

“They Will Hunger and Thirst No More”**Revelation 7:9-17****Easter 4: What Present Creation is Supposed to Be****Revelation 7:9-17**

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne

will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The Sermon

There’s a line said by an Ernest Hemingway character in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* who says, “The world is a fine place and worth fighting for and I hate very much to leave it.”ⁱ

Back in the 90s there was a psychological thriller called *Seven*, at the very end of which, a hard-boiled detective played by Morgan Freeman says in a voiceover, “Ernest Hemingway wrote, ‘The world is a fine place, and worth fighting for.’ I agree with the second part.”ⁱⁱ

What do you think?

Years ago, I was sitting with a guy who only in his senior years had become an outgoing and warm church member. That hadn’t been the case for very long when he was stricken by an illness that required months and months of difficult treatments.

If he had any fear of dying, he never shared it with me. He believed firmly in an eternal afterlife, bought by the saving grace of Jesus Christ. He’d had a long and prosperous life, and made a lot of money, and had recently donated a great deal of it. His affairs were in order, and his family was going to be well taken care of.

He was talking about how difficult the most recent series of treatments had been. And jabbing a finger into the armrest next to him for emphasis, this man who for years hadn’t had much to say to anybody, in church or otherwise, told me, in the hearing of others: “It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I’ll keep doing it as long as I have to if I can have *one more day in this—good—world.*”

The world is a fine place, and worth the fighting for.

What do you think?

In the Greek New Testament, there are a few different words that are translated “world.”

- One refers to the whole created cosmos, the order of God’s universe (κοσμος).
- One refers to the planet earth—the physical world of dirt and air and fire and water (γησ).
- One refers to the “world” which is the human-made, imperial order (οικουμενη).
- And one refers to the age we live in—“our” world, as in, our time; the “world” we know.

So, in Revelation 3:10, God says: I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the *oikoumené*, the human order, that will test the inhabitants of *gés*, the planet earth.

In other words, it’s not the planet, and it is certainly not the whole created *kosmos* that are on the brink of destruction in Revelation.

It’s the human-made world of cruel politics, and heartless economics, and societies whose values and ethics are the opposite of what God made us for.

God is not going to leave us, and is not going to let the whole created order, fall to ruin. God loves what God has made.

In Revelation 21, a loud voice comes from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals,” and “[I] will dwell with them as their God,” and “See, I am making all things new”—not obsolete, or

disposable, and not finding some other planet to start over, but making all things, the creation that already exists, new.ⁱⁱⁱ

A few years ago, the trilogy of the Lord of the Rings movies finally put on the screen the fantasy epic written by the Christian writer J.R.R. Tolkien, which for decades was believed to be unfilmable.

Even spread out over three long movies with many more hours of footage added into the home video editions, there are still many passages from the books that were never shot for the movies.

Among the sequences from the original books that were left unfilmed is a segment from the very last part of the three novels called the “Scouring of the Shire.”

It’s not included or even alluded to in the movie, but in the book, the Hobbits finally return home from their epic journeys, having played a critical role in saving the world from evil forces (long story), only to find the charming rural idyll from which they had set out so long ago now a joyless industrial grey wasteland of pollution, ruled by a bureaucracy and enforced by thugs.

The passage in Tolkien’s novel reads in part,

Many of the houses that they had known were missing. Some seemed to have been burned down. The pleasant row of old hobbit-holes in the bank on the north side of the Pool were deserted, and their little gardens that used to run down bright to the water’s edge were rank with weeds. Worse, there was a whole line of the ugly new houses all along Pool Side... An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road towards [their home] they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air.^{iv}

So, in the closing pages of the book, they undertake one more adventure, rousing their compatriots and launching a revolt that eventually results in reclaiming the shire and restoring the land.

Well, that's from an epic fantasy written by an inspired Christian author in the mid-20th century.

What do you think?

Stephen Hawking suggested in 2016 and 2017 that it was time for the human race to find another planet to move to, and do so within the next 100 years, because that's about all the time we have left before the earth is totally trashed.^v

What do you think? Is the world God made worth the fighting for?

In late January of this year, a spokesperson for the highest office in the most powerful country on earth responded to concerns about the future of the planet and humanity's ability to survive in the face of massive environmental damage by dismissing that subject as "matters we're gonna leave in the hands of a much, much higher authority."^{vi}

What do you think? Is the world God made worth the fighting for? Or are we just supposed to wait for whatever happens, both environmentally and theologically?

This past Monday, the U.N. released a 39-page summary of a 1500-page report, put together by hundreds of experts from around the world, using thousands of scientific studies.

It's an urgent warning that we are "transforming Earth's natural landscapes so dramatically that as many as one million plant and animal species are now at risk of extinction, posing a dire threat to ecosystems that people all over the world depend on for their survival."^{vii}

The report “is the most exhaustive look yet at the decline in biodiversity across the globe and the dangers that creates for human civilization.”^{viii}

As a rule, I don’t read 1500-page reports, so I am grateful they released a summary, and not only that, but they helpfully outline four major ideas that come from these thousands of studies. Their four prominent conclusions are:

1. Nature, including everything about it that is crucial to human existence, is deteriorating all over the world.^{ix}
2. The “drivers of change”—the factors that are causing the environment to deteriorate—have been picking up speed over the past 50 years.^x
3. Based on the trajectory that we’re on, if we’re going to avoid total environmental catastrophe, it’s going to require “transformative changes across economic, social, political and technological factors,”^{xi} and they clarify that by transformative changes, they’re talking about “a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.”^{xii}

Transformation is not our forte.

There are reasons beyond public apathy that transformation is so hard. Entrenched interests with something to lose are petrified of the slippery slope, which starts with being asked to give up some of their privilege.

So we leave it up to our children—*children*—to give their lives by jumping on active shooters, physically embodying the divine truth that the world is worth fighting for, while the rest of us act like we have no idea what could be done to change things.

Which leads to the fourth conclusion in the UN report: the thousands of studies analyzed have shown that if we *do* make the right “urgent and concerted efforts [to foster] transformative change,” then “nature can be

conserved, restored and used sustainably” and at the same time we can continue to meet all our other goals for human life.^{xiii}

What do you think?

In the vision of a world redeemed by God, we are invited to more than just passively waiting for God to do something, but to actively living in this world and ministering to this world in anticipation of what’s to come and in celebration of what God has already done for us.

God is inviting you and me to follow Jesus in holding the whole, precious Creation: the heavens *and* the earth, the polluted seas and the fished-out oceans, the forests laid waste and the deserts where uniformed patrollers find and pour out pitiful supplies of water left by compassionate people to offer survival to the desperate.

You may have heard about Teresa Todd, who is a city and county attorney in West Texas, who was driving late one night recently and saw three young people walking in the cold desert, one of whom appeared to be seriously ill.

She stopped and got the kids into her car to warm up, and was calling people she knew and worked with for help, and a squad car pulled up, and she was arrested and booked for harboring illegal migrants.

A few days later, the baffled local sheriff said, “Harboring is a big jump for them to make in my book.”^{xiv}

He said, “There’s a human component to this. We’ll let Congress and the politicians fight it out, but if somebody’s hungry or thirsty or needs some help, we’re going to help them.”^{xv}

It’s not the planet earth and it’s certainly not God’s created universe that are on trial in the book of Revelation. It’s the world of cruel politics and

heartless economics and societies whose values and ethics are the opposite of what God made us for.

But God doesn't give up on God's creation or the people who are in it.

And I say the world is a fine place, and worth the fighting for.

One last story about human rules and divine grace.^{xvi}

The rules of etiquette in the symphony concert hall are very specific and clear and have been established by centuries of tradition.

When a musical piece with several movements is presented, you do not applaud between the movements; you wait until the end of the whole symphonic piece.

And when it's time to express appreciation—and only at that time—the audience is allowed to respond within a strict set of parameters, pretty much confined to enthusiastic but polite applause.

Last Sunday, at the Boston Symphony Hall, the Handel And Haydn Society Orchestra was presenting a formal concert.

As they came to the end of a Mozart piece called 'Masonic Funeral Music,' there was a second of silence in the hall, and then a nine-year-old boy said, loudly enough for the whole hall to hear:

“WOW!”^{xvii}

That was a breach of protocol.

But the audience couldn't control themselves, and they all started to laugh—not a condescending laugh, but a gentle one recognizing that what that kid had said was pretty much what they were thinking, and it was just so charming.

Well, OK, you can't control a laugh. But then softly, tentatively at first, some beautiful human being started to clap. And the clapping seemed to be saying, you know what? That kid got it exactly right. "Wow" is the only possible response to that much beauty.

And within two seconds, everybody was applauding. And they kept on clapping. How long it went on isn't yet known by the public because the snippet that the Handel And Haydn Society released, to make people like me sob like a baby, fades out after several seconds with the applause still going strong.

The kid broke the rule. Then the audience broke the rule. Then the masters of the hall and the owners of the copyright on the performance endorsed the breaking of the rule, in the name of grace and beauty and what you and I recognize as holiness breaking into the human world.

Then they put out a public request to find out who that kid was, and it turned out he's an autistic boy named Ronan Martin. His grandfather had brought him that day. And the grandfather said he "can count on one hand the number of times" that Ronan has ever just spontaneously "come out with some expression of how he's feeling."^{xviii}

Talk about grace abounding.

The rules of propriety are specific and clear and well established.

So what do you say we go to the places where justice is denied, and where the suffering is hidden, and where people are hungry who do not have to be hungry,

and in the name of Jesus, let's break some rules of etiquette.

Because those who have endured the great ordeal
will stand before God's throne,

and they will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
 and no heat will strike them;
 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
 and guide them to springs of the water of life,
 and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And because this world is a beautiful place, and worth the fighting for.

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 May 12, 2019

ⁱ Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

ⁱⁱ Andrew Kevin Walker (writer), *Seven* (New Line Cinema, 1995)

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 21:3, 5

^{iv} J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine, 2003 paperback edition), 307.

^v Julia Zorthian, “Stephen Hawking Says Humans Have 100 Years to Move to Another Planet” (<http://time.com/4767595/stephen-hawking-100-years-new-planet/>, May 4, 2017).

^{vi} Sarah Huckabee Sanders quoted in Brendan Cole, “Sarah Huckabee Sanders Dismisses Ocasio-Cortez Climate Warning: We’ll Leave It to ‘Much, Much Higher Authority’” (<https://www.newsweek.com/sarah-sanders-dismisses-ocasio-cortez-climate-warning-well-leave-it-much-much-1301197>, 1/23/19 at 5:26 AM).

^{vii} Brad Plumer, “Humans Are Speeding Extinction and Altering the Natural World at an ‘Unprecedented’ Pace” (New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/climate/biodiversity-extinction-united-nations.html?module=inline>, May 6, 2019).

^{viii} Plumer, “Humans Are Speeding Extinction”

^{ix} Sandra Díaz, Josef Settele, Eduardo Brondízio et. al., “Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services ADVANCE UNEDITED VERSION (United Nations, 6 May 2019), 2

^x Díaz, et.al., “Summary,” 3

^{xi} Díaz, et.al., “Summary,” 5

^{xii} Díaz, et.al., “Summary,” 5

^{xiii} Díaz, et.al., “Summary,” 7

^{xiv} Manny Fernandez, “She Stopped to Help Migrants on a Texas Highway. Moments Later, She Was Arrested.” New York Times

(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/10/us/texas-border-good-samaritan.html?fbclid=IwAR29N0WHb7IUcYpISQUXkHevKSmQTdVs792I2msrUwqJ_Aa3WJgVvdgKDr8, May 10, 2019)

^{xv} Fernandez, “She Stopped to Help”

^{xvi} Reid McCarter, “And now, a nice story about the kid who yelled “wow!” at the symphony” (May 10, 2019, 2:25 P.M., <https://news.avclub.com/and-now-a-nice-story-about-the-kid-who-yelled-wow-a-1834672482>)

^{xvii} <https://twitter.com/995WCRB/status/1125847597271453696>

^{xviii} McCarter, “The Kid Who Yelled ‘Wow’”