

Act Six: New Creation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Storyline

The biblical story begins by introducing the setting, main characters, and initial plot. In the first act of the biblical narrative, the reader learns that...

Through the act of creation, God establishes his kingdom over all things and appoints human beings to rule on his behalf as his image bearers, to fill the earth and develop his creation into a glorious civilization.

Like most every other story, the biblical narrative quickly runs into the conflict that needs to be overcome. The introduction of this conflict makes up the second act of the biblical story.

Tragically, human beings rebel against God as they seek to rule God's creation their own way, resulting in the curse of evil and death upon the world, which infects every aspect of God's good creation.

As the conflict of any story creates more tension, a path is laid out that sets the plot up to reach its climax. Act three of the biblical narrative does exactly this.

God remains committed to his creation by initiating a covenant with Israel to undo the world's curse by being a blessing to all nations thereby reestablishing his kingdom, but Israel is continually unfaithful to the covenant.

Eventually the central conflict of a story reaches its breaking point and so the storyline arrives at its peak. This is called the climax, and it occurs in the biblical narrative with the person and work of the Christ, Israel's king.

In faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, God sends his Son as their Messiah to inaugurate and make possible the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Once the climax of a story has been reached, its effects begin to be implemented as the storyline moves toward its resolution. In the biblical narrative, this occurs in act five: the church.

The work of Jesus results in the renewal of God's covenant and the creation of a transformed community called the church whose mission is to extend God's kingdom to every part of the world in the power of the Spirit.

As the effects of a story's climax are worked out, the storyline finally reaches its ultimate resolution. This occurs in the biblical narrative with the reunion of heaven and earth in God's new creation.

With the return of Jesus to earth, God ultimately deals with evil and death, and glorifies human beings so that they reign with Christ over a renewed and flourishing creation—God's kingdom is finally restored.

The Place of Act Six in the Bible

The picture of new creation is most clearly described in the final two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21—22. However, scattered throughout the biblical story, various glimpses of this new creation are presented as the ultimate hope of both God's people and God's world.

How to Read Revelation

When contemporary readers approach the book of Revelation, they naturally bring to the text a certain pre-understanding about how Revelation should be read and interpreted. Usually one's understanding is strongly influenced by end-time charts and speculation about modern-day events bringing the world to an end. It is essential, however, to read and understand Revelation as its original readers would have understood it.

Apocalyptic Literature. The book of Revelation is an example of the ancient genre of apocalyptic, a form of literature no longer used today. To read Revelation properly, the reader must seek to understand how apocalyptic literature functions. Among other things, apocalyptic literature uses fantastic imagery to encourage a persecuted people to persevere in faith by showing them what is really happening behind the scenes of current world affairs. It is meant to comfort God's people with the promise that God will ultimately defeat evil.

Reading Revelation Today. In light of the above, one must not read Revelation as a sequential map of future events, but rather as a fantastic account of the spiritual realities that were shaping the political and religious events of the first century. Revelation teaches that despite the current state of the world, God is moving history toward its intended destination; his kingdom will indeed finally come to earth.

II. ACT SIX: NEW CREATION

The Hope of the Church

The ultimate hope of the early church is not what happens immediately after death (what is popularly called “heaven”), but rather life in the age to come (what the Bible calls, among other things, “eternal life”). This hope is a renewed creation; it is living in *shalom* in the kingdom of God.

Eternal Life. The multiple phrases used synonymously in Luke’s account of the rich young ruler is one example in Scripture that life in the age to come is the believer’s ultimate hope (18:18–30).

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” —verse 18

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” —verse 24

“Who then can be saved?” —verse 26

“You will receive in the age to come, eternal life.” —verse 30

Renewed Creation. Paul indicates in Romans 8 that creation isn’t waiting for destruction, but it is waiting for restoration. When God’s children are finally glorified, new creation will come.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be bestowed upon us. For the creation itself waits with eager expectation for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility... in hope that it will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain freedom when God’s children are glorified. —verses 18–21

Glimpses of New Creation

The church’s hope in a restored creation is intrinsically connected to Israel’s expectation that God will fulfill his promises of reestablishing his kingdom on earth. These promises offer glimpses of God’s new creation and are scattered throughout the biblical narrative.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a child will lead them.

—Excerpt from Isaiah 11:6–9

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

—Excerpt from Isaiah 35

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered... I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.

—Excerpt from Isaiah 65:17–25

The Final Chapter

The key passage describing the age to come is Revelation 21—22. Here we see the culmination of God’s purposes for his creation. Sin and death are defeated; harmony with God, each other, and the created order is restored; things are finally as they should be resulting in God’s ultimate glory.

Heaven to Earth. The final two chapters of the biblical narrative do not describe people leaving earth and going to heaven, but rather the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth. God’s kingdom has finally arrived in its fullest (Matt 6:10).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. —Revelation 22:1–2

City in a Garden. God’s new city resides in a beautiful garden, indicating that the last chapters of the Bible are not simply a return to Garden-of-Eden conditions, but to the development of God’s creation into a glorious civilization.

“A comprehensive redemption also means that human cultural development and work will continue... There will be opportunity for humankind to continue to work and develop the creation – but now released from the burden of sin.”

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen
The Drama of Scripture

The Day of the Lord

Though there are many different views concerning the details of end-time chronology, there is a consensus that the Bible speaks of one pivotal point in the future when three major events will usher in the fullness of God’s kingdom.

The Return of Christ. Jesus, the King, returns to earth to be the one who ultimately restores God’s creation.

Jesus must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through the holy prophets. —Acts 3:21

The Resurrection. When Jesus returns, the dead and the living are physically raised to life with new bodies.

I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. —Acts 24:15

Final Judgment. At the resurrection, evil is defeated and everyone is judged according to how they lived their lives.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to receive what is due for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. —2 Corinthians 5:10

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY

Our Ultimate Hope

Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world; it's not even the primary promise of following Christ. Sadly, the Christian hope has been cheapened to an endless worship service of disembodied souls floating from cloud to cloud. In contrast, the promised goal of biblical history is a renewed creation here on earth where everything is as it should be—God's people with Jesus Christ ruling a world without sin, disease, hunger, or death, and full of joy, harmony, peace, adventure, and meaningful work.

*This is my Father's world
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong
Seems oft so strong
God is the ruler yet*

*This is my Father's world
The battle is not done
Jesus who died
Shall be satisfied
And earth and heaven be one*

Continuity with New Creation

Since God's new creation is not the destruction of this world but rather its renewal, there is a real continuity between this age and the next. This means that while the world is infected by sin, it is still to be valued because it will all be redeemed. Moreover, we can be assured that our present efforts to restore God's world will somehow carry over into the age to come.

Holistic Salvation

If the culmination of the biblical story is a renewed community living in a renewed creation, then salvation is not an escape from this world; instead it encompasses all of life. Salvation undoes all the effects of sin; it not only includes personal restoration with God, but reconciliation with others, physical healing, societal justice, peace, environmental renewal, and much more.

*"John's vision in Revelation, indeed, in the whole New Testament,
does not depict salvation as an escape from earth
into a spiritualized heaven where human souls dwell forever.
Instead, John is shown that salvation is
the restoration of God's creation on a new earth."*

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen
The Drama of Scripture

Inspiration for Mission

The hope of a restored and healed creation serves to fuel followers of Christ to continue their task of proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God in all of life. The biblical story constantly holds out this hope to encourage God's people to be a part of what he is doing in this world.

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As followers of Christ continue to experience, anticipate, and implement the life of the kingdom in this present age, in God's perfect time Jesus the King finally returns to earth, judges and destroys all evil, and makes all things new. Both the living and the dead are given resurrected physical bodies to enjoy God's new creation. Followers of Christ are restored with God, each other, and the entire created order. Things are as God's ultimately intended. Human beings rule with Christ over the world and continue to develop God's creation as they were originally designed from the beginning. God's kingdom is now a real, tangible, and beautiful reality on earth.