

THIS HALLELUJAH BANQUET

How the End
of What We Were
Reveals Who
We Can Be

**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**

EUGENE H. PETERSON

From the beloved translator of *The Message*

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WATERBROOK

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Editor's Note



This Hallelujah Banquet was created primarily from a sermon series that Eugene H. Peterson preached at Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, during Lent in 1984, along with wider commentary and materials from his personal archives.

We at WaterBrook have selected and edited this material to read smoothly while remaining faithful to Eugene's unique voice and pastoral intention. Our edits and additions have been limited. Besides correction of minor errors and some reordering for flow and clarity, the only changes have been to remove dated references (to technology, politics, pop culture, and so forth), replacing those with the principles Eugene was making, and to add related material from other work on Reve-

lation in places where additional context is helpful in a printed setting. (For example, much of the opening chapter of the book—which gives valuable insight into Eugene’s thoughts on John’s ministry to the churches of Revelation and our need to return to these words of Christ through John—came from a much earlier 1967 sermon.) As well, we occasionally have inserted a few especially profound insights from his later writings on Revelation in places where they fit naturally with his earlier preaching.

We have strived to take no unnecessary liberties with Eugene’s words or thoughts and to present them to you with the craft and care that Eugene exercised in writing and preaching them. Speaking personally, as I have worked, I have noted with pleasure the special intimacy that comes from words meant to be spoken. I think Eugene would have smiled to see his sermons still “preaching” after so many years of Sundays.

A final structural note: each of the letters follows a similar outline. First, Christ presents a particular part of his character. Next, Christ examines the Christians. The examination reveals both strengths and weaknesses, and so corrective action is commanded. An urgent promise concludes each message. Far from a wooden devotion to this approach, Eugene honors its

Editor's Note

rhythm in each of the chapters. In these messages, we are confronted with how the end of one way of life—or even one version of our faith—can usher in a new and more vibrant connection with Christ. Every ending can become a beginning. It is this theme of examination and invitation that forms the core of Eugene's teaching in this book.

When this book was first pulled together in the fall of 2019, we had no idea of the global changes that would come with the widespread pandemic of 2020. Now, as it releases at the beginning of a misty 2021, a sober attentiveness has come. More than anytime in living memory, it has felt for many like the end of the world. With that have come grief, reflection, and hope—all of which are present in these pages.

It's with quiet joy and expectation that we at Water-Brook, with the blessing of Eugene's family, present this special book to you. May it lead you to a deeper knowledge of the Lamb, who invites us all to his eternal feast, to this rich and timely hallelujah banquet.

—PAUL J. PASTOR, editor

BEGINNING AT THE END



He who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son.”

—Revelation 21:5–7

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The End Is Where We Start



The last book of the Bible, Revelation, has some of the best words to start the year, words that launch us into the pages of our calendars.* T. S. Eliot wrote in “Little Gidding,”

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.†

“The end is where we start from.” The end of the Bible is the beginning of our new year’s existence. It

* Editor’s note: This chapter was originally preached as a New Year’s sermon. Though I’ve retained Eugene’s language about the beginning of the calendar year, this teaching gives fitting context for the wisdom Revelation carries for any new beginning.

† T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, 1943), 42.

functions for us in this way as it speaks to our mood and condition.

The characteristic mood, the typical mental stance, on New Year's Day is a look to the future. We have a calendar of unused days stretching out before us. There is curiosity about them and fear of them. Amateur prophets make predictions. Astrological magazines and horoscope plotters are in their peak season. Articles proliferate in magazines and newspapers: the business outlook, the literary prospects, the political probabilities, the social changes expected. And with all this, no one can avoid these personal questions: What will it bring for me? What waits to be recorded in the diary pages of the new year?

The book of Revelation is the word of God that speaks to this combination of anxiety and hope about the future. For the person who is concerned with the future, the book of Revelation is the timely word of God.

In the course of our years, New Year's Day is a day wherein our concern about the future is expressed. The book of Revelation is the part of Scripture that deals with our concern about the future.



When we begin reading the book of Revelation, we are first confused and then disappointed. We are confused by an author who talks of angels and dragons, men eating books and giant insects eating men, bottomless pits and mysterious numbers, fantastic beasts and golden cities. The language confuses us. And then we are disappointed because we don't find what we are looking for. We want to know what is going to happen in the future, but we find neither dates nor names. We are fearful of what may happen to the world in the next twelve months, but we don't find anything said that helps us understand the coming days. We have some hopes for our lives and for our families, but we find nothing that is said about our prospects. We go back to reading the political analysts and working the horoscope in the paper, escaping occasionally with a science fiction novel and making do as best we can.

So, what has happened? Has the book of Revelation—a holy scripture notwithstanding—failed us? Is the Word of God, though highly regarded in previous centuries, quite inadequate to communicate to our adult, mature world? We put the writer and reader of Revelation in a class with palm readers and fortune tellers—colorful but chancy.

Or is it that we just haven't given it enough thought?

Maybe what is needed is some hard concentration to figure out the symbols, arrange the chronology, and pin down the predictions. Many people have done just that. Obsessed with the future and unwilling to concede that the Bible does not have the final word on it, they twist and arrange the material in it until it finally does yield the word they want to hear. History becomes arranged in prophetic installments. Dates are set and personalities named. The future is known. There is no more uncertainty. But the end result, satisfying as it is, is not recognizable in the book of Revelation.

Maybe this book doesn't need ingenuity as much as open attention. Maybe we have been so obsessed with questions about the future that we haven't heard what Revelation said about it. Maybe we have so fixed in our minds the kind of thing that will be said that we are not able to hear what is actually said. For us, the future means dates, events, and names, and if we do not find them, we either give up in disgust or invent them and put them in anyway. Maybe, though, the future doesn't mean that at all. Maybe God is trying to say something in the book of Revelation that we haven't thought about before that is the truth about the future. Maybe this is a new word—a *really* new word.

This new, unexpected quality is characteristic of

Scripture. Have you noticed how often people question Jesus in the gospel narrative and how regularly his answer ignores their question? Scripture is not an encyclopedia of information to which we go when we are curious or in doubt. It is God speaking to us his own word, telling us what he wishes to tell us and omitting what is of no significance. (Have you ever made a list of all those items you are intensely curious about but for which there is no biblical data?)

The book of Revelation really is about the future, but what it says does not satisfy our curiosity or match what we think are the obvious things to say. It is not a disclosure of future events but the revelation of their inner meaning. It does not tell us what events are going to take place and the dates of their occurrence; it tells us what the meaning of those events is. It does not provide a timetable for history; it gives us an inside look at the reality of history. It is not prediction but perception. It is, in short, about God as he is right now. It rips the veil off our vision and lets us see what is taking place.

The text gives us a summary of what lies behind the veil, behind the newspaper headlines, behind the expressionless mask of a new calendar. Behind all the imaginative caricatures of future events, there is God,

who sits on his throne and says, “Behold, I make all things new. . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 21:5–6).

“All things new.” Well, we would like that. A new car, maybe a new home, certainly some new clothes. And as long as it is “all things,” we may as well expand our list. Some new neighbors, some new weather, a new political climate, a new world peace, a new society of brotherhood. As long as we are wishing, we may as well wish for the works.

But wait a minute. God does not say, “I will make all things new,” but said, “I make all things new.” It is in the present tense. If he is already doing it, why are so many things old and worn out? Why are we so quickly bored with things? Could it be that we have once again missed the point of the Word of God?

To get back on track, let’s look at the way the word *new* was used earlier. Isaiah was a spokesman for the Word of God about four hundred years earlier. There the Word of God was,

Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise. (Isaiah 43:18–21)

That triggers the recollection of another famous instance of the word *new*. This time it is from Saint Paul in 2 Corinthians: “If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:17–18).

When God speaks from the throne in Revelation and says, “Behold, I make all things new,” he can hardly mean anything very different from what he has already said through Isaiah and Saint Paul. God is with men and women in Christ, meeting them personally, forgiving their sins, and filling them with eternal life. The new is that which God brings to humanity now—the new is now.

In one sense it is not new at all. It is the same new thing that God did at the beginning when he said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3); the same thing as when the Spirit of God came upon King Saul and gave him a new heart (1 Samuel 10:9); the same thing that the crowd around Jesus saw when they exclaimed, “What is this? A new teaching!” (Mark 1:27); and the same thing that Jesus said to Nicodemus: “You must be born anew” (John 3:7). If by *new* we mean the latest fashion, fad, or novel, then this certainly is not new.

✧ *God is with men and women in Christ, meeting them personally, forgiving their sins, and filling them with eternal life. The new is that which God brings to humanity now—the new is now.*

On the other hand, if we mean essential life, our encounter with God, the receiving of grace so that our lives can finally be lived without guilt and with steady purpose, then yes, this is the absolutely new. It is that which can never be antiquated. It is that which puts into obsolescence all other experience and knowledge. And as we participate in this new thing, we become a beachhead from which all things are made new. We be-

come the person Saint Paul spoke of—a new creature who has heard the good news and who shares this new report with his or her neighbors.

The statement “I make all things new” is supported by the identification “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet, and Omega is the last. When translated into our terms, Alpha and Omega comes out as “from A to Z.” God’s being includes all things. Nothing is excluded from his will and purpose, including time.

It is all God’s time. He hasn’t reserved only the fifty-two Sundays of the year for his specialized attention. He will not be absent any day or any month. The whole of time is his. There is something more to be said, though, for “the beginning and the end” do not merely mean first and last. A belief in God that is limited to that literalism is too bare. God got things started and he will be around at the finish—most people more or less expect that. But this beginning and end have a more profound meaning. Here, *beginning* means source and origin—the basic substratum underlying all things.

Theologian Paul Tillich has defined God as the “ground of being.”* Tillich was trying to get away from

* Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 156.

the idea that God is just off in the clouds somewhere or just the first thing that happened in history way back at creation. God is that out of which everything proceeds and exists. God is also the “end” in a more profound sense than that he will be around at the end of the world. The Greek word for “end” (*telos*)* means that he is the destination of all things. His being is the fulfilled purpose for which all things exist.



I can almost hear someone’s objection at this point: but I knew all that—I thought Revelation was going to tell me something about the future. All I can answer is, it has. It has taken the same gospel of Jesus Christ—that God is present with us to bring us to new life, to support us, and to fulfill us—and applied it to the future. There is no different gospel for the future than for the present or the past. There is no use casting around for some easier, magical way to live our lives this next year.

On the other hand, the book of Revelation has convinced many people that there is no need to find that impossible, magical view of the future. It helps create room for faith. One theologian wrote, “God guides his

* *Strong’s*, s.v. “telos” (G5056), Blue Letter Bible, www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=g5056.

children around many blind corners. He knows the way they must take. It is the devil who indulges men's desire to see the whole road ahead; he hides only the precipice at the end of the road.”*

Every new year, we find a year ahead of us in which God will be making all things new. Of everything that is and of everything that takes place, he will be both the source and the destination. It takes great courage to believe that and great faithfulness to act upon it, for every newspaper in the country will be headlining a contradiction, and your own sin and rebellion will be turning in contrary evidence. All the same, let this word of God tear away the veil that obscures the presence and action of God in the days ahead.

Every day will be a new day for God, creation, and redemption. It is only our blindness and sloth that keep us from seeing that openness in it.

As G. K. Chesterton wrote,

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person

* Editor's note: While Eugene attributed this quote to D. T. Niles, the publisher was not able to independently verify its source or wording.

does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon.*

This wonder brings us back to the throne, where he says, “Behold, I make all things new. . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

This is the end where we make our beginning.

The end from which we start.



And this end brings us to the beginning of true *thanksgiving*. The art of thanksgiving is to give thanks when you don’t feel like it.

It is easy to say thank you when you are filled with a sense of blessedness. It is easy to say thank you when your arms are filled with gifts and you are surrounded by the ones you love; it is, in fact, nearly impossible *not* to say thanks, to sing praises, and to laugh and make merry then.

* G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *Heretics and Orthodoxy* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), 220.

A few years ago, on a bright spring Sunday, I met a man I had not seen in years at the entrance to our sanctuary. He had once been an active member of our church but had dropped out years before. I was surprised to see him and said, “Jimmy, what in the world are you doing here? It’s great to see you, but how come you chose today?” He said, “I woke up this morning feeling great, and I just had to say thank you. My business is going great, my kids are great, and the day is wonderful. And I had to say thank you to someone—and God seemed the only one adequate to receive all the thanks I am feeling.”

And so he did. He worshipped with us that day. He gave thanks. And I haven’t seen him since. I understand his wanting to be there that Sunday. But I also understand him not coming back. All of us know how to give thanks on spring Sundays when our kids are beautiful and our work is lovely and the Judas trees are blossoming and the dogwoods are in flower. It is the other times that are difficult.

Giving thanks is one of the most attractive things that we do. Maybe *the* most attractive. There is something whole and robust and generous about the praising person. Even if we cannot give thanks, we like to be around the people who can.

We like it when other people do it. We feel *wonderful* when we ourselves do it. There is a sense of completeness, of mature wholeness. Praise is our best work. A praising life is the best life of all.

It is fitting that Thanksgiving Day is a national holiday for us here in America—the gathering together as friends and families in an act of gratitude, remembering our national origins in acts of thanksgiving. Giving thanks to God in acts like this one, whether of national gratitude or of Christian worship, shows us at our best. We feel it. We aren't just offering our gratitude because our parents told us to do it or out of a vague sense of obligation. We have a deep sense that thankfulness is one of the best things we can do in order to be at *our* best.

There are two books in the Bible that more than any other show the inner life of the person of faith: Psalms and Revelation. Both of them conclude in boisterous acts of praise.

Psalms concludes with five great noisy hallelujah psalms, gathering all that everyone could feel about themselves and God—pain, doubt, despair, joy, rejection, acceptance, the whole bag of human experience—into praise.

Revelation does the same thing. It enters imaginatively into the enormous range of experience that we get ourselves in for when we take the name of Jesus Christ as the definition of our lives, goes through the various depths and heights of dealing with God and the devil, and finally ends up in the same place: praising, singing repeated hallelujahs—in a replay of the Psalms ending. The last hallelujah song is sung as we are ushered into the great hallelujah banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb that is spread in heaven.

It would seem, on the basis of these accounts, that the way to be a whole person, to live at one's best, would be to live a praising life. To say thank you a lot. To praise God a lot. But this cannot be a superficial thanks. There have, unfortunately, been more than a few people around who have told us to give thanks without first doing the work of honesty. It never seems to make things a whole lot better, does it? A beautiful discipline of the soul can become sappy, mindless counsel, if we divorce it from the biblical roots of honesty, grief, lament, and genuine celebration from which it originates.

No! If we are to live praising lives, robust lives of affirmation, we must live truly, honestly, and coura-

geously. We cannot take shortcuts to the act of praising. We cannot praise prematurely.

✧ *If we are to live praising lives, robust lives of affirmation, we must live truly, honestly, and courageously. We cannot take shortcuts to the act of praising. We cannot praise prematurely.*

Take the psalms, for instance. The psalms, literally *praises*, are not, for the most part, praises at all. They are laments and complaints, angry questions and disappointed meditations. Occasionally there is a good day—the sun shines, no sheep wander off, nobody rips you off—and there is a wonderful song of thanksgiving. But mostly there are laments, complaints, cries of anger, and people fed up with life and wanting God to do something about it—and soon.

Revelation is that way too. There are interludes of heavenly praise: harps and angels and elders throwing their crowns up in the air in jubilation (you can bet that they aren't Presbyterian elders doing that). Yet the story line in Revelation also has to do with trouble: the mess we are in and the seemingly endless difficulties of ever getting out. The cycle happens over and over

again—seven times, in fact, until we wonder if it is ever going to come to an end. And then it does: in exuberant rounds of praise, encores of praise, and then the marriage supper—this hallelujah banquet.

It is absolutely essential that we take this pattern and sequence seriously. Premature praise is false praise. Praise is our end but not our beginning. We begin our lives crying, not smiling and cooing and thanking our parents for bringing us into this lovely world full of dry diapers and sweet milk and warm flesh. We kick and flail. We yell and weep.

✧ *We have the popularization of a kind of religion that, instead of training people to the sacrificial life after the pattern of our Lord, seduces them into having fun on weekends.*

We have moments, it is true, when we give praise. But mostly we are aware of wants, of needs, of frustrations, of incompletions. We experience pain and ignorance. We are aware of inadequacy and rejection. In the midst of these poverties, we have moments when everything is wonderful, but that praise is not perpetual. Now, here is the biblical pattern: we don't

become praising people by avoiding or skipping or denying the pain and the poverty and the doubt and the guilt but by entering into them, exploring them, minding their significance, embracing the reality of these experiences.

That is what is so distressing about the religious entertainment industry in our land. We have the popularization of a kind of religion that, instead of training people to the sacrificial life after the pattern of our Lord, seduces them into having fun on the weekends, with Jesus as the chief master of ceremonies—much like some sort of talk show host who’s here to interview those lucky people who have made it big with God, and the show is interspersed with some upbeat worship music to keep the audience (that’s us) from thinking too much about the awful people in the world who are killing and raping and cheating and making such a mess of things that there is really nothing left for them but the Battle of Armageddon.



We, all of us, want to be in a church or some kind of community that serves up the hallelujah banquet every week. Americans seem particularly susceptible to being seduced along these lines. In the nineteenth century,

there were several utopian communities that were attempted by high-minded people, not unlike the communes that sprouted during the sixties.

One of the famous ones was Brook Farm in Massachusetts.* It attracted some of the literary luminaries of New England. Among them was Nathaniel Hawthorne. The story of Nathaniel Hawthorne at Brook Farm is reflective of us. Hawthorne was a gloomy man, mostly. He knew the depths of human sin and probed the dark passages of the human condition. But he must have gotten sick of it at one point and wanted out. Brook Farm promised a way out.

At Brook Farm there was no sin. It was conducted on the lines of rational enlightenment. At Brook Farm, people would be living at their best. No stuff of *The Scarlet Letter* or *The House of the Seven Gables* guilt. At Brook Farm, there were only joy and thanksgiving.

But then George Ripley, the guru of Brook Farm, assigned Hawthorne the task of tending the manure pile. And Hawthorne didn't like it and left. He wanted Thanksgiving turkey, not chicken dung. He came to Brook Farm to live with the songs of the angels, not the refuse of the cows and sheep.

* For historical context on Brook Farm, see *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Brook Farm," www.britannica.com/topic/Brook-Farm.

That's us—wanting the glamour of an idealized life, then growing quickly disillusioned when reality breaks into our daydreams.

The only way genuine, authentic, and deep praise is ever accomplished is by embracing what's real. By accepting whatever takes place and living through it as thoroughly as we are able in faith. For in these moments, in these passages, we become human. We grow up into the fullness of our humanity and into the depths of Christ's salvation that is being worked out among us.

✿ *The only way genuine, authentic, and deep praise is ever accomplished is by embracing what's real. By accepting whatever takes place and living through it as thoroughly as we are able in faith. For in these moments, in these passages, we become human.*

Jesus Christ did not arrive at the hallelujah banquet by successfully dodging all the evil in the world, by working out a careful strategy so he could avoid touching every unclean person of his time, and by developing

a loyal cadre of friends who would be absolutely true to him through thick and thin. He didn't do that at all.

He went out of his way, it seems, looking for trouble, and when it came, he embraced it. He embraced other people's trouble, but he also embraced his own. He took up the cross. He didn't like it. He didn't thank God for it. He didn't sing a hallelujah hymn in the Garden of Gethsemane. He hated every minute of it. But he *did* it. He *embraced* it. Christ entered the jungle of pain, he explored the wilderness of suffering, and, in the process of the sacrifice, he accomplished redemption. For redemption is not a rescue from evil—it is a redemption of evil. Salvation is not luck but rather a courageous confrontation that is victorious in battle.

And that is why praise is so exhilarating. It has nothing to do with slapping a happy face on a bad situation and grinning through it. It is fashioned deep within us, out of the sin and guilt and doubt and lonely despair that nevertheless *believes*.

And, in that believing, becomes whole.