

November 23, 2025

Group Study: The End is the Beginning
Revelation 21:1-5

1. How does John's vision of a new heaven and new earth compare with the story of creation in Genesis?
2. What does it mean that God will "make God's home among the people"?
3. How does the New Jerusalem symbolize both continuity and transformation of God's people?
4. How do you hear the promise that God is "making all things new" in your own life?
5. What does it mean for the tree of life to bring healing to all nations?
6. How can we live now as though we are part of God's new creation?

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

November 23, 2025

"The End Is the Beginning"

Focal Text: Revelation 21:1-5

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The focal passage of this week's lesson is Revelation 21:1-5. Here we find John's breathtaking vision of a new heaven and a new earth. It's a passage that imagines God not abandoning creation, but renewing it. "Look!" says the voice from the throne, "I am making all things new."

That promise can feel both inspiring and ... kind of hard to hold onto. Because we live in this tension of "already" and "not yet." Christ has already conquered death, but the world around us still groans. The oceans rise. Forests burn. Communities suffer from pollution and drought. Climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations—low-income communities, children, the elderly, people with pre-existing health conditions—because they often have fewer resources to prepare for and then cope with its impacts.

So, what does it mean to live faithfully in a world that is both beautiful and broken? How can we live in hope and not despair?

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Before we go further, I'd like for you to take a minute to think about God's good creation.

When have you felt most connected to creation as a part of your faith?

Maybe it was a walk or a garden. Maybe it was a storm, or just a moment of awe. I have so many memories of these connections from my childhood in Alaska: wrapped up in blankets, watching the northern lights dance at midnight; looking up through silvery-green leaves, listening to birch trees whispering; sitting on a boulder at the foot of an Alaskan mountain range. In these moments, I remember feeling intertwined. I felt like I was one small creature that was integrated into a sacred whole.

Revelation's vision of a renewed creation doesn't describe an escape from the earth or the destruction of the earth. Revelation describes the restoration of creation. The first heaven and the first earth are not destroyed; they are remade.

That means creation care isn't just activism or environmentalism. It's participation in God's redemptive work. When we pick up litter, when we plant trees or reduce waste or advocate for clean water and clean energy, we're not just doing good deeds. We're aligning ourselves with the character of the God who makes all things new.

Theologian Sallie McFague once wrote that "the world is God's body." We might even think of caring for creation, then, as a form of worship—an embodied way of loving what God loves. God places Adam in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:15, so that the man can "till and keep it." These same verbs are used later in Scripture to describe the service of priests in the temple. Creation care is not peripheral to faith; it is priestly work.

What are some ways that your church already participates in this priestly care of creation? What work is ours to do? Maybe you aren't the scientist who will discover a clean-energy breakthrough, but that doesn't mean that there's nothing for us to do. What small, faithful acts could we add to this work?

But before we get too idealistic, Revelation also speaks about a world of hardship. The communities who first heard John's vision lived under oppressive Roman rule. They were poor, they were persecuted and tired. They longed for that renewal because they lived surrounded by destruction.

We can't really talk about the hope of renewed creation without also naming lament.

For many people today, the ecological crisis feels overwhelming. Wildfires, floods, extreme heat have all displaced millions of people, often those who are the most vulnerable.

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Earlier, I mentioned memories of growing up in Alaska. Just this fall, unusually warm ocean temperatures in the Pacific Ocean contributed to the formation of Typhoon Halong, a category 4 storm that hit the southwestern coast of Alaska early in the morning on October 11. Just from these small villages, more than 1,500 people have been displaced, and some of them permanently. Many from these villages have lived on this land for generations. The small village in the Kuskokwim Delta were the traditional homelands of the Yup'ik people. The people's lives there were based on subsistence farming of moose, beluga whales, salmon, seal oil. They lived close to that land. And generations of their ancestors are buried on that land. Even apart from disasters like typhoons, erosion and thawing permafrost caused by global warming—these things more slowly but just as effectively are forcing the relocation of Alaska Natives.

Others of us who live in other places and in other circumstances, we might struggle with guilt. We know that our lifestyle contributes to harm that we just can't easily undo. It seems to me that lament is the most—and maybe sometimes the only—appropriate response.

Remember, though, that lament is not the opposite of faith. Lament is faith that refuses to be silent in the face of brokenness. It's what the prophets did. It's what the psalmists did. Lament keeps our hearts soft.

When we grieve for creation, we join God's own sorrow over the damage done to what God called "very good." And that grief can lead us to repentance, to change, and to courage.

Take a moment to reflect. What is one part of creation that you grieve for? And then, whether it's connected to the object of your grief or not, what is one small action of care that you could practice this week?

Recently, the Buttry Center for Peace and Nonviolence at Central Seminary in Overland Park, Kansas, hosted an event called "Faithful Responses to Climate Change."

It was a gathering of pastors and theologians, scientists and lay leaders, both in person and on-line, all wrestling with this same question: What does faithfulness look like in this time of climate crisis?

What stood out to me in the keynote sessions was the balance between realism and hope. The data is pretty clear, and it is heartbreaking to see the cost to the earth and its ecosystems and even more so the cost to human communities. No one pretended that the challenges were small. But they also refused to surrender to despair.

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Creation care isn't at all a distraction from the gospel; it's an expression of it—and it's an expression of hope. Caring for the earth is one way to love our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable who suffer first and most from environmental harm.

Participants at this conference shared practical steps, too. Like how churches and congregations can assess their carbon footprint, how they can support sustainable agriculture, and how we can partner with local organizations on community gardens and clean-energy initiatives. A link to the Buttry Center's work, including the presentations from this conference, are included in the podcast show notes.

The atmosphere of that conference was deeply theological, and deeply human. It was rooted in the conviction that hope is an act of resistance.

When Revelation speaks of “a new heaven and a new earth,” it's not just about ecology. It's about intimacy.

“Look! The home of God is among mortals,” the text says. “God will dwell with them, and they will be God's people.”

This is the heart of the promise. God is not distant from creation's pain or from our own. The Creator chooses to live within creation—within us.

And that's why our acts of care, however small, matter. They are signs of the indwelling God; they're gestures of trust that God's love will have the final word, and that God's creation is indeed good.

Think of it like ... compost: Even the discarded things, when they're tended, can become fertile ground for new life. The church's task, as strange as it might sound, is compost work. We're transforming what's been wasted into the soil of renewal.

If you can track along with this analogy just for a moment longer, consider this: What is one “compostable” part of your life or your community? Some experience of loss or burnout or brokenness. And how could that loss become a source of new growth, with God's help?

Revelation's final vision takes us back to the beginning, to the garden of creation, now restored. The river of life flows through the holy city, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

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That's the image we carry with us as we live in this "already-not-yet" time. We're not called to build heaven on earth. We are called to live as people who trust that heaven and earth will one day meet.

Tending to creation, tending to one another—that's how we live out that trust. So, this week, whether you recycle a bottle or you plant a seed or you reduce waste, or you simply pause to give thanks for the breath in your lungs and the soil under your feet, know that you are participating in the work of God who says, "Look! I am making all things new."