

The fact of Christ's eventual return to earth supercharges human life with meaning and determines what must be thought and done in the present.

“The Second Coming”

Revelation 19:1-21

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This morning we come to the account of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am going to consider this text twice: this morning in a general way and then, Lord willing, next Lord's Day morning with respect to the way in which the account of the Lord's return reiterates and emphasizes the central themes of the book of Revelation.

Text Comment

- v.4 This is the final appearance of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders – whom we have said are angelic beings – in the book of Revelation. Their final words: “Amen. Hallelujah!”
- v.5 In 18:20 the saints were invited to rejoice over the destruction of Babylon. These verses are the response: a mighty chorus of angels and men praising God for his just judgment of the wicked world.
- v.7 As you know the likening of salvation to a marriage between the Lord and his people is a commonplace in the Bible. The description of the people of God as the Lord's bride or wife is as well. The NIV's “bride” is actually the word “wife” but the distinction is a small one. We often refer to a married woman as a man's bride even years after the marriage and in John's Hebrew culture a woman was a man's wife as soon as they were engaged, before they were married. Remember Joseph and Mary.
- v.9 This is the fourth of the seven “beatitudes” in the book of Revelation. This marriage supper is never described but is, we assume, a figure for the blessedness of eternal life described in the last two chapters of the book.
- v.10 An eyewitness touch! John made a mistake: he thought the figure before him was the Lord and was immediately and sternly corrected, as is always done when men are worshipped as God in the Bible. The NIV places the last sentence of verse 10 within the quotation marks, as a continuation of the remark of the angel. The ESV places it outside the quotation marks and understands it to be John's explanation of what has just been said to him. Remember, there are no quotation marks, or punctuation of any kind, in the original text of the NT. Where to put them is a question the translator must answer. This is the fourth time the phrase “the testimony of Jesus” is found in Revelation. And here as in the other instances it means the truth as Jesus has revealed it. So the spirit of true prophecy is that which aligns with what Jesus has revealed in his life, death, resurrection, and in his teaching. Any other message is false and any one who comes preaching another message is a false prophet.

- v.11 In his vision John has been in heaven from the beginning of the chapter and now, without warning, there appears a magnificent figure astride a great steed. This is a scene depicted in a variety of ways elsewhere in the Bible but always with the same purpose: to represent the final appearance of the Lord in history to execute judgment on the earth.
- v.12 The description is obviously symbolic. We could hardly visualize it if we wanted to. The unknown name suggests what is always true about the Lord Christ: there is that to his being and his glory that no human being will ever grasp.
- v.13 The blood on his garment is not his own – this is not the blood he shed for us on the cross – but the blood of his enemies, as in Isaiah 63:1-3.
- v.14 Ordinarily we would think of the great host that follows the Lord into battle as angels, but it seems clear, both from 17:14 and from the other use of “fine linen, bright and clean” in this same chapter, in v. 8, that the company includes the saints.
- v.15 These images of divine judgment are all taken from the OT: the sword in the mouth, the iron scepter, and the winepress of God’s wrath.
- v.18 This supper is the ghastly alternative to that of v. 9: a summons to birds of prey to come and feast on the corpses of the fallen.
- v.21 There is no description of the last battle, either here or earlier in 17:14. These are images, not literal descriptions and, in any case, the entire event proves to be an anti-climax. The nations rise up but the battle is nothing to speak of; the enemies of the Lord are routed, their leaders captured and judged. We will have more to say about the judgment of the followers of the beast and the false prophet as that judgment is further described in the next chapter.

Now, at last, it appears that we have come to a passage about which there would be much less disagreement among commentators on the book of Revelation. Do we not have very clearly before us the account of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? Surely every one can see that this is a description of that same event that the Apostle Paul describes in his letters to the Thessalonians and that Jesus himself described in his teaching about the future in the Gospels. “When the Son of Man comes...” he would say and then tell his disciples something about his coming back to the earth.

We may continue to disagree about the precise interpretation of the middle chapters of Revelation and the three cycles of seven – the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls –: whether they describe the entire course of history from the Lord’s ascension to his second coming, or events that crowd into the final chapter of human history, or, indeed, events that were largely complete by the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But here, at last, we are all together on firm footing. Well, not *all* together. Not even here. There are some good men who do not take chapter 19 as a description of the second coming at all. They take even this description of events as a symbolic representation of the history-long struggle between the kingdom of God and the

kingdom of this world. The wedding supper of the lamb in v. 7 is not an event at the end of history but the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the new age of the church that follows upon the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Those destroyed by the Messiah's great army and then eaten by birds of prey in vv. 19-21 are the Jews who were killed in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem or, perhaps, it is a metaphor for the spiritual death of those who will not believe in the gospel as the ages pass.

But, for obvious reasons, that is a decidedly minority viewpoint among advocates of all the various major schools of interpretation. The same descriptions that we find here are found in many other places in the Bible with what would seem to be an inescapably future reference; a reference to events that represent the consummation of history. To limit the reference of Christ's victory to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 or the wedding supper of the Lamb to the ongoing celebration of the Lord's Supper – whatever other problems with such interpretations as might be mentioned – drastically shrinks the perspective of the book and makes its horizon much smaller than is permitted by John's actual words and his use of all the imagery taken from the ancient Scriptures and especially from the rest of biblical and Jewish apocalyptic literature. The interpretation of chapter 19 that does not take it to be a description of the Second Coming, a version of what is called the *preterist* interpretation of Revelation, makes the vision of the book far too small, far too limited. It runs afoul of Revelation's large and expansive outlook at point after point. The book of Revelation is about the history and the future of *all* peoples, tongues, tribes, and nations and we have now come to the consummation of that history in chapter 19. As we said last time, Babylon is Rome for John's readers and stands for the world system as it is organized in opposition to the kingdom of God. We saw and heard the kings of the earth, the merchants of the earth, and the seafarers all mourn Babylon's destruction in chapter 18. Now we hear heaven celebrating that just judgment. And, again, we read here of "the kings of the earth" and "the flesh of all people..." This is the world, not Jerusalem; and chapter 19 has before it the end of the world, not the end of the Jewish state. Christ in chapter 19 is the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," triumphant over the entire earth. And the wedding supper is the marriage toward which the church has been pointing throughout the ages, the same wedding feast that Jesus himself made an image of the world to come. She is the Lord Christ's bride, she is betrothed to him; but she awaits the wedding itself!

It is, after all, not only here in Revelation 19 that we read of the Lord's physical return to earth, the destruction of his enemies, the bringing of the world into judgment, and the inauguration of the eternal states of heaven and hell. One grand argument against the claim that Revelation 19 is *not* about the second coming of Jesus Christ is that early Christianity understood the chapter to be a description of the Second Coming. Those most familiar with its apocalyptic imagery understood that the imagery was deployed precisely to describe the event that would bring this age to its conclusion. In Revelation we have heard from the very beginning of the Lord's coming again. In the introduction to the book, in 1:7 we read:

"Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him."

At the very end of the book we will be reminded of this same future event that will bring all things to their conclusion: "Behold, I am coming soon!"

So I think we can be confident that the battle alluded to in 19:19-20 is the same final conflict prophesied in 17:14 and 16:14, the Armageddon of 16:16. This is the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the end of the age. This is the event also referred to in the NT as the *parousia* after the Greek word meaning “arrival” or “coming” and frequently used in the NT for the Second Coming. When the Lord refers to the events that will mark *the coming* of the Son of Man, that is the word *parousia*. When Paul, speaking of the Lord’s resurrection as the pattern and anticipation of the resurrection of those who trust in him at the end of history, he writes:

“But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his *coming* those who belong to Christ...” [15:23]

that “at his coming” is again *parousia*. Older writers used to speak of the “second advent,” that is, the second coming or the second arrival of the Lord Jesus. Two other terms used to describe the second coming of Jesus Christ in the New Testament are “revelation” and “manifestation.” [G.E. Ladd, *The Last Things*, 52-55] Both indicate its public, universal nature. That is a feature of all the Bible’s teaching about the Second Coming: it will be cataclysmic, overwhelming, and bring to a shuddering stop everything going on in the world. The whole world will know that the Redeemer has returned as a triumphant king! All mankind will know that the history of this world has come to its end and that of the world to come is now to begin. That is why it is also called “the day of the Lord,” harkening back to the use of that phrase in the OT to describe times of the Lord’s dramatic and decisive intervention in the affairs of men. J.R.R. Tolkien referred to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ as the “eucatastrophe,” that is, the good catastrophe. An unimaginable catastrophe for the unbelieving world, but the fulfillment of every hope and dream for those who love and trust the Lord Jesus.

In many ways the Lord’s first coming was not at all like this. The Son of God stole into the world almost in secret. His conception in the womb of his mother and then his birth were, to be sure, announced by angels, but to only a few simple people, not to the high and mighty and certainly not to the entire world. And so it continued while he was in the world. The glory of his divine life was concealed behind his humanity and most people – even most people who saw him and heard him during his life – never gathered that, though a true man, he was also the living God, the creator of heaven and earth. They did not realize that Jesus of Nazareth was God in disguise! *It will not be so at the Second Coming*. Everyone will know that the King has returned: both those who rejoice to welcome him and those who gnash their teeth that he has come to judge them.

Once again in Revelation 19 we have before us the grand demonstration that the Christian faith is not first a system of doctrine and ethics. It is not first a way of life. It is not first even a set of beliefs. It is those things to be sure. *But not first!* The beliefs and the way of life come after something else; they are built on a foundation of something else. We must never forget this. Our Christian faith is first and foremost an account of things *that have happened in history* – in particular, things that happened in the birth, the life, the suffering, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension to heaven of the Lord Jesus some 2,000 years ago – and an account of what is yet still to happen. As we read at the very beginning of the book, the vision that John was granted and that he recorded for us was designed to show him and us “what must soon take place.” And

Jesus Christ is identified as the one who was, who is, and who is to come. Events are to unfold that will change everything for everyone!

Christians are those who recognize that events occurred in the world long ago that have absolutely transformed the meaning of human life. And they further know that events are to come to pass that will bring a conclusion to the story of human life, a conclusion based upon those long ago events, following upon them, and bringing them to fulfillment. Christ Jesus came first long ago to save people from their sins by paying for those sins himself on the cross. He will come the second time to bring final salvation and endless happiness and goodness to those who have trusted in him as well as to do justice to those who have steadfastly refused his gracious offer of life.

True enough: salvation is happening all the time in this world as a person here or there, a couple, or a family encounters Jesus Christ – present in the world even now by his Holy Spirit – and puts his or her or their faith in him; or as a child is born into a believing Christian home to be nurtured in that Christian faith. And, true enough, judgment is coming to pass also as others bear the sad fruit of their sin and suffer the consequences of their rebellion against God. But the Bible makes clear and observation confirms these things are very incomplete and imperfect in this world. The salvation we rejoice in is but the beginning of salvation. The believer in Christ is never in this world rid of his sins, his communion with God is at some distance, and he must still die. And, in the same way, while the world rings with the reality of divine judgment, it is a very incomplete, imperfect judgment. Indeed its imperfection is its characteristic feature. Many get away with their sins and others pay only slightly for theirs. So much sin not only goes unpunished, it is even unrecognized, unconfessed, and unadmitted. It is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ that provides the only final solution to this imperfection and incompleteness. All will then be put right: salvation will come into its perfection; justice will be complete.

A living Christian faith does many things for the present life. There are many blessings that come to those who love and trust Jesus Christ and follow him in obedience in their daily lives. We know this. We have found it so in so many different ways. It is a great thing to be a Christian! But, notwithstanding that fact, the great interest of our faith lies in the future, lies at the end of history, lies on the other side of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Everything points there; everything is fulfilled there and then; the full wonder of Christ's salvation and what it means to belong to him will be known only then.

There is no doubt that this poses a great problem for many people, especially people in our culture. We are a people who are all for the present. The future, especially what is perhaps a distant future, leaves little mark on us. We want what we want *now*, not later. We are not people who are inclined to take seriously the prospect of the unfolding future. As a people we Americans do very poorly at saving money for the future. Our politicians, in order to please us, are very likely to borrow money today with little thought of the difficulty repaying that debt may pose for our children years later. Relatively few of us have wills. Death lies far enough in the future that we are not inclined to think about it. No people has ever spent as much money as we do attempting to forestall the aging process. We want to *be* young and to continue to *live* as if we would live forever. But, of course, invest the billions as we will, we cannot prevent the years

from taking their toll. Time marches on, the future arrives eventually, and we cannot prevent its arrival no matter how hard we try.

Those who have studied American culture have noticed that Americans tend to think of the ultimate goals of a good life as matters of personal choice. For this reason freedom is ranked as the highest cultural value. This concept of freedom lacks content however in large part because it is cut loose from any concept of a future reckoning.

“Freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people’s values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life.” [Robert Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, cited in D. Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 34]

There are many serious problems with this view of human freedom: with a freedom that is all freedom *from* rather than freedom *to*. It is not clear, for example, that any society can survive that is built on such an idea of freedom; it is too selfish, too isolating. Another problem is that it is impossible to apply this idea of freedom fairly as a social norm. One person’s freedom is invariably the loss of another’s. I cannot be left to do my own thing without sooner or later it requiring *someone else’s* freedom to be curtailed to keep it from getting in *my* way. But, more important than any of this is that such a view of freedom and of human life absolutely requires a certain understanding of the future. It cannot possibly stand if, in fact, Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead; it cannot stand if history is moving toward a goal and that goal is a moral reckoning; it cannot stand if Christ intends to impose *his* will upon the world he made and the people whom he caused to exist. People who think the way most Americans nowadays think about freedom look to the future, as far as the future may be, and see, and must see...*nothing*. But the Christian faith sees something, and not just something, but the very definite, decisive, inexorable appearance of the King and the Judge of all men. The Christian sees the end of the matter, the end of all discussions about freedom, about the meaning of life and death, and about everything else.

The Christian faith, as an account of present and future history, breaks into the round of human life and death and proclaims that the years of a person’s life in this world are not the end of the matter. There is more. Human life continues after death. Its meaning is not exhausted by the experiences that a person has while he or she lives in this world. A day is coming when every human being will come face to face with his or her creator returning to the world to bring eternal life to his people and doom to his enemies. The day of moral reckoning is approaching. The grand story of human life and death in this world is significant primarily because the story doesn’t end in this world, but in the world to come. And the great event that separates this world from the world to come is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Everything that makes you happy or sad, everything that comes easily to you or with great difficulty, everything you count a success or a failure, everything that makes you angry or that enchants you, that causes hate or love to rise in your heart, *everything* is only truly what it is, what it really is, *in the light of this shuddering event at the end of history*. Everyone will be there, the Bible says – those who died centuries before and those who are alive at the moment – and

every life will be revealed for what it really was: a life pleasing to the King of Kings or lived in rebellion against him.

Think of the folk on the upper floors of the towers that morning on September 11th 2001. They were going about their lives; they had hurried to work, got that cup of coffee where they always did, greeted their co-workers as they arrived at their desks, perhaps were chatting at the water-cooler when they heard the first scream from someone looking out the window. In a moment the ordinary round of life was no more. How differently would they have lived had they known! Even Christians must not forget this: this taking to heart the reality of the Second Coming is the antidote to what Kierkegaard called “playing at Christianity.”

Brownlow North, the Scottish evangelist of the 19th century, used to rivet a congregation by beginning his message with the words: “I can tell you to a minute how long your life is going to last.” And then he would say, “It is to be as long as the life of God.” You are immortal. You will never cease to exist; can no more go out of existence than God can. But that is good news *only* if one is at peace with God, *only* if one is longing for the return of Jesus Christ and not dreading it.

Are you one of those among whom Paul numbered himself: those who were longing for the Lord’s appearing? Are you, like old Simeon, waiting for the consolation of Israel? We are in the same position as were those ancient saints waiting for the first coming of the Messiah. They waited long but, in the end, he came indeed. And he will come again as he said he would.

Thomas Chalmers, whose statue you can see today in the middle of one of Edinburgh’s prominent intersections, was seven years in the ministry of the Church of Scotland before he was a real Christian. He had been all his life to that point playing at Christianity. His real interests in life were mathematics and astronomy. He preached in those early years of his ministry against “fanaticism,” by which he meant taking the Christian faith and its account of the past and the future seriously. But after a few years in the ministry he was struck by a serious illness and during his long confinement he was awakened by the Spirit of God to the brevity of life and the magnitude of eternity. He eventually returned to his pulpit but now a believer in Jesus Christ and everyone noticed the dramatic change in his preaching. As one of his hearers, accustomed to something very different, put it: “the world to come cast an awful shadow over every sermon.” Chalmers would eventually be called to teach in the Divinity School in Edinburgh and a group of young men gathered at his feet who came to have the same sense of future things, of the Second Coming, and the two worlds that lay beyond: McCheyne, the Bonar brothers, William Burns, and others. What lives they lived; what ministries they had; what a testimony they left behind them in Scotland, in China, in virtually every part of the world because they were men who were looking forward to the coming of the Lord! They were men like the great men of the English Reformation, men whom John Knox simply described as men “who loved the coming of our Lord Jesus.”

It is the best way to live: looking forward and eagerly anticipating the coming, the advent, the *parousia*, the revelation, the manifestation of the Lord Jesus. It puts everything in your life in its proper place. Set your faces like flint toward the East; see him coming on the clouds in your mind’s eye. And be sure to tell others what you know: “The Master is coming back; pass it on!”

