

### Turning the Page on Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-6a)

One of the regrets I have these days is that I don't make more time for recreational reading. I spend a lot of time reading in support of my ministry, but that's not recreational. Sermon research, church leadership, and church development typically round out my reading topics. As most people would say, that stuff is boring. And for the most part, they would be right.

One of the last "recreational" books I read was Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*. And it was a real page turner, one of those books you just can't put down. It was so suspense-filled that I was always in a hurry to get to the next chapter. But as I got closer to the end of the book I realized that the suspense soon would end and I just wasn't ready for that to happen.

Have you ever had that experience? The nearer you get to the end of the book, the more you want to know the outcome. And at the same time, you don't want the story to be over. In the case of *Angels & Demons*, I actually started pacing myself toward the end so I could extend the mystery just a little more. This phenomena, it occurs to me, is a lot like our attitude toward the kingdom of God. Please pray with me.

Creator God, the one who reigns from above, yet lives among us, open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word proclaimed. Help us to accept that death is a part of life as we are so keenly aware that ones we

love have been taken from us in this life. Make us willing participants in your plan to bring your heavenly kingdom to earth. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Every Sunday we say or sing the *Lord's Prayer*. I have always been intrigued by the extent to which some people feel the need to emphasize "trespasses" over "sins" or vice-a-verse-a. Here in West Chicago we are a "trespasses and trespass" church. The last two churches I served before coming here were "sins and sin" churches.

The truth is people do have strong feelings about their choice of words when they pray. But a large part of my intrigue with such strong feelings about words goes to the heart of what we actually understand about the words we use when we pray. Do we recite or "say" the prayer from rote, or do we actually *pray* the prayer? Do we really understand the words we are praying? And do we make an effort to transform those words into actions? I think these are important questions we all need to ask ourselves.

For example, when we say "thy kingdom come" what do we really mean? What is our understanding of the kingdom of God? What are we praying for when we ask for the kingdom to come on earth? I often wonder just how much thought goes into that part of the prayer. I'm sure Jesus put a great deal of thought into it as he taught the

disciples how to pray. Think about it just a minute. What do you think it means to pray for God's kingdom to come?

It seems that most of us look for the coming of the kingdom much in the same way we approach that real "page turner" of a book. We want the kingdom to come because we are anxious to see how things come out in the end. We want the mystery to be finally revealed. At the same time, we stall because we don't want our life as we now know it to come to an end. We desire to hang on to our earthly lives as long as possible because of the uncertainty of the beyond. Here is what John thought he was seeing and describing in his Revelation:

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. [Revelation 21:1a, 2a *NLT*]

John envisions the final pages turning on the old heaven and earth – the old Jerusalem. When that last page turns, life as we know it will be replaced by something new – the resurrection. And the resurrection encompasses the fullness of all our hope. It is our faith that all those saints that have gone on before us are waiting for us in the New Jerusalem. I always remind people that we don't *know* this. We *believe* it! It is that belief in new life that keeps us going through this life.

Today – All Saints Day – we remember those who have gone on before us. And we yearn to be reunited with those we love and have lost in this life. But in the midst of our yearning just how anxious are we to turn that last

page. When we pray "thy kingdom come" do we really mean it? Are we ready – prepared – to have that final mystery revealed?

When I think about my preparedness I always wonder if I am ready for the truth of the kingdom. Can we handle the truth we seek in the coming of the kingdom? Are we ready, really ready to hear the truth? Or would we like to deliberately slow the turning of the final pages in the resurrection story? Is it even possible for us to slow down the coming of kingdom? We know it's not possible because that's completely within God's domain.

Two days in our Christian calendar have earned special names – Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Yet in a real sense we live on Saturday, the day with no name. What the disciples experienced in small scale – three days of grief over one man who had died on a cross – we now live out on a cosmic scale.

Human history grinds on, between the time of promise and fulfillment. Can we trust that God can make something holy and beautiful and good out of a world that includes places like Iraq and Rwanda, inner-city ghettos and jammed prisons right here in our own country? It's Saturday on planet earth. Will Sunday ever come?

That dark Friday on Golgotha can only be called Good because of what happened on Easter Sunday, a day which gives a tantalizing clue to the riddle of the universe. Easter opened up a crack in a world moving toward entropy and decay, sealing the promise that someday God will enlarge the miracle of Easter to the cosmic scale – to each one of us as well as all the saints that have gone on before us. It is a good thing to remember that in the

cosmic drama, we live out our days on Saturday, the in-between day with no name.

Philip Yancey<sup>1</sup> tells the story of a woman whose grandmother lies buried under 150-year-old live oak trees in the cemetery of an Episcopal church in rural Louisiana. In accordance with the grandmother's instructions, only one word is carved on the tombstone: "Waiting." "Waiting."

Though Jesus cast a vision for a better kingdom now and in the future, as long as it is Saturday, the fulfillment of that vision still awaits until Sunday dawns. As long as we resist the turning of the pages leading up to the coming of the kingdom that vision is still waiting. Let's read more from John's *Revelation*. The one on the throne said:

"Look, I am making all things new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true."<sup>6</sup> And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give the springs of the water of life without charge." [Revelation 21:5b-6 NLT]

As the last pages of the Old Jerusalem are turning we need to decide for ourselves whether or not we can handle the truth. The truth, as we believe, is that there is eternal life. What it looks like and how it feels we are just dying to know – literally. But how anxious are we really to receive the kingdom.

Many scholars and theologians believe we are already living in the

kingdom. Many people believe that we are actually living in the so-called *end times*. You can count me among them. When we pray "thy kingdom come" if we realize that we are already living in the kingdom, it casts a much different light on the *Lord's Prayer* – and the final pages of life as we now know it! Please pray with me.

Awesome God, give to us your grace, that as we stand before the mystery of death we may hear a word of hope and experience the power of your promise to never leave us or forsake us. Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. Help us to believe what we have not seen, that confidence in your presence with us may lead us through the days ahead and bring us at last with all the saints, into the joy of your home, not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. (Zondervan, 1995)