

📖Text: Revelation 21:1-7, “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. And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is among people, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making all things new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ He said to me, ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the one who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. All who overcome will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.’”

I try to take some time from my professional reading to relax with a good novel. I love to read and to talk about books. When I was a hospital chaplain I found it interesting to see what people were reading on the wards. I figured if they had a James Michener novel, they were in for a long stay! One day I was passing through the Cardiac ward and saw a patient reading a book entitled *Dead By Morning!* I told her, “What a book to be reading in the hospital!” But she assured me it was a terrific murder-mystery. I said, “I hope you’re still reading it in the morning!”

There’s something comforting about a book—you know there’s going to be a final chapter. A few years ago I attempted to read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, and though I understand it has a final chapter, I never made it to the end! I later tried another Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamozov* by Dostoyefski, and though I thought it would never end, I somehow managed to finish it.

Well-written books are often unpredictable. Popular authors churn out formulaic novels because their readers don’t want any surprises. Take a look at the current best-seller list, and you know what to expect from most of the top 20. Good authors, on the other hand, take risks; some say that even they aren’t sure how their stories will turn out. In the course of the action, the plot may take unexpected turns, keeping the reader in suspense. You can’t tell where things are headed, but you expect that when you reach the final chapter there will be a satisfying conclusion that will explain the twists and turns of the plot, and clarify any questions raised.

I have to confess that I’ve often been tempted to read ahead and sneak a peek at the last few pages! Life doesn’t present that option, but in a sense that’s exactly what we’ve done this morning. We’ve looked at the conclusion of the last book to see God’s final word. The Revelation (which means an “unveiling”) contains the answers to the paradoxes of life’s plot, for He is “the Author and Finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

I realize that some authors leave the reader hanging...and some people come to the end of their lives with unanswered questions, unfinished business, and unresolved conflict. But death is not the final chapter.

The final book of the Bible is unlike the fiction we read for pleasure. God announces in chapter 1, vs. 3 (the prologue), that there is a special blessing for those who “read the words of this prophecy...and take to heart what is written in it”. You won’t find such a promise in the *New York Times* bestseller list.

If you keep a journal (women keep diaries; men keep journals), you can chart the progress of your life. I kept one during Desert Storm so I could have a record of what I experienced. Our lives are like a historical novel. And in this story we find ourselves living *in the middle*. Our lives may take some unexpected turns. We turn a page and encounter a nasty surprise—sickness, discrimination, deployment, a financial setback. The paradoxes and absurdities of life test our faith, and we discover how strong we are. While in the middle, we believe that God is good and that He loves us...yet life often hurts.

The Lord Jesus Christ is called the “Alpha and Omega” (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). He is eternal, the beginning and the end. I saw a poster in a Christian bookstore that said, “Lord, I’m troubled about the future” and then came Jesus’ answer: “Don’t worry—I’ve already been there.” Our problem is that we’re in chapter 4 and we’re worried about what will happen in chapter 6.

We know that “in the beginning,” the opening of the book of Genesis, God declared things were very good. We agree that the end of time will be good—God will “wipe away every tear” from our eyes. With such a good beginning and ending, it comes as a surprise that the middle contains sorry, disappointments, despair, tragedy, and pain.

Our problem is that we expect uninterrupted good times, but life in the middle of the story can take some nasty turns. If our lives are to have purpose, we need to see that we are living in the middle of a story that was begun and will be concluded by God. My life did not begin with me; it began with God. The search for meaning in life begins above, not within. In novels, “accidents” happen to the characters, but they’re not really accidents; the author planned them. In life there are no accidents that escape the plan of God.

As the “plot thickens”, we find a great reassurance. God, Who is in control of the past and the future, the Lord of the beginning and the end, is also in charge of the middle. We may not know what tomorrow may hold, but we can trust the One who holds tomorrow in His hand. Many people struggle with the poetic and prophetic symbolism of the book of Revelation. Yet the message of this final book can be stated in a few simple words: God is in control of history. His rule is inclusive and absolute. He is sovereign over the beginning, the end, even the middle. There are no accidental occurrences or encounters in our stories. John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Church) used to say that he read the newspaper to see what God was doing in the world. We can declare with confidence, “Our God reigns.”

I find this comforting when facing important decisions or unresolved situations. When we are convinced that God is the Author of life, it should bring us to our knees.

Every US President has cabinet officials, and most has what’s been called the “kitchen cabinet”, an unofficial group of presidential advisors. They hold no public office, yet they have unlimited access to the President. Imagine if you were a member of this trusted inner circle. You might influence foreign and domestic policy. You could receive a phone call one evening, and as you share your ideas with the President, a few days later you’d see the results of your advice on the front page of your morning paper!

Now think about the power of prayer. You’re speaking about the troubles of the world to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Prayer is dealing with the problems of our fallen world. Prayer is political action and socio-economic force. Prayer sustains society more than any earthly leader, army, political party, legislation, social movement, or any other factor. There’s an old saying,

“More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.” I can’t get into the Oval Office, but I can go before the throne of God. He has an open-door policy for His children.

I was having a disagreement with my commander one day over a policy issue. Believing God can change people’s minds, I smiled and said, “Sir—I guess I’ll have to *go over your head*...and **pray** about this.” He replied, “Chaplain—no fair!” David declared in the Psalms, “The heart of the king is in the Hand of the Lord.”

Who’s really in charge of this world? If not God, then we’re left with chaos. If our existence is the result of a random and chance origin, then life is without meaning or purpose. Morality would be arbitrary, and it wouldn’t matter how we lived. Suicidal despair would be the logical conclusion to a meaningless existence. Some people (in spite of the complexity of Creation) do see life as an amazing accident. A few years back, in response to an article on evolution in *US News & World Report*, a Rabbi wrote, “The *big-bang* theory may be valid, but we theists insist that there was a Big Banger!” How do we survive life “in the middle”? By confidence in our Creator, Who is present in this world, even when it seems like He is silent and far away. Faith is trusting God, even when life appears chaotic and makes little sense.

A 10-year old girl was reading her Bible and came to the last book, to the concluding chapters of Revelation. As she read the encouraging final words, she shouted to her Mother, “We won! We won!” And “in the middle” we can be “more than conquerors through Christ who loves us” (Romans 8:37).

When I was stationed in Fort Sam Houston, my wife gave me a great Christmas present—tickets to see the San Antonio Spurs. Let’s say that you’re 6’7” and on their team. You’re at the *Alamodome* playing the Denver Nuggets. It’s halftime and you’re trailing Denver by ten points. But it’s only the middle. The game’s not over yet. If you could know with certainty that you would win the game, and even know the final score, you can be sure you would begin the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter with confidence.

We are somewhere in the middle. We don’t have to know the whole story if we’re convinced there **is** a story, and if we’re trusting the Author. We are heading toward the finish, trusting the One who is the *Beginning and the End* to guide us, and give our lives meaning and victory—as we turn the page.

Prayer> “Sovereign Lord, help us to see that life is not accidental or arbitrary. As we continue our journey, help us to live by faith in Your care and control. Be our Companion in our difficult times and cause us to face every challenge with quiet confidence. This we ask in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ--the Alpha and Omega--Who is and Who was, and Who is to come, Amen.”