

Title: Wrap it and Tie it Up with a Bow
Date: February 4, 2024
Subject: Seeing Life Clearly: Four Resolutions for Christian Living – Bow
Scripture: Matthew 19:27 – 30; 2 Thessalonians 1:3 - 10

Most people like stories with a happy ending, where the author ties everything together. No loose ends. No plot line undeveloped. No mystery to unravel. No questions unanswered. No cliffhanger cuz there's nothing to hang over the cliff. The reader doesn't have to wonder what happened to such and such character.

And when the story is tied together in one last line, even better. For instance, while Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* first line pulls in the readers: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," the ending pulls the story together: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known." Dickens also wrote *A Christmas Carol*. Opening line? Anyone? "Marley was dead, to begin with." The last line is more uplifting: "And so, as tiny Tim observed, God bless us, everyone."

Memorable last lines from movies. Casablanca: "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Wizard of Oz: "There's no place like home." In Home Alone, big brother Buzz has the honor. "Kevin! What did you do to my room!?" Then there's Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and many other fairy tales: "They lived happily ever after."

Some may think "they lived happily ever after" is lame and unrealistic. What if we raise it to "they lived the happiest, ever afterest"? Jesus is writing the greatest story...ever...and he's not done yet.

Jesus was the Master storyteller. He communicated an enormous amount of truth through his parables – earthly stories with heavenly applications.

One of his stories (Matthew 20:1-15, workers in the vineyard) is bracketed by similar statements: "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." It's switched around for the end: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The parable is preceded by a conversation Jesus had with a rich young man. The man asked Jesus what he needed to do to get eternal life. Jesus pointed out that the young man had the wrong idea. Instead of changing his mind and following Jesus, the man turned away sad...because he had great wealth. Jesus told his disciples it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven and it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:23, 24).

The disciples were amazed, astonished and perplexed because, in the back of their minds, they still associated wealth with blessing by God. Their response was "Who then can be saved?" If the rich guy who had been keeping the commandments and seemed to have it all going for him couldn't be saved, who could be?

Jesus was crystal clear that salvation isn't possible by merit or earned. It's impossible for people to save themselves. People can't be or do anything to affect their salvation. It's not about an emotional attachment, sentimentality, human achievement, meritorious goodness, self-denial or giving away of all possessions.

The good news is salvation is totally possible because of God and his grace.

Peter had a follow up question. Let's start with that as we read Matthew 19:27 - 30.

Peter was concerned about himself... and his pals. They'd been with Jesus and followed him for a long time. They were loyal. Jesus recognized this and spoke to what will happen to people who follow him.

Jesus points to the future. A time is coming when things will be renewed. Everything will be renewed. The earth. The heavens. People. Everything. The Son of Man will sit on his throne, his glorious throne. He'll rule and reign over anything and everything. Totally.

Many who lived during the time of Jesus looked for a political Messiah. They wanted one who'd rule and reign immediately when he appeared. They didn't want to wait till sometime in the future. They definitely weren't looking for a Messiah who would die. The same is true in our world.

However, Jesus came as the suffering servant Messiah who would reign, but not right away. In the coming kingdom, the disciples will have unique function. They'll sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. This is mentioned in other Scriptures and it's not what we're going to get into this morning.

The other part of Jesus' promise extends to everyone who has placed their trust in him to be their Savior. He promises that whatever loss they've experienced during their earthly lives, they'll experience a far greater reward because they followed him. Some of it happens in this lifetime with relationships they have with fellow followers of Christ who replace family who don't want anything to do with Jesus. They have a welcome among those who know Christ. We can meet other believers and instantly there's a connection of fellowship.

The second item, and the main focus, is set to take place in the future. "They will inherit eternal life." Luke's account also specifies it's in the age to come (Luke 18:30).

Jesus begins the story with an attention grabbing line: "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." He proceeds to tell the story of a vineyard owner. He hires workers early in the morning to work for him and they'd be paid a certain amount. Later he hires more workers and promises to pay whatever is right. He goes out three more times, finds more people and hires them.

The custom was to pay workers at the end of the day. The last workers were the first to be paid. When they received the pay promised to the first workers, the first workers expected to be paid more. They were disappointed when they received the originally agreed upon amount. They felt the latecomers were undeserving and shouldn't get paid the same. The owner stated he wasn't being unfair to the first hired. The last lines of the owner are "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" He declared he had the right to pay what he wanted.

Jesus concludes the story with a memorable statement: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." His point is God is generous and has the right to reward how he decides. He pays based on his grace, not by what people think they've earned or deserve. One commentator says the point is to show "an absolute equality in the blessedness of the life to come" (Ellicott's Commentary).

Otherwise, people might think the thief on the cross who put his trust in Christ in the last minutes of his life, shouldn't have as much of heaven and its enjoyment as those who followed Christ for 80 years. We'll all get the same experience of being with Christ forever.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3 - 10.

Paul was in Thessalonica for a brief time before being forced to leave because of persecution (Acts 17). He didn't have much opportunity to help new believers grow in Christ. His letters replaced his presence and encouraged them to remain faithful to Christ even though they were suffering. He also answered questions, many dealing with the future, the end times and when Jesus Christ would come back.

He first looks at the present situation. He asserts the right thing to do is thank God for them because their faith is growing and their love is increasing. He brags about their perseverance, endurance and their faith - their trust and confidence in God. He encourages them to hang in and stand firm.

I thank God for you. Your faith, your trust and confidence in God, is growing more and more. You're desiring to learn more about who Jesus Christ is and what he's done for you. You're loving one another more and more. You're enduring and persevering through trials, troubles, difficulties, suffering and persecutions.

The time shifts to the future. God will judge the troublemakers in vv. 8, 9. He'll pay them back for the trouble they caused to him and his followers.

God's judgment is often viewed as being only of the evil. It's broader as he'll judge the evil and the righteous accordingly. Jesus taught that when he comes to gather all the nations before him (Matthew 25:31 - 46) he'll separate people as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. To the sheep he'll say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." These are the righteous, those in a right relationship with God by way of Jesus Christ. They'll go to eternal life.

To the goats, the unrighteous who aren't in a right relationship with Christ as they've never placed their trust in him as their Savior, he'll say, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." They'll go to eternal punishment. Our minds can't conceive of everlasting destruction. How can there be ongoing destruction but never coming to the point of being completely destroyed?

More easily understood is the second aspect of judgment - shut out from the Lord's presence. The door is closed, locked and no entrance is permitted. Banished forever from being with the one who gives life.

On the other hand are those who are counted worthy of the kingdom of God. They'll be given relief. This isn't merely the cessation of troubles. It's not just the result of the troublemakers being judged and no longer able to cause trouble. It's not just alleviating pain and suffering but providing everything that's the opposite. It's the absence of pain and heartache. It's wholeness.....

The timing. V. 7 - "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. Movies and TV shows use computer generated images to create mind blowing pictures of explosions and fireballs. They're nothing compared to what the Lord has in store. We can let our sanctified imaginations run wild. Fire, not just ordinary fire, but blazing fire.

Other Scriptures use fire imagery. “A fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Hebrews 10:27). “The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men...The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat” (2 Peter 3:7, 10-12).

Another element describing Christ’s return is in v. 10. “On the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.” It isn’t just that his people will give glory to him or they’ll be surrounded by glory, but Christ’s glory will be in them. It will be the state of complete and entire salvation, of being a new creation in all its fullness, being finally and entirely transformed into immortality.

Those who believe in Jesus will marvel at him. It’s the stuff of songs trying to describe what it will be like to see Jesus face to face, to encounter the one who has saved them by his grace, who’s cleansed them from their sins, who’s given them the gift of eternal life. As the MercyMe song says, “I Can Only Imagine.”

We’re talking about the end of time as we know it and the dawn of eternity. It’ll be the moment when there’s a cosmic shift from keeping track of things in hours, days and years...to time without end. It’ll take place after the events of the end times - the tribulation, the thousand year millennial reign of Christ on earth. It’ll be at the end... But it will really be the beginning. The Lord God will fulfill the promises he’s made.

In the first book of the Bible (Genesis) God sends the flood to destroy wickedness on the earth. After it, He promised Noah “that never again will all life be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). God said the sign, seal and reminder of his covenant between himself and all living creatures for all generations was his rainbow he set in the clouds” (Genesis 9:12 - 17).

The Book of Revelation opens with a stunning picture of Christ in his glory. It’s followed by letters to seven churches intended to correct, challenge and encourage with promises from Jesus for those who are faithful and overcome: the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God; the crown of life; not to be hurt at all by the second death; some of the hidden manna; a white stone with a new name written on it; authority over the nations; the morning star; walk with Jesus dressed in white; name never blotted out from the book of life; name acknowledged before my Father and his angels; made a pillar in the temple of my God; write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem; write on him my new name; the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Then John describes what he saw (Revelation 4:2 – 11): “Before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were 24 other thrones and seated on them were 24 elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne 7 lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.” There are heavenly creatures who along with the 24 elders worship the Lord: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is,

and is to come. You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

We finally get to the key word. It's bow as in rainbow or as in a bow you attach to a present. You wrap it and tie it up with a bow as the finishing touch. There's nothing left to do. That's what God is going to do when he brings in eternity. He's going to wrap everything and tie it up with a bow. It's time to enjoy.

As it says in another place, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13).

Christian life assignment. Revelation 21 & 22. Read and enjoy.

Scripture at end of service

As it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” — the things God has prepared for those who love him— (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Daniel in his night vision: thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. . . In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:9, 10 , 13, 14)

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! (Philippians 3:20 – 4:1)

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24).