

Some Christians assume that the bizarre and sometimes gruesome events described in the book of Revelation still lie in the future. The truth is, the church to whom John first conveyed his vision was already experiencing misery and fierce opposition to their faith. These Christians to whom John wrote the Apocalypse were dealing with enormous adversity, including martyrdom and great suffering. The very first Christians also expected Jesus to return quickly and establish his kingdom on earth *after he ascended to heaven*.

Ever since then at least some of God’s people have assumed the same thing. Some Christians said, “The world is going to end very soon” during the twentieth century when genocide seemed to provide a whole list of potential Antichrists. Twenty-five years ago, some people assumed that since Jesus works only in round numbers, the beginning of the new millennium would signal Jesus’ return. But church historian Martin Marty notes that the world is, in one sense, *always coming to an end*. The world of the first century was at least figuratively if not literally ending even as John recorded this message. Craig Barnes, a friend who was formerly the pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church, points out that in a sense, **it feels like our world ends every time someone we love dies**. It’s also true that when we bury a loved one, we also want to believe that there’s more in store for both them and for us. **John’s main message is that this world is not the end, even as the heartache and disappointment we experience do not have the last word.**

John wrote the book of Revelation to encourage Christians who suffered immensely for their faith as they approached what seemed like the end of their world. In Revelation 21 he does so by describing a time when “*the first heaven and first earth had passed away*.” We don’t know if he means that God will completely destroy and then remake heaven and earth or instead renovate them on some kind of grand scale. God’s people do know, however, that when Christ returns, he will destroy the old way of doing things. John promises that God will replace the ancient threat that was the “sea” with God’s own glorious

presence, symbolized by the descent of the New Jerusalem and God's dwelling among his people. **In other words, someday very soon God will eliminate everything that threatens us, including mental and physical illness, violence and even climate threats.**

God will replace those threats with himself by setting up God's throne among God's beloved people in a new creation. So, the God who acted in history through Israel will consummate human history by finally making God's permanent home among God's redeemed people.

John also promises that in that glorious home God “*will wipe every tear from our eyes.*” To give us perfect vision God will tenderly wipe from our eyes every tear that grief, sickness, alienation, anxiety, and doubt blurs. What's more, John writes that someday very soon there won't even be any reason for tears! “*There will be,*” after all, “*no more death or mourning or crying or pain.*” Tears and grief will have no place in the new creation because God will eliminate **their causes**. What a tremendous vision that we all desperately need! Death by inches from things like brain tumors, dementia or other incurable diseases pockmark life on planet earth. Things like failing health, broken families, lost jobs, wars, and ethnic hatred scar our lives in this world.

Isn't God's dwelling *already* in and among God's people to comfort, strengthen and encourage us? After all, aren't we *already* because of God's amazing grace his children who can now call God “Daddy” and whom God now calls his adopted “sons and daughters”?

I've noticed that Christians will sometimes think that in verse 5 God says, “*I will make all things new,*” but that's **not** what verse 5 actually says. God insists, “*I am making everything new.*” That implies it's already happening—NOW! Add to it God's wonderful promise to wipe every tear from our eyes. Of course, that will fully happen only in God's glorious presence in the new heaven and earth. Yet doesn't the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, already comfort God's grieving people? How many of us have grieved deeply, but eventually felt God's comfort and peace? We who hear and read Revelation 21 still weep,

sometimes right up until the moment of death. God, however, comes to us to ease our grief, sometimes slowly. God is already beginning to dry our tears.

And hasn't Jesus' death and resurrection already changed the meaning of death? Death is not yet a "dead" enemy. Nevertheless, the death of God's adopted sons and daughters will end our rebellion against God, but not our existence. The death of a Christian is a doorway into God's glorious presence!

John's vision of the new creation, it seems to me, changes not only the way we die, but also the way you and I live, and the way we worship. Craig Barnes says, "Heaven exists not just as a future place to go after we die, but also as an inspiration for the life we live today." Knowing that Christ is waiting for us with open arms makes all the difference in how we live today. **To be honest, it makes all the difference in the world.**

"The old order of things" (v. 4) won't just pass away in the new heaven and new earth. They're already dying whenever a classmate sticks up for a bullied student or where incarcerated people earn college degrees. Jesus' death and resurrection as well as the Holy Spirit's presence among us means that we can do things to help this life be a kind of appetizer of that glorious future life.

I don't want to brag, but it's November and **I've kept every one of my New Year's resolutions...in a manila folder!** But today I resolve to honor the Lord with my life as we dedicate our Capital Campaign to the glory of God. This month we've focused on worship and I've wanted to talk about things that really matter, that matter not just today or tomorrow, but for all eternity. For over 90 years Ken Mawr has been a place where the spiritual and physical worlds draw closer, where the veil that separates them is thinner. We can sense spiritual and even eternal realities in a powerful way when we gather in this place! **Today's Dedication is in a way an opportunity to begin anew.**

The Bible is full of new beginnings just as life itself is full of new beginnings. God begins the world with Creation. God begins humanity with Adam and Eve. Then, when Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, God sends them on their way to begin again. Then the world became such a horrible

place that God found Noah, had him build an ark, put himself, his family, and every animal imaginable in it, sent him on his way, and began once more. As time went on, God chose Abraham to be the father of a special people; and a new relationship with humanity was begun. Soon God's special people were in slavery in Egypt; they cried out for deliverance and God sent them a deliverer named Moses, through whom they were freed from bondage and brought into the Promised Land. And God began again.

Then, as the Scriptures say, *“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children”* (Galatians 4:4).

God sent Someone to bring good news of yet another “new beginning,” one that offers salvation for all and the promise of eternal life in our Savior.

Finally, as Revelation says, at the end of history, things will not really END at all! As today's Scripture has it, we will see *“a new heaven and a new earth.”* No more death, no more tears, no more pain, no more sickening sin. *“I am making everything new!... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”* Over and over again, in the midst of our sinfulness, in the midst of our wandering, in the midst of our fear, and in the midst of our failure, the God of new beginnings begins again with us. I don't know if it's even possible to comprehend the implications of this. But I'll venture to say that it means the God of “new beginnings” is **more concerned about our future than our past.**

Let me state that once again: the God of new beginnings is more concerned about our future than our past! Indeed, our past may be a record of one failure after another, of one broken promise after another, but that doesn't matter to God who creates and redeems and makes all things new.

A new world awaits us, a world where every longing is fulfilled in God.

Without a belief in God's future, all of life, including time spent in worship, lacks significance and hope. **But in Revelation 21 God allows us to**

experience heavenly worship. “He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new!” And it's already begun! Amen.