

Life between the Trees

For those of us who have ever loved a pet and welcomed them into our families, this Scripture from the book of Revelation should be especially good news. According to at least John of Patmos, the author, your pet will be part of the afterlife, part of God's great plan of redemption of all things. However, the evidence for this reality is not limited to this text but spread throughout the Bible and theology.

The Book of Revelation, for the casual reader, seems to be about revenge, for getting even with the Romans for all the oppression they wrought on Israel and the world. A more careful reading, however, displays another picture entirely. This picture is summed up in our text: *Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped.*

Assembled around God's throne in heaven are "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the sea," each one praising and worshiping God. God's ultimate purpose is the salvation of all creation. **This surely includes our beloved pets.**

However, we're getting ahead of ourselves, for the end of history and life as pictured around the throne of God is not where we are now. Far from it. **Is there any question that the world is in need of redemption?** Unfortunately, the church is as much the problem when it should be the solution. Consider Ukraine: The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is at war, literally, with the Russian Orthodox Church. Prior to that, Roman Catholics and Protestants were killing each other in Northern Ireland. WWI and WWII pitted majority Christian nations against each other. In the US, Christians have upheld slavery, segregation, and women's rights, while others worked for equality. Yet, through it all, God is now and always has been working to redeem the world. The reason it has now taken some 2000 years since the ministry of Jesus is because God needs humans to help accomplish this. Specifically, God needs the church to play its rightful role.

Recall from the book of Genesis that "In the beginning," God created for us a splendid, life-giving garden, named Eden, and deemed the entire creation "very good." In the midst of that garden God placed the Tree of Life that could sustain its occupants for eternity. But, as the story goes, humankind turned its back on God, preferring to be their own gods and go their own way without their creator's guidance. The consequence of which is they lost access to the Tree of Life and die.

Ever since, God has been at work to bring the entirety of creation into a saving relationship with God's self, one another, and all things as noted in our text for today.

So, the Bible begins with humans enjoying the everlasting life the Tree of Life offers and ends with the Tree of Life restored to all. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

Rev. 22:1-2

During these three months that we will be together, I want to explore with you the implications of what I call life between the trees, how God is at work redeeming the world and our place in this process. It begins by recognizing the need for human involvement. [Adam placed in the garden to till it and keep it.]

God's efforts to redeem the entire world form a continuous story throughout the Bible. It can be traced from Genesis to Revelation

Humans barred from Tree of Life → Humans restored to Tree of Life

Suggest the totality of God's work in the world is for redemption.

In the purpose of Israel we find the purpose of the church.

Genesis 12:1-4 returns to universal viewpoint

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Through the Covenant, God is teaching Israel how to secure the abundant life.

Model of behavior toward each other is found in the 10 commandments and in the Year of Jubilee

Ultimate goal → to be a "Light to the Nations"

Isaiah 42:6

*I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,*
a light to the nations,*

Isaiah 49:6 *"Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will*

also give you as a light to the gentiles, that you should be My salvation to the ends of the earth'".

Zechariah 8:20-23

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Come, let us go to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going.' Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'

Israel was involved in mission by attracting people to Yahweh by living out their unique relationship with him.

What do we find in the New Testament?

Mt's purpose: convince Jewish followers of Jesus to be a light to the gentiles

Great commission

Luke traces Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam to underscore Jesus is for all the nations.

Acts of the Apostles 1.8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

Jesus:

Matthew 5.14-15: *'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'*

John 3.21: But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

Paul 1 Cor. 14:25 "God is really among you!"

What do you suppose a passerby might notice that would suggest that God was with these people, this congregation?

The purpose of a congregation is to teach and model the two great commandments

To live for the sake of one another and the world, so that the world will find God.

We, as one small part of the church universal, cannot do this on our own. But the success of a congregation is not measured in numbers or programs or how nice the people are. A congregation's success is found only in its faithfulness to its mission, the mission of being a light to its world. The first step is to understand its role and then move into the greater work of modeling how God wants the world to work right here in this little part of Redding. We are well on the way. Let us not grow weary in well-doing or think that we can't be of much good due to our size. Remember the congregation in Corinth? Paul wrote to them that Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. We will do our part and God will take it from there. It is no small thing that God needs us as much as we need God. We shall not disappoint! AMEN