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EDITORIAL

In biblical perspective, endings are beginnings. True, it's not always an easy matter to discern that vantage point, nor to assess the relative value attached to starting and finishing. Consider the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: 'Better is the end of a thing than its beginning...' (Eccl. 7:8a). So actually getting to the end is better than simply starting out, not knowing what the end might be—or whether that end will ever arrive. And yet, only a moment later we read: 'Say not, "How is it the former days were better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this' (Eccl. 7:10). One way of understanding this enigmatic verse is to see it posing the contrasting vantage point to the earlier one (a common enough occurrence in biblical wisdom). The present, in fact, is no worse than the past, the days of 'endings' no better than those of 'beginnings'.

Similarly, Jesus' teaching about 'last days' gives us a curious mix of intertwined endings and beginnings. So, in Mark 13:7 we read: 'And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet.' So there are signs of the 'end', and yet those very signs of 'ending' are but a beginning (v. 8): 'There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.'

Endings and beginnings are inextricably linked—although often not in the way we might be accustomed to think. Our rhythm of life is 'start-to-finish', but the biblical pattern seems rather to be what we would think of as 'finish-to-start'. Consider here the vantage point of the psalmist. We package time in 'morning-to-evening'—we start the day, we end the day—but not the psalmist. In the Psalm 3 (v. 5) we read: 'I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.' It's not 'day-and-night', but 'night-and-day'! And just in case we think it is the sleep that is important to the psalmist, Psalm 4 continues the reflection on the evening (v. 8), 'In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety', while Psalm 5 carries on with the morning (v. 3): 'O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.'

This really shouldn't surprise us. After all, in the account of creation in Genesis 1, we don't read, 'And there was morning and there was evening, the first day', but rather: 'And there was evening and there was morning, the first day'. In fact, once you notice it, this finish-to-start pattern—of endings being beginnings—is everywhere in the Bible. Pick an 'ending', just about any ending (there are exceptions, to be sure), and what you discover is that, through the sheer grace of God, it is also a beginning.

Adam and Eve, expelled from the Garden of Eden, and facing death for disobedience. Yet in their very expulsion, God clothes them and cares for them, gives them meaningful work as stewards of his (now spoiled) creation, and graciously allows and enables them to fulfill the commission he originally gave that first couple to: 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it ...' (Gen. 1:28). Or consider the fratricide of Abel by Cain. Despite warnings, and after the murder, Cain receives a divine mark of protection. As he is sent out, 'east of Eden', he becomes the founder of cities, and his descendents shape civilization as herders, farmers, musicians, metal workers (Gen. 4:17-22). Out of death, comes life.

What, in biblical terms, could arrive with more finality as an 'ending' than the flood, as God tells Noah that he has 'determined to make an end of all flesh' (Gen. 6:13)? But again, through the trauma of cataclysmic punishment on the human race, one small remnant is preserved—through divine grace and Noah's faithful response—to emerge and find in a rain shower not a reason to fear destructive floods and death, but a rainbow to signal divine mercy and life. We've only come to Genesis 9; could we be finished? No! We've only just begun!

There are many more dramatic endings-that-are-beginnings: Abraham's precious child of promise is demanded by God as sacrifice, and Abraham complies—thinking what? That the God who fulfilled a promise when Abraham was 'as good as dead' (so Romans 4:19) could keep a promise beyond death? But that 'ending', too, was met with gracious provision, for the sacrifice was substituted, and the promise truly was in God's own hands, and not Abraham's. We could include in our brief compendium individuals such as the prophet Isaiah, whose glimpse of the divine throne left the prophet 'undone'—but only at that point, ready for service, or the line of David with an 'end' foretold in Jeremiah 22:30, but a future promised in Haggai 2:23. Or beyond individuals, think of the people of God, Israel and Judah. Exile and scattering—the death-knell of a nation—called forth one of the most dramatic 'ending-as-beginning' passages in the entire Bible: Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones, capturing the mood of the scattered people whose hope was lost: 'We are indeed cut off' (37:11). But Ezekiel prophesied to the wind of God which breathed new life into the slain army: 'I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live' (v. 14).

This isn't just an Old Testament phenomenon. We have already noticed Jesus' words in Mark, but beyond that, Jesus himself embodies this dynamic. When the 'Greeks' wished to 'see Jesus', his reply was to describe himself as the 'grain of wheat' which 'falls into the ground and dies', because 'if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). The only way to fruitful life was through death. But as J. C. Ryle commented on this

passage, 'It is as true of Christians as it is of Christ—there can be no life without death', and so Jesus went on (v. 25): 'Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life'. Paul articulated this same principle at several points in his letters. 'I have been crucified with Christ', he wrote to the Galatians. 'It is no longer I who live'—there is the ending—'but Christ who lives in me'—and there the new beginning (Gal. 2:20). As if to cap it all, how does the New Testament bring Christian Scripture itself end? It all ends ('Of course!', we might now say) with a new beginning: a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, and One on a throne saying, 'Behold, I am making all things new' (Rev. 21:5).

The Bible truly is a book in which endings are beginnings, a dynamic which captures something of central importance concerning the gospel, and it is especially relevant at just this moment. It seems we have entered a season in Scotland in which churches are facing 'endings' of various kinds. There is no denying the pain, and dying really does result in death. Yet every believer facing such trauma knows something better. The seed has died? By God's grace, the fruit will come.

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There is an 'ending' of a different kind to mark in this number of the *Bulletin* as well. For three years James Merrick has served as an indefatigable Review Editor, arranging for rich and varied fare from recent theological literature for our enjoyment, education, and edification. We're grateful to James for his labours on our behalf, and wish him all the best as he re-settles in the United States after his period of doctoral studies in Aberdeen. He passes the baton to John Ferguson—minister in Inverness, and an erstwhile fellow PhD student of James's in Aberdeen—who begins his tenure in the role in 2013.

David Reimer

The reflections in this editorial began life as a graduation address for International Christian College, Glasgow, at Harper Memorial Church, 3 July 2010.