

GOD'S BIG PICTURE, Part 6

Universal Restoration & New Creation



UNIVERSAL RESTORATION (Revelation 19-20) – *The success of the Redeemer demonstrated*

This final period in redemption history balances the first period, which I called “Universal Decay”. In that earlier period the problem of sin and the failure of human government without God were demonstrated in the accounts of the Fall, Cain and Abel, the Flood and the tower of Babel. In this final historical period we see the ultimate resolution to both of these problems:

- a) **Perfect government demonstrated** (19:1-6) – Revelation chapter 19 speaks of the shouts of praise in Heaven that precede the return of Christ. The crowd says: “*Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God for true and just are His judgements*” (19:2). Then in verse 11 Christ appears as a rider on a white horse. He is called “*Faithful and True*” and He comes to make war and to judge with justice. Christ destroys the enemies of God and binds Satan before initiating a reign of 1000 years (20:1-6).
- b) **Sin finally dealt with** (20:7-15) – at the end of the 1000 years Satan is released. One final rebellion against God is defeated, and Satan is thrown into the lake of fire. Christ then judges the living at the dead at the Great White Throne. The record of the deeds of all people is produced as evidence in this judgement (v12) and it is clearly sufficient to condemn every person. Death is finally defeated, being thrown into the lake of fire (v14). The lake of fire is also the eternal destiny of those who are condemned at the judgement. There is salvation for some, but it is not on the basis of a favourable record of their actions, but because their names have been written in the “*book of life*” (v15). There is no suggestion of a works salvation here – the deciding factor in the judgement is whether or not individuals have received the gift of eternal life through faith (are their names in the Lamb’s book of life?).

How should we understand the book of Revelation?

The interpretation of Revelation is notoriously controversial. The difficulties arise from the fact that Revelation is written as “apocalyptic”, a genre which is full of figurative language and confusing images. Scholars are divided over when and how the visions contained in the book are to be fulfilled. This debate also depends on how Daniel chapter 9 (about the 70 weeks of years) is understood.

- The *Preterist* view suggests they were fulfilled in the early history of the Church (during the first century AD)
- The *Historicist* view suggests that they are being fulfilled throughout the whole of Church history
- The *Futurist* view says they will be fulfilled at a future stage leading up to the return of Christ

A full discussion of these interpretations is beyond the scope of this study, but the *Historicist* and *Futurist* views are predominant among evangelicals. Whichever view is taken, the final chapters of the book (from 20:10 onwards) are universally recognised as speaking of the future. The key point to realise from Revelation is that the Lamb (Christ) is victorious. God’s story will be completed as He planned!

Related to these three interpretations of Revelation is the question of how the 1000 year period (“millennium”) mentioned in Revelation 20:1-6 should be understood. Again there are three main interpretations:

- *Premillennialism* – the 1000 years is a literal period of time after the physical return of Christ to the earth during which He will reign from Jerusalem, demonstrating His righteous reign and literally fulfilling God’s promises to national Israel.
- *Postmillennialism* – the millennium is a period of time just before Christ returns during which there will be an increased rate of conversion to Christ and world society as a whole will be influenced by the Church to be more peaceful and righteous.
- *Amillennialism* – there is no literal 1000 year period. The millennium is a figurative way of speaking about the Church age (the last days) during which Satan has been bound because of Christ’s death and Christians who are with Christ in glory reign with Him.

The difference between premillennialism and amillennialism is fundamentally one of how literally we interpret details of the book of Revelation as well as some Old Testament passages. Although I believe it is legitimate to hold one particular view (and I do have my own view), I believe that this kind of issue is of secondary importance. Sadly, divisions between Christians over their interpretation of the end times has led to failure to work together and to celebrate the living hope that we have in Christ Jesus. I believe we should seek to understand Scripture’s details faithfully, but we must not lose sight of the Big Picture in the process. Christ will restore all things when He returns in glory to judge. Surely all Christians can unite in our belief in this future reality!

Universal reconciliation does not mean universal salvation

In calling this the period of “Universal Restoration” I do not intend to imply that there will be universal salvation of human beings (a belief that is sometimes simply called “universalism”). The fact that some will be lost eternally is clear from the description of the final judgement. Hell (the lake of fire) is a reality and will be the destiny of all those who are not redeemed. It is, however, true to say that all things will be reconciled to God through Christ (Colossians 1:20). This means that all things will be restored into proper recognition of God’s sovereign rule. There will be no more rebellion, as sin will finally have been dealt with. Every knee will bow before Christ and confess that He is Lord (Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:11) and God will be given the glory that He is due. Sadly, though, some will bow the knee in acknowledgement that God’s judgement upon them is just and fair. Only the redeemed will bow the knee in glad surrender. All things must be restored in this way so that there can be a future New Creation in which there is no longer any rebellion against God.

NEW CREATION (Revelation 21-22) – *God's relationship with mankind consummated*

Revelation chapters 21-22 contain a glorious vision of the eternal destiny of the redeemed. There are obvious parallels between these chapters and Genesis chapters 1 and 2, which describe the original creation:

- The rivers that flowed from Eden (Genesis 2:10-14) are replaced by a single river of the water of life (Revelation 22:1)
- The tree of life, first seen in Genesis 2:9, appears in Revelation 22:2
- Eden predated the curse of God upon the earth, and in the New Creation the curse has gone (Revelation 22:4)

More fundamentally, there is a restoration of perfect harmony between redeemed human beings and God, between one human being and another and between human beings and the created order.

The New Jerusalem and the New Heavens and Earth

Revelation 21 speaks of the New Jerusalem, the city of God, which is not a literal city but an image of the redeemed people of all ages (v9 makes this clear, as John is promised a vision of the Lamb's bride and then is shown the city). The gates of the city bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (v12), while the foundations of the walls bear the names of the twelve apostles of Christ (v14), showing the fundamental unity of God's eternal purpose to save. Although the Church is a distinctive reality of the New Covenant, there is apparently no separation in between believers who lived before and after Christ in eternity – both are brought together as Christ's bride since both Testament and New Testament believers are redeemed solely on the basis of His death.

The context for this vision of the New Jerusalem is "*a new heaven and a new earth*" (21:1) where the curse has been removed and there is no more death or pain (21:4). This new universe was envisaged by the prophet Isaiah (65:17 forward) and hoped for by Peter (II Peter 3:13). Our eternal destiny is to live on a new, restored planet earth in new resurrection bodies that cannot decay or die (I Corinthians 15). Unlike the cartoons, we will not be disembodied spirits. We don't know exactly what life on that new earth will be like, but it will probably be much more like life in this world than we realise, but without the effects of sin. Chapter 22:1-5 continues the imagery of this new universe in its perfection. There is a perfect relationship between God and His people. There is no need for a Temple in the city (21:22) because God and the Lamb live with them and give them light (21:23-25; 22:5). There is direct access to the Tree of Life (22:2), indicating the reversal of the banishment from Eden and the reality of eternal life in God's presence. The redeemed serve God (22:3) and reign with Christ over the new earth (22:5), fulfilling the purpose for which God created them, to be His stewards over His creation.

The Central Person is Christ

The central figure in all of this beautiful imagery is Christ, the Redeemer. He is:

- "*The Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End*" (21:6; 22:12) – this is a powerful indicator of the deity of Christ since Revelation 1:8 describes none other than "*the Lord God*" as the "*Alpha and Omega*". The meaning is also that Christ is eternal existent and that all things issue from Him and return to Him. He is the beginning and end of the story of redemption. He is its great theme!
- "*The Lamb*" (21:9,22,23,27; 22:1,3) – this title, which echoes the words of John the Baptist recorded in John 1:29, is a powerful reminder that Christ's sacrificial death is central to redemption. It was His death that accomplished atonement, the forgiveness of sins, allowing Him alone to open the scroll that represents the eternal completion of God's plan (see Revelation 5). "*The Lamb*" is a favourite title for Christ throughout Revelation. The redeemed people of God are the bride of the Lamb (21:2,9).
- "*The Root and Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star*" (22:16) – we are reminded that Christ is the fulfilment of God's plan as recorded throughout the Old Testament. He is both the root of David (the one from whom David grew) and his offspring.

Revelation ends with a reminder that Christ is coming soon (22:7-21). The reader is challenged to come and "*take the free gift of the water of life*" (v17). God is working out His plan of salvation. We are invited to come and be part of it.

CONCLUSION

The story of redemption is beautiful and perfect. There is symmetry in the movement from Creation to New Creation, and the story centres and hinges on Christ and the redemption He achieved. The following table summarises these seven epochs in the Bible.

PERIOD	DATES	BIBLE SECTION	KEY THEME(S)
Creation	<i>Unknown past</i>	Genesis 1-2	The pattern of God's intended relationship with mankind – God is King, man is His steward ruling over creation in loving relationship with Him
Universal Decay	<i>Pre-history</i>	Genesis 3-11	The need for a redeemer demonstrated. Human sin and its effects, including the failure of human government. Judgement, grace and sacrifice introduced. There is hope for mankind through the Noachic Covenant.
Israel	2000-430 BC	Genesis 12 – Malachi	The Old Covenant provides the pattern for a redeemer who will fulfil the promises to Abraham, the Law of Moses and the promise to David. The prophets look forward to the Messiah.
Christ	4 BC – 30 AD	Matthew – John	Christ fulfils the Old Covenant and establishes the New. He teaches about the Kingdom of God. His death and resurrection provide the eternal redemption that is the only hope of mankind.
Church	30 AD – return of Christ	Acts – Revelation 18	Christ continues His ministry and mission on earth through His body, the Church. Christians live in the New Covenant with the activity of the Holy Spirit.
Universal Restoration	<i>Unknown future</i>	Revelation 19-20	The success of the Redeemer is demonstrated as He exercises perfect government and as He finally judges sin. All things are put right.
New Creation	-	Revelation 21-22	Redeemed humanity fulfils God's creation purpose by reigning over the new earth in perfect relationship with God.