The Bookends of the Bible

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[0:00] Right, let's pray then. I'm going to use a prayer from the great English reformer Thomas! So let's pray. Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning,! Grant that we in such wise may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which You have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, thank you very much for coming. It's good to see you all. And please forgive me for sitting, though as I've often said before, the Bible tells us that Jesus sat and began to teach, so there is good precedent. What I'm going to talk about is what I call the bookends of the Bible, from creation to new creation. Now, I'm going to begin by reading some verses from the beginning and the end of the Bible. I'm not going to read the whole of Genesis 1 and 2 and Revelation 21 and 22, but these are what I call the bookends of the Bible, the parts that show us what the part in between is all about. So let's hear the word of God at first of all in Genesis 1, verses 1 to 5.
In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light. And there was light, and God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness he called night.
And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day. And then down in verse 26. Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heaven, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, be fruitful, and be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.
And then a few verses in chapter 2. Chapter 2 verse 3. Chapter 3. Chapter 2 verse 8.
[3:26] And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food.

The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.
And now the end of the Bible, Revelation 21. Reading here verses 1 to 5. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.
[4:55] Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.

And then a few verses in chapter 22. Then the angel showed thee the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the land, through the middle of the street of the city.
Also on either side of the river, the tree of life of twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

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No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the land will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 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, ever. This is the word of the Lord.
[6:18] So the big story of the Bible, which is our subject this morning, from creation to new creation. The basic truth about God is that he is the creator.

Above and beyond everything else, that is what this book is about. As we've seen, the beginning of the Bible begins with creation.
It ends with God making a new creation. And God is totally committed to that creation. He is not going to set it aside.
He's not going to abandon it, because he has begun a good work, and he will continue it. I used to say in Cornhill that the whole of the Bible is a footnote to Genesis 1, verse 1.
In a very real sense, that's true. The fundamental truth about God is that he is the creator. And he creates these basic realities of heaven and earth, separate but belonging together.
[7:30] And right throughout the Bible, these twin truths are brought forth, until at the end, they're united, when the holy city comes down, and heaven and earth are united, and God lives with his people forever.

And the important thing to notice is that God said his creation is good and very good. And that is still true, although it's false.
And I want now to say five things I want to say, like a five-act Shakespearean play, I suppose, a drama in five acts. You could say that's true of the Bible.
First of all, the creation story itself in Genesis 1 and 2. In Genesis 1, God is up there, an awesome figure who speaks and the world bursts into abundant life.
The theological word for that is the transcendence of God. He's totally different from us, totally other than us, and to be worshipped, to be revered, to be feared.
[8:43] Whereas in Genesis 2, he comes down into the story. And the theological word for that is imminence. He's both up there and down here.

That's at the very heart of the Bible's story. In pagan religion, the gods were remote. They didn't love people.
They didn't love people. Or they might use people for particular projects they had in mind. They didn't love people. They didn't care for them. They didn't honour them in any way.
Whereas the biblical God, both up there, powerful, awesome, transcendent, and yet he comes down here. And ultimately, that's pointing to the time when he's going to take flesh and become one of us.
And throughout the whole story, everything that he says happens. He speaks and life happens.
[9:48] He said, let there be light, and there was light. Let there be light, let there be, and the whole of the life of creation as we know it. The tragedy is, of course, in Genesis 3.

It goes badly wrong. The week when everything went right is followed by the day when everything went wrong. But the important thing is God didn't abandon his project.
He didn't say, oh, that didn't work, so better try something else. And that leads on to the second point, the second act, when God calls Abraham in Genesis 12.
What God says to Abraham echoes what he said to Adam in the creation story. Two things, he says. You're going to have land, and you're going to have descendants.
That's exactly what he had said to Adam. You're going to have descendants. You're going to have to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with other images.
[10:53] And so Abraham is called, and his descendants are to be a nation which are to bless all the nations of the world.

God has not abandoned the world. He has simply chosen an individual from whom will come a nation, and that nation will one day fill the earth.
That is the second act. Now, the third act, of course, is that nation, Israel, fails badly, fails dreadfully.
But God's purpose still continues. And once again, Moses is promised the same things as Adam and Abraham were promised, the land and descendants.

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And also he's asked to build a tent in the desert. And later on, King Solomon is asked to build a temple. Now, the point about that is that this is trying to restore Eden in the fallen world.
[12:04] The tent and the temple are a place where God meets with his people. Just as God had met with Adam and Eve in Eden, so now in the fallen world, he's going to meet with his people and he has a place where he does that.

Not that God needs a place, but that we need a place. And he creates this. And throughout the Old Testament story, that is why the temple is so important.
Now, once again, that experiment seems to fail. And another element is added to the story when he calls David to be king, to provide good government for his people.
In 2 Samuel chapter 7, there is the covenant with David, where David is to rule over his people and point to someone else who is going to come, greater than David, but David's own descendant.
And in him, all the nations are to be blessed. And in the better days of David and indeed of Solomon, we see trailers, if you like, anticipations of the new creation.
[13:29] Read passages like 2 Samuel 23, where David talks about the godly rule, which is like the dew, like the rain falling on the earth and the sunshine.

And in Psalm 72, where the new creation is anticipated. Now, David's descendants, there are plenty scoundrels among them, and plenty of people who led the nation in the wrong way.
At the early days, there were two good kings, Asa and Jehoshaphat. And almost at the end, there were two superior kings, Hezekiah and Josiah.
But ultimately, they failed, and the exile came. And the exile, of course, corresponds to the expulsion from Eden. As Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, So Abraham's descendants are expelled from the land and taken to Babylon.
But once again, God has not abandoned his purpose. And in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, a remnant return. And the first thing they do is rebuild the temple.
[14:43] Now, that is terribly important. Because once again, that is re-establishing Eden in the fallen world. Establishing a place where God meets with his people.

Now, we rightly say that buildings don't matter. But in this case, this was a building that God himself had appointed. And therefore, it did matter.
That's why the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, tell people more than this. If you don't rebuild the temple, you're basically saying you don't care if God is among you or not.
And so, the story goes on. But it's only a partial fulfillment. The prophets had promised glowingly of the desert blossoming like the rose, of the tribes coming to Zion, of the nations flowing to Jerusalem to worship the God of Jacob.
That was not happening. That brings us on to the fourth thing, if you like. What the prophets and the Psalms have to say. The prophets speak of a continuing glorious future.
[15:50] Particularly the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah in chapter 2. The mountain of the Lord will rise above the hills and the nations will come to Zion.

Then the glorious passage in chapter 11, where the lion lies down with the lamb. A little child plays in the serpent's den and so on.
In other words, Eden is going to be restored. The call of creation is going to resume harmony and glory once again.
And then in chapter 35. And in chapter 11, Isaiah says, The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
That verse is repeated by the prophet Habakkuk. Now, of course, in Lot's phrase, the waters cover the sea. The waters are the sea. Surely what the prophets are saying is that one day, the glory of the Lord and the presence of the Lord will so fill creation, that his original good creation will be renewed.
[16:59] His original purpose will be fulfilled. Another prophet, Jeremiah in chapter 31, speaks of the new covenant which God will make, which will fulfill and supersede the earlier covenants.

And throughout the prophets, we have this vision, which sustains people through rather dark times. If you read prophets like Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi, it's fairly low key, but they are pointing to something much bigger and much more glorious.
Something which has not yet happened. Something which is future to us as well as it was to them. And then in the Psalms, you'll have glorious passages about the renewed creation.

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Like Psalm 98, for example. Psalm 98, speaking about the... Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the world and those who dwell in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands. Let the hills sink for joy together. And why is that excitement running through creation before the Lord?
[18:17] For he comes and notice he comes to judge the earth. Now, judgefully, it doesn't mean he's coming to destroy it. It means he's coming to put it right.

He's coming to restore it to what it all must do. And once again, that clearly has not yet happened. So the whole of the Old Testament is yearning with expectation. The pages rustle with hope of someone who is to come.
A figure who will come. A new David who will bring about the Lord's kingdom. That brings us to the fifth point.
How it works out in the New Testament, in the Gospels. In Matthew, in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 4, verse 17.
[19:19] First of all, Matthew says, Give me a moment. The beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Why is it the page you want to always get stuck? Matthew chapter 4, verse 17.
Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It's important to realize what Jesus means by the kingdom of heaven.
He doesn't primarily mean somewhere far away. What he means is that since he has come, the promises that God has made about renewing his creation are beginning to happen.
That heaven and earth are joining together. The ancient promises of the prophets, of the Psalms, of the historians.
[20:26] These are beginning to happen as Jesus begins to preach. And as we look at the Gospels, I just, not because there's not time to go into this in detail, but one or two things.

Remember, Jesus told us to pray, that told us that the Lord's Prayer, your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Now, surely that means that the earth is going to be part of God's future purpose. Obviously, that prayer is going to be fulfilled. Jesus would not have told us to pray that if it weren't going to happen. So we pray, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.
That is going to happen. It's not happened yet, but it is going to happen. And it's the task of God's people, the church in the present day, to be thrillers of that kingdom.
Just as David's kingdom pointed to the kingdom to come, so the church points to the new creation. And as Jesus, as Jesus preaches throughout Galilee and performs what C.S. Lewis called miracles of the new creation.
[21:42] This is beginning to happen. Miracles of the new creation as he does things that are going to be characteristic of the new heavens and the new earth. Disease, death itself, and those glorious passages where he walks on the water.

Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey him? This surely is both of the Old Testament prophecies of someone who is going to subdue creation, somebody who is going to bring it to its true fulfillment.
And one particular story in which you get in the Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a particular one in Luke, Luke chapter 9, the story we call the Transfiguration, where Jesus goes up on a mountain and taking Peter, James, and John with him.
And he is, Luke chapter 9, verse, this is Luke chapter 9, verses 8 to, sorry, verses 20, 28 to 38. As they were, as Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face altered and his clothing became dazzling white. In other words, these three disciples see Jesus as he truly is and his glory is revealed.
[23:09] And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah. And they speak of his departure, or better still, his exodus, which he was to carry out in Jerusalem.

And this is not the first time that Moses and Elijah have met God on the mountain. Moses had met God on Mount Sinai. Elijah met him on Mount Horeb.
And Moses had prayed on Sinai, Lord, show me your glory. And he was given a partial answer. But here's a fascinating example of a prayer that's fully answered 1,500 years after it was spoken. Show me your glory. And this is what Moses was happening. Now, Moses is standing, looking at the unreal glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as is Elijah.
It's wonderful how the story hangs together. This psalm. And that's why this story is so important. and, of course, what they're speaking about, the death of Jesus and, of course, his resurrection and

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his ascension, which are going to guarantee the new creation.
[24:29] Just one other example from the Gospels. This time in John, in John chapter 20, on the resurrection morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the garden tomb.

She finds the tomb is empty and John chapter 20, verse 11, Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. And then and then in verse and she sees Jesus standing. He did not know it was Jesus. And John chapter, once again, in this chapter, John chapter 20, verse 15, Jesus said to her, Woman, Why are you weeping?
Whom are you seeking? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him. Now, of course, in one sense that was a snake. In another sense it was absolutely right.
This was the gardener come to restore Eden. And this time, an Eden without a snake in it, this time, the new Eden will have no serpent.
[25:40] And this is why it's one of those little touches that show that as Jesus is in his earthly life is fulfilling these promises of the Lord returning to Zion.

That brings me now to the third, or maybe it's a six point. I would have been very good at counting. The future of this, which the rest of the New Testament deals with.
First of all, in Acts chapter 1, as the risen Jesus meets his disciples, and in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, they said, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?
Now, that was a sensible question because after all, they had been, they knew the Old Testament, they knew that God would restore his people. And it's interesting what Jesus says to them.
He doesn't say talking nonsense. He says, it's a far bigger thing than you imagine. Of course, the kingdom is going to be restored. It's not just Israel. He says, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you with my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
[27:05] That kingdom will come. But it's not just in Judea, and Samaria. It's the whole world that's going to be part of that kingdom.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. And then another great chapter is Romans chapter 8. A chapter that talks about the assurance of those who believe in Jesus. Wonderful chapter and talks about the certainty of salvation. He talks about in Romans chapter 8 verse 38 he says, those whom he foregrew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.
Those he predestined he called. Those whom he called he also justified. And those whom he justified he also glorified. but that's only part of something that's much bigger.
Earlier on in the chapter he said in Romans 8 verse 22 we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth.
[28:22] But one day creation is going to be renewed. In other words when the new creation comes it's not sympathy for salvation of individuals.

It's the fulfilment of God's ancient purpose that heaven and earth will be reconciled that the whole of creation will be filled with the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea.
And I think it's very important for us to remember that we sometimes limit the gospel thinking it simply is the salvation of individuals. that's hugely important. But that's only part of if you like the restoration project when God will complete what he began in Genesis 1 verse 1.
And then further in 1 Corinthians 15 there's a glorious chapter on the resurrection. Paul talks about the resurrection body and in particular he talks about transformed bodies which are suitable for the new creation.
Now very often we think of heaven as our final destiny but that's not true.
[29:47] Of course those who belong to the Lord are with him now in heaven. If we die before Christ returns we will go to heaven.

That's only temporary. The final destiny is the resurrection and the new creation. Not we mustn't think of heaven as a kind of disembodied place floating on clouds stringing hearts.
It's a renewed life in a renewed heaven and earth. Physical but with bodies which are no longer subject to aging, to pain, to illness and death.
And that's the and those who are even those who are now with the Lord have not yet received their full salvation. They are waiting for the final resurrection and the coming of the Lord and everything will be restored.

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and Paul tells us in that chapter that the living, that in that chapter one can verse, I tell this rather, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. [31:03] Behold, I tell you, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, will sight, the dead will be raised in perishable and we shall be changed for this perishable body must put on the imperishable and the mortal body must put on the immortality.

Not as disembodied spirits or souls, it's as with new resurrection bodies that will live in the new creation. And when the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory.
So, the hope of Christians is the new creation, the fulfilment. And God's ancient purpose will be fulfilled.
God created Adam and Eve to care for the creation. if you like, to Edenise the world. If they had not fallen, their task was to fill the world with their descendants, who would Edenise the world.
That did not happen, as we know. But that does not mean the purpose has been set aside. And when the Bible talks about reigning with Christ, forget about sitting on marble thrones.
[32:39] think about it as looking after the new creation. Now, how exactly that would work out, we don't know. But it is an absolutely breathtaking prospect, far more exciting than some disembodied evidence.

But a fulfillment of God's ancient purpose. grace. And then in Revelation 21, where we began and go back at that again, Revelation 21, I saw the holy city coming down out of heaven from there.
In other words, it's not so much we're going to live with God, God is coming to live with us. That is the point. Just as he visited Eden, but he is coming to live in the new heavens and the new earth with his people.
The dwelling place of God will come and see, will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.
there shall be you wipe away every tear from the rise. Notice that phrase which actually is taken under the prophet Isaiah in chapter 55.
[33:59] Not just no one will weep anymore, but he will wipe away every tear. It's a personal, loving, caring action of God. The former things have passed away.

And then again in chapter 22, his servants will serve him. They will see his face, his name will be on their foreheads. And they will reign forever and ever.
will carry up God's ancient purpose to fill the earth with his glory. Now, that essentially then is on a five-act look at the Bible.
I want to finish now by suggesting four implications of this just briefly. first of all, it is, it gives us big ideas of the purpose of God.
The whole creation rejoicing as God completes the task of Genesis 1, verse 1. In Philippians, Paul says, he who begins a good work will continue to complete it.
[35:18] that's true about his basic work of creation. It's the first thing. I think the second thing is the people of God in Old Testament and New Testament are one people.

Now, sometimes, I mean, some views of the future that see the Jewish people and Christians as different people are not. I mean, God's Old Testament and New Testament people are one people.
how will the Old Testament believers say that they will say my grace through faith. Well, it's expressed in a different way with the sacrificial system, but it was that.
And I think there's a fascinating question, Revelation 15, talking about the redeemed in heaven. Revelation 15, 3, they sing the song of the Lamb.
Well, you expect them to sing that. What else do they sing? They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God. In other words, God's people, whether the people of Moses or the people of the New Testament, they sing the same song, the one song of the one people of God.
[36:32] That's the second thing. I think the third thing is it gives a bright attitude to the present creation. Now, there are two extreme views of the present creation.

One is to idolise it, to see it as the ultimate reality. The other is to despise it. Now, neither of you is biblical.
I haven't mentioned the wisdom books of the Old Testament yet, but the wisdom books particularly tell us to value this present world as it reflects the purpose of God.

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Ecclesiastes 8 verse 9 verse 7, Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart. Don't despise the good gifts that God has given in this world.
Don't treat them as idols, don't treat them as ultimate realities, but treat them as anticipating the new creation, the world to come.
[37:37] and then we'll treat the present creation in the right way. And the fourth thing is this, and I suppose this is the most important implication, in all the diversity of the Bible, there's a tremendous unity.

And that unity lies in the fact that it is the creator of God who begins and ends the story and who works all the way in between to renew and to restore his glorious creation.
And that, I think, is a marvelous and wonderful reality. Thank you.

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