

BEGIN WITH THE END

Revelation 21: 22 -23

In a recent story in *The Washington Times*, First Lady Laura Bush recalled a visit with her husband to the home of his parents, the former president and Mrs. Bush. According to Laura Bush, on this visit her husband, perhaps the most powerful man on earth, woke up at 6:00 a.m. as usual and went downstairs to get a cup of coffee. As he sat down on the sofa, he put his feet up on the coffee table. All of a sudden, his mother yelled out, “Put your feet down!”

His father said, “For goodness’ sake, Barbara, he’s the president of the United States.”

And Barbara said, “I don’t care. I don’t want his feet on my table.”

The president promptly did as he was told, for as Mrs. Bush observes: “Even presidents have to listen to their mothers.” Today we honor our mothers. And we continue our series on the Book of Revelation.

Kent Crockett tells a powerful story in his book, *I Once Was Blind, But Now I Squint*. Years ago Kent and his wife Cindy recorded many of their family highlights using an 8mm home movie camera. Some of you are too young to even know about 8mm film. Others of you took your first home movies with them. They were silent, and the picture wasn’t very sharp. But they were sufficient to capture some of the important moments in your life.

Kent and Cindy collected years of precious memories on numerous spools of film, which became antiquated after the invention of video cameras. Some friends living in another state offered to consolidate all of these old films onto one videotape. The Crocketts gladly accepted their generous offer and sent them the films.

Their friends placed an 8mm home movie projector in their living room to project the movies onto a screen. Then they set up a VHS video camera pointed at the screen and recorded the films while the projector’s reels turned. Afterward they sent the completed videotape back to the Crocketts. Kent and Cindy were anxious to watch the tape of their old movies. They brought out the popcorn and inserted the video into their VCR. But that’s where the fun stopped. As they beheld their old home movie films on videotape, they also listened to their friends’ remarks. These friends hadn’t realized that when they recorded the old silent 8mm films, the microphone on their video camera also taped their critical comments about the Crocketts!

When the videotape began, these so-called friends started making fun of Kent and Cindy. As the film continued to roll, their comments turned vicious. With every new scene came a cutting remark or sarcastic joke. Daggers entered Kent's heart as he listened to what their friends honestly thought about them. Cindy was devastated. Although their friends were cordial to their faces, the video recorded the true thoughts of their hearts.

The real lesson here is to beware what you put on videotape (or the internet!), because it will always come back to haunt you.

Imagine your life captured on videotape and then presented to God on the final day--even those parts you thought the camera wasn't picking up. Is that a scary thought? It's something to think about as we come to our reading from God's word.

Today's lesson from Revelation paints a beautiful picture of the culmination of all we believe about God and about life:

“And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”

What a beautiful picture of the end of the journey of faith. So that's how it all comes out--the holy city, the city of God.

Stephen Covey in his wildly popular book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells us to begin with the end in mind. Covey is referring to the end of our earthly life--what people will remember about us when our lives are done. But for the believer in Christ, death is not the end. The end is the new Jerusalem where we will be fully and completely in the presence of God. That is when our striving to touch Him will come to fruition. That is when we will truly know Him in whom we have believed. Begin with the end in mind, but what does that mean, if the end is with God?

First, it means that everything matters. Nothing that happens here is irrelevant.

Someone has made a list of The Top Five Things You Don't Want To Hear At The Pearly Gates:

Number five is, "Ha, Ha! Are you the doofus who stuck the knife in the toaster?"

Number four is, "Take a seat, it will be a few minutes; God's helping a high school football team in Texas." (I'll let you think about that one for a moment.)

Number three is, "You're an organ donor? Good. Please wait in the lobby until all your parts are here."

Number two is, "Hey pal, maybe we don't believe in you, either!"

And the Number One thing You Don't Want To Hear At The Pearly Gates: Security!

If it's true that our lives do not end in a box in a hole in a ground but in the presence of almighty God, then it certainly makes a difference what kind of people we are here and now. If this world is but a prelude to a better one, then life itself matters. In light of eternity, nothing is inconsequential. It really does matter that we live authentically--that our lives reflect integrity, kindness, justice, and mercy. We aren't living just for today. Each day we are fashioning lives for eternity. Our actions are translated into habits. Our habits become our character, and our character becomes who we are. Living with the end in mind means that everything matters. Life itself matters.

As you know, there is a quaint expression in life insurance policies which calls natural disasters "acts of God." It reminds me of something Charles L. Wallis said years ago. He said, "Some have called the disaster of crumbling buildings following the San Francisco earthquake an act of God." But then he noted that a distinguished architect, after investigating the tragedy, reported, "Dishonest mortar was responsible for nearly all earthquake damage in San Francisco." Not an act of God, but dishonest mortar. Charles L. Wallis goes on to say, "When men build their lives or their society with 'dishonest mortar,' eventually judgment will come."

And that's true. It's not so much that a videotape of our lives will be presented to God on that day we come fully into God's presence. That is not necessary. Rather, *we* will come into God's presence, and who we will be will reflect the accumulation of all that we have thought and done and said and believed. Each day we live, we are fashioning our lives for eternity. Living with the end in mind means that everything matters.

But it also means, paradoxically, that everything is all right. We no longer have to live in fear. We've read the last book in the Bible, and we know that God wins. Truth wins. Justice wins. Even more important, love wins. We don't have a thing in the world to worry about. Everything one day will be all right.

Writer Catherine Marshall tells about a friend named Marge who had an unusual experience aboard a plane bound for Cleveland. The plane was waiting for takeoff. As she settled into her seat, Marge noticed that on one side of the airplane a sunset suffused the entire sky with glorious color. But on the other--out of the window next to her seat--all Marge could see was a dark and threatening sky, with no sign of the sunset.

As the plane's engines began to roar, a gentle voice spoke within her. "You have noticed the windows," the voice murmured beneath the roar and thrust of the takeoff. "Your life, too, will contain some happy, beautiful times, but also some dark shadows. Here's a lesson I want to teach you to save you much heartache and allow you to 'abide in Me' with continual peace and joy. You see, it doesn't matter which window you look through; this plane is still going to Cleveland. So it is in your life. You have a choice. You can dwell on the gloomy picture. Or you can focus on the bright things and leave the dark, ominous situations to Me. I can handle them alone anyway. And the final destination is not influenced by what you see or feel along the way. Learn this, act on it and you will be released, able to experience the "peace that passes understanding."

What a beautiful way to express it. Living with the end in mind helps us put life in the proper perspective. No matter how difficult things may seem, no matter how great our heartaches may be, this is not God's final word. His final word still lies on the other side. That is why in the lesson from the gospel, Jesus says to us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Christ is saying to us, don't give up or give in. Everything matters. Yes, but everything's all right. Because all of it is in God's hand.

And that leads us to a final truth--Life is good, because God is with us in this world and the next.

Life *is* good. The nonbeliever can't really say that. Without a belief in life beyond the grave, the impartial observer can only say that life happens. To quote a country song, sometimes you're the bug, sometimes you're the windshield. Life itself is neutral. Maybe you win, maybe you lose. Who knows?

Well, we know--life is not neutral. This life is a prelude to a better life--life lived in the presence of almighty God. That is the faith that sustains us in good times and in bad. And God is with us each step of the way.

It's like a story that someone tells about a young lady named Sally. Sally was growing up, becoming a woman preparing to go off to college. Her mother had struggled to provide for her education, an especially difficult task since her father had died several years earlier. Her mother made every effort within her power to raise Sally right. Now she would be on her own, an exciting and frightening time.

Sally had strong reservations about leaving her mother alone to mind the farm and the chores. She was also nervous about having to find her own way without her mother's guidance. As she prepared to meet the bus, bags packed and ready, her mother took her arm and told her, "You're gonna see things an' do things you ain't never heard of," she said, "and you won't know which way to turn sometimes. You 'member how you used to tug on my apron string when you wanted something and I'd see to what you was after? You 'member how when you was too close to the road and I'd holler to you to tell you to get away from there'?" Her mother gently reminded. "Well, I'm gonna be there with you in your heart, but it'll be up to you to listen to what I told you. I can't kiss your hurts when you fall down an' skin your knee or quiet you when the big storms come rollin' through. But, I'll be close as a peanut in your pocket when you need me. If you're afraid, I'll stand with you. And if you are hurting, you can feel me close, and if you do wrong, I'll whisper the truth to ya so you won't do it no more." The tears came to both their eyes. Her mother opened the dresser drawer and took out a neatly folded handkerchief and placed it in the pocket of her dress.

Upon leaving, Sally felt completely alone. As she fought back the tears, she reached into her dress pocket to take out the handkerchief her mother had

placed there. Then she noticed a knot in one corner just like her mother used to tie her milk money in her handkerchief. Upon untying the knot, she found a single peanut. She knew that her dear mother would always be with her in her heart.

And that is the good news for today. God is with us each step of the way. Beginning with the end in mind reminds us that everything matters. We are conditioning our hearts for eternity. But that's also why everything's all right. Our hearts belong to God. We don't have to have perfect hearts--only hearts with God's love in them. And one day, we know we will be fully in God's presence. And that is why life is good.