

“The Revelation”

Revelation 1:1-5

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Text Comment

- v.1 The opening of the book is patterned after Daniel 2:28-30. Daniel spoke of the revelation of what must come to pass “in the latter days.” John replaces “latter days” with “soon” or “quickly.” In other words, John sees prophecy as having advanced toward its goal, as having advanced further than it had in the days of Daniel.
- v.3 There are seven such beatitudes or blessings in the book. We will find that there are seven of a number of things in Revelation. Revelation may be the account of a vision that God gave to John, but it is also a very carefully composed literary masterpiece.
[Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 3]

You will notice that John says “blessed are those *who hear it...*” Most people in those days, of course, would not have had the opportunity to *read* Revelation; they would have heard it read in their worship services. That, we will see, is a not an insignificant fact.

Today we begin a new series of morning sermons on the Book of Revelation, a book of the Bible that I have never preached before apart from several sermons on the letters to the seven churches of the province of Asia. I used to wonder whether I would ever preach through this book, daunted as I was by its unique problems and challenges for an interpreter. After all, didn't John Calvin himself – the prince of biblical commentators and the only commentator of the centuries past whose commentaries are still regarded by scholars today as necessary to consult – didn't Calvin nevertheless fail to provide us a commentary on Revelation? And wasn't that because he was, like so many others, daunted by this book, its opaque symbolism, and its mysterious prophecies? Did Calvin himself not say that he could not understand the book? So I once thought.

Well, as it turns out, there is precious little evidence that Calvin ever said any such thing. And we have no evidence at all that Calvin didn't write a commentary on Revelation *on purpose*; that is, that he didn't write on the last book of the Bible because he didn't want to or felt he couldn't do justice to the book. Calvin did not write commentaries on three books of the Bible: II and III John and Revelation. The most likely explanation as to why he did not is that he didn't get around to them before his life's work was done. He wrote commentaries on Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, books that are very like Revelation in the problems they pose to commentators and preachers. There are, in fact, many similarities between sections of Daniel and Ezekiel and the book of Revelation. We will have cause to note those similarities as we proceed through the book. But the symbolism and prophetic form of *those* Old Testament books did not deter Calvin from writing valuable commentaries on them, so it is very unlikely that he would have been deterred from writing on Revelation. There are even some witnesses from the period of the Reformation who claim that the great Reformer did in fact write a commentary on Revelation;

but if he did – and that does not seem likely – it is lost. [Cf. T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 75-78]

But what of the great Baptist preacher of the 19th century Charles Spurgeon's remark that "Only fools and madmen are positive in their interpretation of the Apocalypse"? [In I. Murray, *Puritan Hope*, 263] Was he not admitting that Revelation's peculiar form, full of symbols as it is, leaves us at last only guessing at its meaning?

Well, perhaps so, *if we understand the book as it was widely understood in Spurgeon's time*, as believers in the Bible understood it in those days, as a kind of secret code to be deciphered and, still more, as a book that really addresses the situation, not of John's contemporaries, but of some later generation of Christians who happen to be alive in the world when these prophesies come to pass. Indeed, it was then widely thought and is still thought by many today that Revelation can only be fully understood by those who are living in the world just before and at the time of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. But, in fact, that is not true and is evidently and obviously not true. Modern study of this book of the Bible has wonderfully advanced our understanding of it, John's original purpose in writing it, and the benefit all Christians of all times and places were intended to receive from reading and hearing it.

Indeed, what we are going to discover as we make our way into this wonderful book is that Revelation is much more like one of the letters of the Apostle Paul than at first it may seem. What do you expect to find in one of the letters of the great Apostle to the Gentiles? You expect to find an account of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ His Son, what promises of salvation are yet to be fulfilled, and how we who believe in Jesus are to live in the meantime. All of that is found in Revelation as well; in fact those are the great subjects of this book. In fact Revelation *is all theology*, the teaching about God and salvation and the teaching of the Christian life. We misunderstand the book entirely if we take it to be a secret code, an esoteric forecast of future events, able to be understood only by those few capable of breaking the code and unlocking its secrets. To be sure, Revelation contains a forecast of great events at the end of time, but in a very general form. That is, it prophesies the Second Coming and the Last Judgment and Heaven and Hell very much as Jesus did and as Paul and Peter did. It uses a different form of words, describes the events in a different literary style, but the message is evidently and obviously the same. John, in fact, tells us at the outset what sort of book he has written. He says three different things about it.

First, in the opening verse, he tells us that what he was writing was a revelation. Revelation in Greek is the word *apocalypse* and it is the very first word of the book. That is why you sometimes hear the last book of the Bible referred to, as Spurgeon did, as The Apocalypse. There is no "The" in John's Greek so the book begins: "Revelation of Jesus Christ..." By revelation is meant that in this book God is disclosing to us we would not otherwise know or be able to discover. But the word *apocalypse* also indicates a particular type of disclosure, a particular *form* of prophetic writing that, so far as we know, originated with some Old Testament prophets and continued to be employed by Jewish writers up to and after the time of John and the book of Revelation. There are some Jewish writings that are not Holy Scripture that copy this same apocalyptic form or style. *Apocalypse* tells us not only that the book is "revelation" but also that we may expect a certain type or genre of revelation. Apocalyptic writing is marked by the report

of visions, of the transportation of the seer or writer to heaven in his visions, of the mediation of the revelation to the prophet by angelic beings, and by highly symbolic presentations of the truth being revealed. You find instances of this genre, this way of writing about the present and the future in Daniel and also in Ezekiel and Zechariah. As I said, other Jewish writers from the time also copied this literary form in writing their books of religion and spiritual life.

What the apocalyptic genre particularly provided and was intended to provide was a transcendent perspective on the world and upon human life in the world. The seer is taken out of the world to learn the secrets of God's purposes as they are known in heaven and to see the world from the heavenly perspective. This is what was given to Daniel in Babylon. He was given to see how the world looked from heaven and what God was really doing in the world and of course that was a very different perspective than the Babylonians had and even what the Jews in Babylon had, and so it is here in Revelation. [Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 1-9] In heaven the seer or prophet, John, is transported not only so as to see the world from the heavenly perspective but he is transported in his vision into the final future of the world. So that is the first thing to be said about Revelation. It is an *apocalypse*, a revelation, a disclosure of what we would not otherwise know or understand and it is a disclosure of a particular type made in a particular form.

Second, Revelation, as John says in v. 3, is a *prophecy*. This is especially emphasized in the book by being said at the very beginning and then, again, at the very end. We have learned to call this literary device an *inclusio*, a statement at the beginning and at the end that tells us something about everything in between. In 22:7, and 18 and 19, at the end of Revelation, the book is again referred to as a prophecy. And by prophecy is meant certainly the disclosure of the future as v. 1 has already indicated and as we will read again in v. 19 of chapter 1. As we also read in 22:6:

“The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

But prophecy, as we know, is not only the prediction of the future but the authoritative proclamation or declaration of the meaning of the present and of the obligations of God's people in the present. The prophets of the Old Testament were preachers even more than they were seers or predictors of the future. John himself stands as a successor to the Old Testament prophets who were always addressing the immediate situation of their contemporaries as well as speaking of things to come. Indeed, the message of the Old Testament prophets saturates the book of Revelation. We read in Rev. 10:7:

“But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.”

And in line after line we will find that Revelation is a continuation and completion of the message of the Old Testament prophets. John makes this clear throughout his book. No book of the New Testament is so thoroughly saturated with allusions to Old Testament texts as is Revelation, though, interestingly, there is not a single formal citation or actual quotation of any OT text in the entire book. Virtually every point John will make comes in some way by means of an allusion to some Old Testament text. The symbols John uses are likewise mostly drawn from the Old Testament. [Osborne, 2] For example, John's oracle against Babylon in chapter 18

echoes very obviously and evidently every one of the oracles against Babylon in the Old Testament and the two major oracles against Tyre. In that chapter Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel lurk in the background and very obviously so. And so it is throughout the book. John is virtually a commentary on the prophets of the Old Testament!

And, then, *third*, John tells us that Revelation is a *letter*. As we see in v. 4, the formal beginning of the book is in the form of a circular letter from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia, a form very familiar to readers of the New Testament from the letters of the Apostle Paul that begin the same way. The fact that Revelation is a letter indicates unmistakably that it addresses the situation of John's immediate contemporaries; that it is a message *for* them and *to* them, not a code book to be deciphered by some subsequent generation of Christians. A letter is meant to read and to be understood. It has a message and a message that John expected those who heard the letter read to understand and take to heart.

Now put all of this together and what do we have? What we have in Revelation is the disclosure of an alternate reality – *apocalypse* – and an exhortation to John's Christian friends to live their lives in keeping with that reality. One scholar suggests that what Revelation is designed to do is to purge our imagination and to give us an alternate vision of the world in which we live. [Bauckham, 17] To John's contemporaries and to us, the world, you see, *appears* to be one thing. It is in fact, something quite different from what it appears to be, but only faith can see that. Only God can show us what is really happening in the world and what life and history mean. The world looks very different from heaven; things take on such a very different meaning when seen from a heavenly, a divine, a transcendent, and an eternal perspective.

The people who inhabited those seven churches in the province of Asia witnessed the Roman propaganda at every turn just as you and I witness the American propaganda at every turn, every moment, every hour, every day. The might and glory of Rome was everywhere to be seen just like the might and glory of American advertising and television and other media is everywhere to be seen. It was reflected in the temples and public buildings, the general prosperity, the might of the Roman army. The Roman ideology permeated public life as the American ideology permeates public life for us today. Nearly everyone accepted that ideology as a matter of course. The greatness and glory of Rome was the great political fact of their existence. The Christians were a despised, powerless, and tiny people who lived amid the *pax Romana* as outsiders. How could they stand against the majesty of Rome and against the Roman power that threatened them on every side? Of what importance could this little community be in a world dominated by a great pagan power that either totally ignored them or actively oppressed them? Where was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Jesus Christ had ascended to heaven and seemed to have left the world in Roman hands. Rome mattered; Christians did not.

Or so it seemed. But, in fact, that was not the true situation at all. In v. 5 of Revelation chapter 1 John refers to the Lord Christ as "the ruler of the kings of the earth." The Roman emperor thought that *he* was the ruler of the kings of the earth! Domitian, likely the Roman emperor at the time of the writing of Revelation, was demanding to be addressed as *Dominus*, Lord, or *Deus Noster*, our God. Loyalty to the emperor was the essential demand of Roman statecraft. Christians were increasingly to face grave danger precisely because they would not refer to the emperor as Lord and God. What is more, vast numbers of people were prepared to treat the

emperor as the ruler of the kings of the earth. He seemed to them to have such power and authority. But, in fact, there is but one ruler of the kings of the earth and that is Jesus Christ, God's Son. And no one who has any true grasp of reality fails to know that and no one who is living his life according to the truth fails to confess that fact from the heart.

The church there and then may have been tiny and at least in some cases oppressed and persecuted, but she was, nevertheless, the center of the divine plan in the world; the entire cause of human history unfolding as it was; and, no matter what the Roman world supposed, no matter what the American world supposes today, the Christians would carry the future with them. Most people of that time as most people today had no idea that this was so. They had no thought for the Christian church as the great reason for all that was happening in their world, but that was in fact what she was and what she is. In heaven, where the real rule, the real power, the real authority is found, that is how the church in this world is viewed. For all of her troubles, all of her failures, all of her setbacks, the future will come *to her*. The future in fact is all about her. That is the reality that John will set before his hearers and readers: a counter-reality to the outward appearance of things in this world. Of course it is the same now as then. Does the world's press – the New York Times, the Times of London, the great European newspapers, the television news – do the world's governments, do her great men think of world affairs in terms of the fortunes of the Christian church? Do they consider those fortunes the center of everything important happening in this world? Do they consider the present in terms of a future dominated by the prospect of Christ's return in judgment and salvation? Do they make their decisions based on the conviction that things are, really are only as they are in heaven? Of course not. None of our political parties is going to confess Jesus Christ as the ruler of the kings of the earth. But in failing to do so, they have cut themselves off from the foremost of all political truths.

As an introduction to his report of the vision that he was given, John will write to each of the seven churches of the province of Asia a particular message. Each church has much in common but the individual and particular circumstances of each congregation differ and in some respects differ greatly. The fact that there are *seven* churches – seven being the number of completeness in the Bible – no doubt indicates that John saw these seven congregations as representative of the universal church. Some of these churches had suffered persecution, but not all. Some were being undermined by false teaching, but not all. Some were in fine spiritual fettle, but not all. And so it is today.

Imagine today a Ugandan church, a wealthy and comfortable American church, a church in some refugee camp in Darfur, a house church in China, or a small remnant church in Western Europe. Each of those churches has a particular, discrete spiritual condition and situation in the world. Some face the threat of severe persecution or have already suffered great loss from the enemies of Christ. Others are more threatened by the temptations of comfort and worldly security and the allurements of its culture. Some have reason for confidence and others are struggling to believe that the gospel really is the power of God unto salvation.

But no matter the situation, they all need the same thing. So after these seven letters to each individual church comes the rest of John's report; that too – the remainder of the book – is all part of a letter to the seven churches. They all need to see their situation, their circumstances in terms of Revelation's theocentric vision of the coming of God's universal kingdom. They all

need to see the world in which they find themselves from the perspective of the Living God and his purposes and plans, to see it as it is seen in heaven, which is to say to see things as they *actually* are, not as they *appear* to be. The great question addressed in apocalyptic literature in the Bible is: who *is* the Lord over this heaven and earth? And the answer of Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah is that Jesus Christ alone is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Christians of course believe this but even they can be beguiled by the seemingly so great discrepancy between what they believe on the one hand and what they see when they open their eyes on this world on the other.

If Christ is King why do events unfold as they do? Why is the church so small and so weak in so many places? Why does it so regularly fall back after stepping forward so impressively? Why is there so much evil and why do Christians – the followers of this King of Kings – suffer so much from it. How is it possible that so many intelligent, gifted people – the kind of people who run this world – can live their lives and exercise their influence as if there were no such person as Jesus Christ, no such king, no such kingdom, no such heavenly throne, no such future as God has revealed to us? If Christ is ruling over all things from the Right Hand of God on behalf of the church, why is not that made perfectly clear to everyone? Why does it remain so largely a secret? We do not expect the King of Kings to remain a secret to almost the entirety of his world!

On our summer travels Florence and I met a dear woman who had earlier in her life planned to be a doctor. She had all the intelligence and desire that would be needed for medical school. But as a young woman she was riding in a car with her brother one day and they had some car trouble that forced them to the side of the highway. While waiting there she was struck by another car. After months in hospital and more months in therapy she came out of the ordeal not the same woman she had been. In the years after her terrible accident she became a Christian. But plans for medicine had to be abandoned. She cannot drive a car. She works in the university library and is brought to church by friends. One could easily multiply such stories of individual life a thousand times over. What is going on? Why should such a thing happen? To what purpose such terrible loss and sorrow frustration? Why should a life in this world, especially the life of one of God's chosen, not come to its proper fulfillment? And why should the followers of the King of Kings not be obviously and evidently the favored ones of this world?

And the same question can be and is constantly being asked concerning the larger scene, the affairs of men and nations. We are in the political season. Do either of the parties, do virtually any of the candidates look at the country, at the world from the vantage point of biblical reality as it is defined in heaven and Holy Scripture? Is this the way they consider the question of the Middle East or policies that affect the economy or racial harmony or education or immigration or any other matter? Do they think that what God thinks is all that matters? Do they realize that all of this worldly pomp and circumstance masks a fantasy that exists only in their own minds? The world looks a certain way to them. It seems obviously a certain thing to them. They think they know very well how to measure success or failure in this life. It is easy for them to view the world without reference to God or to the Judgment or the consummation of history. But the same world, the same human society, the same human culture looks very different from heaven and looks very different to God. That is John's point and that is his great message. Christians must live their lives with this transcendent perspective on the life of this world because it is in fact the only *true* perspective *and the one that events will eventually prove to be true*.

It matters for time and for eternity if the present circumstances of this world – whether in an individual life or in the affairs of men and nations – are what they are for no particular reason at all or are what they are because of the great contest between good and evil, truth and falsehood, salvation and damnation that is raging in this world all the while. It matters altogether if God is going to judge this world and everyone in it, if every human being has an eternal future of either weal or woe, and if God's people have a calling in this world and a ministry to the people of this world that is absolutely shaped and dominated by that prospect.

And why John's stark, dramatic, strange and other-worldly symbolism? Why doesn't he just come out and say what he means? Why the apocalyptic cast of the book? Why the visions that have baffled so many readers of Revelation through the ages? Here is the reason: to shake us out of our chronic failure to see what is actually happening around us all the time and to understand our calling in this world. Far too often it is as though Christians are sleep-walking through a battlefield. The stench of eternal death fills the air, the dead lie strewn in every direction as far as the eye can see – the rotting corpses of men and women slain by their unbelief – and we are chatting with one another about the weather, about sports, or things at work, or perhaps the changes we have made to our homes or our yards. This was the way of it with some of those churches in Asia. They did not perceive they had let slip from their minds the actual reality of this life and this world: what is happening here, what it all means, and where it is all really going.

In imperceptible ways we are all succumb to one degree or another to the temptation to accept what we can see, what we touch, what we hear as ultimate reality even when we know it is not. The visible trumps the invisible every day in our hearts and lives. The tangible trumps the intangible. The temporal trumps the eternal. How many of us must admit that far, far too much of the time we live as if the Almighty were not working out his purposes of grace and judgment in the world with a view to bringing its entire history suddenly to a dramatic, catastrophic close? We chat, we shop, we eat and drink, we make small talk while multitudes drop dead around us, slip off to hell, while the great prospect of heaven remains so dim to us that we can go for days, weeks without thinking a serious thought about it. You cannot live the Christian life this way, says John. You cannot, you must not allow the visual to overwhelm the invisible. There is but one reality, one truth and that is the reality, the truth *as it is in heaven*. John is bringing that reality down to us as he was given to see it and in a form dramatic enough to arrest our attention and to penetrate our consciences.

What John has given us is a symbolic universe to live in as long as it takes us to read or hear his book and then to remember so that we might live in it mentally and spiritually always. If we can keep that symbolic universe in mind, if it remains vivid to us, if we live mentally in the midst of John's vision of reality, it will utterly transform our perception of the world as we encounter it everyday and our perception of the human beings we meet and rub shoulders with every day.

I mentioned earlier that the early Christians would have *heard* Revelation being read in church. It was a text they would have encountered in worship on the Lord's Day. There is also as you know a great deal of worship in Revelation, John's *sees* a great deal of worship going on and that worship no doubt reflected not only what John saw in his vision but the worship practice of early

Christianity. Christian worship functioned much as the book of Revelation was intended to function.

Christian worship, as one scholar has put it, is intended to preserve the “plausibility structure” for the “counter-definitions” of reality revealed by God. [Beale, *NIGNT*, 29] The church’s liturgy reminds believers Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day of the true cosmic order which they are always forgetting about. We come into this sanctuary and kneel before God, the ruler of the kings of the earth. There is no such act anywhere else in our public life or the life of our culture, no such confession of the absolute sovereignty of God or his eternal purpose and power. We confess our sins and pray for their forgiveness and so are impressed again with the moral nature of human life and of what really matters to the judgment of a life by the one who will eventually bring that life into judgment. This too is an act unparalleled in our public life. We read the law of God and realize afresh that we must accept, like it or not, that there is an order that has been imposed upon human life by its maker and that we are required to live in obedience to that order. That too is a unique practice. We sing in joyful praise to acknowledge that God, the Living God, the unseen but very real God, the maker of heaven and earth and the Lord of *all* things, has revealed himself to us, made himself known as our heavenly Father, that he has granted us salvation, that a glorious future awaits us because of what he has done for us and promised to us. None of this, not a shred of this reality is embodied in any other public acts that we perform in this American world of ours. That is what makes Christian worship so important and what makes it so essential that our worship actually embody the reality that God has revealed to us. Worship for Christians should be a step into the real world, every Lord’s Day morning, a breathing of its air once again. Its great purpose is to make real the things that are actually real but that don’t seem real to most people and that we ourselves, we Christians, so easily forget are real in the rest of our life!

When Christians have a so-called worship service that is more like a show or like a sales-convention, the counter-definitions of reality are *not* being reimpresed upon their hearts; in fact the false reality, the mirage of the world of sight and sense is actually being confirmed instead of unmasked and undermined. Every Sunday we come into this house, our worship is to do for us precisely what John’s Revelation is meant to do for the generations of the church: force upon our minds and hearts once again the existence of that reality that cannot be seen, touched, or heard but which absolutely defines our existence and that of every human being in the world.

The world and human life *is not* as it appears to be to most people, not as one would conclude who had nothing but the evidence of his eyes and ears. This world and every life in this world mean and mean nothing else but what they mean in heaven. God defines the meaning of our life, the meaning of this world, the meaning of its history and he has revealed to us that meaning.