

Big Day

Revelation 21:1-6

INTRODUCTION

I would like to introduce you to a man named Bart. If you are a fan of the contemporary Christian music group “Mercy Me,” you probably recognize him. And you probably know the story I am about to tell.

From the earliest days of his life, Bart and his family had been physically and emotional abused by Bart’s dad, a man named Arthur. Bart was himself severely beaten many times. Bart’s parents would divorce while he was still a small child, but he kept in contact with his father over the years.

When Bart was 15 years old, his father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. That diagnosis served as a wake-up call to Arthur, and he started to make amends for his actions. He started to read the Bible and began to go to church regularly.

As his illness became progressively worse, Arthur’s relationship with Bart became improved. And by the time Arthur died in 1991, when Bart was only 18 years old, the two of them were very close.

Bart would say “I got a front row seat to see this guy go from being a monster to falling desperately in love with Jesus. By the time he passed away when I was a freshman in college, not only was he my best friend, he was like the godliest man I’d ever known”.

After his father’s death, Bart became obsessed with a simple phrase he heard his grandmother say many times:

I can only imagine

She would say “I can only imagine what your father is seeing in heaven now.” Bart found great comfort in that phrase, and wrote it on everything he touched.

Fast forward about eight years. MercyMe is recording an album, and they desperately need another song. While sitting on the band’s bus enroute to its next engagement, Bart saw an old notebook on which he had written that phrase. Ten minutes later he had composed a song that would catapult that album to sales of more than 100,000 copies and would also result in MercyMe landing its first record contract. It is the most played song in the history of Christian radio.

And in a few moments, our sanctuary choir will sing it for you.

You know, among the goals of our gathering together on this All Saints’ Sunday is to reflect on the coming Kingdom of God. We have titled this series “Kingdom Come.” Our intent is to focus on how life is different for those of us living in the Kingdom of Christ—different than life in the earthly kingdom, the world around us.

For those in the Kingdom of Christ, there is a Big Day coming. It's not here yet, but it is coming, and coming soon.

IN THAT DAY

When Isaiah writes his "in that day" phrase, he is describing that coming Big Day.

At the time he wrote, God's people were at a very difficult time in their history. They were in exile because of their disobedience. They were discouraged and distressed. And to top it all off, Isaiah has just prophesied that things are going to get worse before they get better.

But despite the fact that things would get much worse before they got better, Isaiah offers these verses of hope about that coming Big Day. Look with me at verse 9:

*In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation." (Isaiah 26:9)*

It's not here yet, but one of these days the people of God will be able to look around and say without hesitation:

*"Look at what's happened! This is our God!
We waited for him and he showed up and saved us!
This GOD, the one we waited for!
Let's celebrate!" (Isaiah 25:9, The Message)*

Oh, what a Big Day that will! But it's not here yet.

UNTIL THAT DAY

Until **THAT** day comes, we must live in **THIS** day. And while **THIS** day does have some really happy moments, there are constant reminders that we are not yet living in **THAT** day.

The Shroud

One of those reminders is the shroud. That's Biblical speak for death. Look at verse 7:

*On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever. (Isaiah 26:7)*

One of the things that makes **THIS** day different from **THAT** day is that in **THIS** day people die. As many of you know, in these days I am walking with my Aunt Doris who will soon herself die. On Friday, I purchased her cemetery plot and ordered the marker for her

grave. I contacted all of my siblings and cousins so they could reach out to her if they wanted too. It is going to be a sad and somber journey. But it is a reality of life here in this kingdom, of life in **THIS** day.

But in **THAT** day, in the Big Day that is coming, the text in Revelation says:

There will be no more death ... (Revelation 21:4)

Here in Isaiah the prophet uses the imagery of the shroud – the linen covering placed over the bodies of the deceased. God will destroy the shrouds, because they won't be needed any more.

That will be a Big Day! But it's not here yet. Until that day, we need shrouds ... and we experience sorrow.

The Sorrow

Look at the first half of verse 8:

The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces... (Isaiah 26:8)

This sorrow involves more than the sorrow experienced at a time of death. There are a lot of other things in our world that break our hearts.

- Fractured families
- Terminal health diagnoses
- A friend I know was recently laid off because his company can't get parts, and he is concerned about buying Christmas gifts for his kids.
- Turn on the news. Pick up the paper. You don't have to look hard to find something that qualifies as "sorrow."
- You may not even need to look outside your own front door.

In addition to the promise of no more death, in **THAT** day, the Revelation text says:

There will be no more mourning, or crying or pain... (Revelation 21:4)

What a wonderful day that will be! But it's not here yet. And until that Big Day we will need shrouds, and we will experience sorrow ... and ...

The Shame

Look at the last half of verse 8:

He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. (Isaiah 26:8)

Each week we hear stories about how hard it is to be a Christian in this day and age – how this nation is becoming more and more anti-Christian.

And while none of us enjoy being hassled for our faith, what we face is still a far cry from the persecution faced by Christians in other parts of the world – places where it is illegal to be Christian and where Christians are martyred on an almost daily basis.

Verse 8 speaks of those times when the world views it as disgraceful, shameful to be considered one of God's children. But there is a day coming – a great day coming – when “every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

That will be a great day indeed! But it's not here yet.

IN THE MEANTIME

God's people have always lived with an eye toward the Coming Kingdom. We live, having experienced many of God's promises fulfilled in our own lives, but with the reality that the biggest and final promises are yet to come. In short, while we wait for **THAT** day, we still have to live in **THIS** day.

In the meantime:

1. Remember that God is still God even when the circumstances of our lives are filled with death and mourning and sorrow and pain.
 - Christians are not exempt from those emotions. Walking in faith with Jesus doesn't protect us from the sorrows of life. My seminary education won't help my aunt at all.
2. Live expectantly in the hope of that coming day.
 - Hope is not a wimpy word for Christians. Hope is, for us, a looking forward to something that is real. It's different than hoping you got a pony for Christmas when your family lived in a second floor walk-up apartment. It wasn't going to happen. Ever.
 - When Christians sing “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less” we talk of the reality of that coming day. It will happen. It just hasn't happened yet.
 - In the midst of the tears and pain and sorrow of **THIS** day never lose sight of **THAT** day.
3. Extend the banquet invitation.
 - Did you notice the wording in verse 6? The great banquet is open to **All** people. Not just Jews. Not just those who already believe. All are invited. That doesn't, however, mean all will have a seat at the table or get to go through the buffet line.
 - The banquet is prepared for those who are counted as God's people when **THAT** day comes.
 - I'm always torn. Sometimes I want to pray, “Lord, I'm ready for that day. Come quickly.” Other times I think about people I love who will not be joining me at the table and I pray, “O Lord, be patient. I can endure this day a bit

- longer if it means my loved one has another chance to hear of your saving grace.”
- But since I know **THAT** day is coming, and I know that it is closer to coming than it was yesterday, I need to be extending the invitation.

APPLICATION

I have read the story of Mary, Martha and the raising of Lazarus many times. I know it pretty well. But as I was preparing this sermon, I realized something new.

- We hear Mary speak.
- We hear Martha speak.
- We hear Jesus speak.
- But we never hear Lazarus. We never hear the voice of the man who had been for those four days.

What do you think he experienced during those four days? Could it be that he got a glimpse of heaven?

I can only imagine.

Amen.