribulations were mounting for the early followers of Jesus, God knew what they needed most was to take a step back and see the bigger picture. The book of Revelation is a call to do just that— without in any way denying the painful reality of our trials and tribulations— so that we might be strengthened by the awesome beauty and hope of the bigger picture. Do you need see the bigger picture today?

⁵ Revelation 1:9 (NLT)

⁶ Revelation 13:10 (NIV) and 14:12 (ESV)

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5, John is shown the bigger picture, and it's a picture of heavenly worship:

Then as I looked, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the same voice I had heard before spoke to me like a trumpet blast. The voice said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this." And instantly I was in the Spirit, and I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it. ⁷

Immediately John was caught up in a supreme display of magnificent worship. Before him was God's throne, dazzling in radiant beauty and splendor. Four living creatures, each with six wings and full of eyes are hovering around the throne — one creature is like a lion, one like an ox, one with a human face, and one like an eagle. Without ceasing, these four creatures cry out:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—
the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come." ⁸

They're joined by 24 white-robed elders— half representing the 12 tribes of Israel, and the other half representing Jesus' 12 disciples. These elders fall down in worship, casting their golden crowns before the throne of God.

As we move into Revelation 5, John notices a scroll in the right hand of the One seated on the throne, a scroll sealed with seven wax seals. The scroll symbolizes the scrolls of the Old Testament prophets, including the prophet Daniel's visions. ⁹ Their message was about how God's Kingdom would come on earth as in heaven. At this point, an angel cries out with a loud voice:

"Who is worthy to break the seals of this scroll and open it?" ¹⁰

At first, no one could be found who was worthy. Because of this, John wept and wept, until an elder came to him and said:

"Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals." ¹¹

Such language would have been familiar to John. This verse is packed with Old Testament themes relating to ancient promises of a victorious messianic king who would conquer all opposition, as King David once had, leading God's people into freedom. God has kept his covenant promise— this lion-like Messiah-king in the line of David— he will be enthroned forever and *he can open the scroll!*

But as John carefully watches this scene unfold, what does he see? The conquering lion of Judah isn't a lion at all, but is actually a Lamb! A Lamb that looks like it's been slaughtered. This Lamb steps forward and takes the scroll from the right hand of the One seated on the throne.

⁷ Revelation 4:1-2 (NLT)

⁸ Revelation 4:8b (NLT)

⁹ See <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-revelation/>.

¹⁰ Revelation 5:2b (NLT)

¹¹ Revelation 5:5 (NLT)

In your mind's eye, try to picture what happens next as I read the text. The 24 elders, and the four living creatures, fall down before the Lamb, singing:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and break its seals and open it.
For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
And you have caused them to become
a Kingdom of priests for our God.
And they will reign on the earth.”

Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—
to receive power and riches
and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and blessing.”

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea.
They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever.”

And the four living beings said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb.¹²

Sometimes, when life in this fallen world gets hard, and we're tempted to compromise our faithfulness to Jesus, what we need most is to have the curtain pulled back for a moment, so we can see a vision of heavenly worship. This is the bigger picture of reality. Each of us needs to be reminded that no matter what we may be going through, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*

- No matter how our bodies may be breaking down, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*
- No matter what relational tensions may be breaking our hearts, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*
- No matter how far our children may have wandered from the Lord, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*
- No matter how divisive the political climate is getting, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*
- No matter how many trade wars and literal wars are raging, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*

¹² Revelation 5:9-14 (NLT)

- No matter how much our planet’s environment may languish, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*
- No matter how much it may seem like injustice is winning the day, *God is still on the throne, Jesus the Lamb has won the victory, and we will worship and reign with him forever!*

Also, the fact that the Lamb has conquered through self-sacrifice shows us how to live victoriously and winsomely in this fallen world. As much as the vision of heavenly worship is a call to see the bigger picture, it’s also a call to reflect the Lamb-like love and beauty of Jesus, right here, right now, by humbly laying down our lives in sacrificial service to others, for the sake of God’s kingdom. This is part and parcel of what it means to reign with our Lamb-like King.

Let’s move on now to the second vision from Revelation given to strengthen us in patient endurance and faithfulness to Jesus. It’s:

1. **A vision of everything made new** (Rev. 21-22)

In the midst of their trials and tribulations, the great hope of Jesus’ return is what most strengthened the early church in patient endurance and faithfulness to Jesus.

The promise of The God Story is that Jesus will come again to earth as rightful King to judge the living and the dead.¹³ He will deal with evil once and for all, establishing God’s eternal kingdom of righteousness, justice and flourishing here on earth. Those who follow Jesus will be given immortal resurrection bodies, like the one Jesus has now, and the whole of creation will be set right.

Like it was for the early Christians, the book of Revelation is an invitation to anchor our hope in this vision of future glory to come— the glory of all things made new at the return of Jesus. John shares this vision with us in Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And then he said to me, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.”¹⁴

Emerson and Cox write that in and through Jesus:

The Maker of heaven and earth who in the beginning created all that exists, is going to remake everything broken by the Fall. Creation, marred by sin, will be reborn... In the end, there will only be a new beginning.

¹³ 2 Timothy 4:1

¹⁴ Revelation 21:1-5 (NLT)

He says:

“Look, I am making everything new!”

Everything! Bodies. Minds, Hearts. Relationships. Families. Cities. Creation. This exquisite picture of everlasting renewal draws together all the threads of The God Story in a perfect climax. The story that started in a garden will end in a beautiful city. We will rule and reign with God in the new heaven and new earth. God’s dream for the borders of Eden to be extended throughout the world will come to pass. The glory of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁵

“Look, I am making everything new!”

There will be no more pain or suffering. Death will find its own grave. The pressure will end. Tears will be dried up. Sorrow will be no more. Sickness will be eliminated. Injustice will be ended. Satan will be completely vanquished.

The seed of promised blessing for all nations given to Abraham will flower into full bloom. A bride of all ethnic peoples, joined in glorious worship, will be prepared for their Bridegroom King. [God] the Father will delight over his family [the church]. Heaven will be married to earth. There will only be *shalom*.

Look, I am making everything new!”

The Lamb at the centre of the throne will receive the reward of his suffering. Every knee will bow and every tongue will shout that Jesus is King, to the glory of God the Father. ¹⁶ Face to face, we will look into the eyes of Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our story... [and] God’s dream will be realized. People from every tribe and tongue will join the dance. God will be with them. They will be with God. Home. Forever. ¹⁷

With this vision in mind, the Bible closes with these final words in Revelation 22:

He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon!”

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all his holy people. ¹⁸

No wonder one of the early church’s favourite prayers was just that: “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Through this vision of all things made new, Jesus called them— just as he calls you, me, and the whole Cornerstone family— to patient endurance and faithfulness to him, as once more he says to us:

¹⁵ Habakkuk 2:14

¹⁶ Philippians 2:10-11

¹⁷ The series of quotes on pages 7-8 come from Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 210-211.

¹⁸ Revelation 22:20-21 (NLT)

Don't give up. Don't give in. I am with you. And I will come again to make all things new.

Because The God Story isn't over yet. The best chapters are yet to come. The Hero of the God Story will come again. And so, we join our prayers with those of Christians across the ages, saying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

At this time, I'd like to close this message, and this series, with a few takeaways as we continue to live into the story of scripture— The God Story.

1. **Get to know and love the story's Author:** The point of this series hasn't only been to give you a high-level overview of the story of the Bible. And it hasn't been to help you accumulate religious information or to get you to intellectually affirm certain theological propositions. At its heart, the Bible is a *love story* designed to lead us into the arms of its ultimate Author— God himself. The Bible is a unified story that points to Jesus, and it's meant to lead us into personal relationship with Jesus. As you engage with the Bible, always do so with the goal of getting to know and love him.
2. **Find your story in God's big story:** Emerson and Cox encourage us to think about all the best movies. "The roles of the individual characters, whether they are brilliant or broken, can only be understood within a bigger plot or storyboard. In a [similar] way, our real-life stories can only find true meaning [and purpose] when they are connected to... the wider unfolding drama" of the Bible's master story.¹⁹

This not only applies to us personally; it also applies to us as a congregation. God has brought Cornerstone so far over our 26-year history, and we've come to a point where we're now seeking God for fresh direction as to the next key missional moves that he would have us make as a church. How do we find our way into the longer-term future God has in mind for Cornerstone? We find our way in God's Story. In fact, that's our Ministry Theme for 2025: **FINDING OUR WAY IN GOD'S STORY.**

This will be a year of revisiting the biblical foundations for the mission of the church. That's what this series has been about, and there will be more series to come along these lines, including the biblical foundations of Cornerstone's unique DNA as a local church, a series on the kingdom of God, and a series on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, our prayer is that God will envision and prepare us all to become co-authors with God in writing the next chapters that he has in store for Cornerstone.

Speaking of prayer, this is also a year of seeking God's direction in prayer together as a church family. In fact, our next sermon series is going to be all about prayer, and our summer series will be an exploration of great prayers from the Old Testament.

Of special importance—and here I would ask you to mark your calendars— on May 24, we will be holding the first of two special Prayer & Re-Envisioning events this year. These events are designed to help us in the process of prayerfully discerning God's future direction for Cornerstone. We would love for you to be a part of that process.

3. **Tell and embody The God Story:** Leslie Newbigin, a renowned professor and practitioner of Christian mission, said that the business of the church is to tell and embody a story. The two

¹⁹ Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 215.

disciples who encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus went from being story-listeners to storytellers. ²⁰ On the road, Jesus had told them The God Story. Then, they went and told others. Now, it's our turn. As we tell and embody The God Story as we walk with its Author, we are allowed the sacred privilege of being co-authors with him in a small but eternally significant portion of that story as it continues to unfold through us.

With that in mind, let's pray together, shall we?

²⁰ Luke 24:13-34