

The prospect of the Second Coming, if seriously considered, will inevitably distinguish Christians from the society around them.

“The Second Coming: No. 2”

Revelation 19:1-21

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Read Text without Comment

We considered this same text last Lord’s Day morning. We argued that it is, in fact, as it has almost universally been taken to be in Christian history, an account of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. And we pointed out that the prospect of this event inevitably determines one’s understanding of the meaning of life.

In the modern world, the authors of screenplays, as before them authors of novels and essays, are sometimes among our most serious cultural critics. One of the brightest and most thoughtful of them over the past thirty years or so has been Woody Allen. He once described his method of writing a screenplay in this way: “The trick is to start at the ending when you write a play. Get a good strong ending and then write backwards.” [God: A Play] His point was not merely technical. He was admitting, as many of his screenplays seem designed to demonstrate, that without a fixed ending to the human drama, the search for significant meaning in life becomes hopeless. [David Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 34-36]

The reality of the Second Coming as an event in the future of all human beings gives terrible and wonderful meaning to human existence. In Revelation, in particular, the account of the Second Coming serves to sum up and emphatically to reiterate the great themes of the book. The vantage point of the consummation provides a perspective on those themes at once powerful and illuminating. Imagine the Great Day having dawned, the event actually unfolding, as here in Rev. 19, and suddenly everything John has been hammering away at in the book so far “stands out in sunny outline, brave and clear.” Revelation has no teaching that you cannot find elsewhere in the Bible – many places elsewhere in fact – but it is unusual among biblical books, especially NT books, for its particular concentration of emphases. And those distinctive emphases are gathered up again in its account of the *Parousia* or Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a very important fact to notice that the accounts of the Second Coming that we are given in Holy Scripture are characteristically more solemn and less celebratory than we might have expected. After all, the Second Coming will be *the* day of triumph for believers, the happiest of all days, the day on which every form of sorrow will be obliterated and every form of happiness experienced to an unprecedented degree; *at least for Christians*. But whether in the Lord’s teaching about his coming again that we have in the gospels, or here in Rev. 19, or the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1, the warning note is accented more than the celebratory. We hear mention of the wedding feast here in Rev. 19 but it is not described. The description is of the destruction of the wicked. There is something in this to ponder and to take to heart. The chief effect of the prospect of Christ’s Second Advent, at least according to the great descriptions of that event we are given in Scripture, is to solemnize us, and to make us think seriously and

carefully about our lives now, our lives in the present. And in particular the chief effect at present *is to make our lives more difficult*. This was its effect for John's original readers and its effect for us today. Let me show you how this is so in regard to Revelation 19.

What every careful, serious-minded reader of this text is compelled to face is the way in which the emphases of this prophecy, if truly embraced, must inevitably set us at odds with the world and the culture around us. We are in this way both summoned and consigned to be odd, different; outsiders in our own world. This account is a call to arms. This is important, very important to acknowledge because all of us by nature *hate* to be outsiders; we *hate* to be considered strange or odd. We are inclined to do almost anything in order *not* to be thought odd or an outsider. We crave belonging. You see this at every level of human behavior. Any thoughtful Christian will admit it of himself or herself. It is, for example, the greatest obstacle to our sharing our faith with unbelievers. We fear what they might think of us: that they may think us odd or strange or, worse, they may dislike us for having placed them in an uncomfortable position. But there is no hope for us to escape this consequence if we are genuinely to be people who long for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, it is true that, as we read in Proverbs, "when a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him." [16:7] We know plenty of Christians whose Christian faith has made them attractive people that other people admire. Their kindness, their honesty, their sympathy and love, their good humor, their integrity and perhaps especially their humility – their Christian character in other words – all of these things are admirable and people can't help admiring them for them. I know this is true of many of you at work and in your neighborhoods. But, true as that may be, it is also true that at some point, in some way, and probably in a number of ways and at many points, *the faithful Christian must cross swords with the culture* and be identified as someone who is an infidel in respect to the culture's cherished beliefs and way of life. He will, she must show himself or herself an outsider; he must prove himself the odd man out; she must prove herself the one who doesn't belong. Hard as that may be to face, fearful as it is for people who want to be liked and accepted – and we all want very much to be liked and accepted – the perspective on life gained by looking at it from the vantage point of the Second Coming makes this conflict and its resulting personal estrangement inevitable. As Paul bluntly put it: the Christian man or woman who wants to live a godly life *will* suffer persecution.

In an early chapter of his great book – and I mean *great* book – *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer tells of a Christian scholar friend of his who had effectively forsaken his chances for any real career advancement by standing up for the truth of God's Word. They were walking together and his friend was explaining what had happened. "But it doesn't matter," his friend said to Dr. Packer, "I have known God and they haven't." What is it to be estranged from unbelievers, he was saying, if that estrangement is because of the communion you have with God himself! Believing in the Second Coming, taking it to heart, fore-fancying it as Alexander Whyte quaintly says, living in the anticipation of it, separates you from your culture, your society in profound ways that cannot be helped. But, precisely because the Second Coming *will someday occur* no Christian should shy away from this inevitable alienation, this being consigned to the role of an outsider in your own world. Let me draw your attention this morning to three ways in which the

prospect of Christ's return, as it is described here in Revelation 19, must alienate you from the world around you.

I. First, the reality of the Second Coming forces us to be a people for whom obedience to the commandments of God is the first and controlling commitment of our lives.

There is a sense in which Revelation is a strange book, different from the other books of the NT. I am not referring simply to its genre: its admittedly strange and dramatic imagery, its difficult structure (is any other book of the NT so hard to figure?). I am talking about its doctrine, its teaching and especially the unusual emphasis laid upon some of that teaching.

From the very beginning of the book the accent falls not on what Christ has done for the believer, but on what the believer must do for Jesus Christ. The emphasis from the beginning to the end of the book is upon the believer's righteousness, his steadfastness, her loyalty to Christ through thick and thin. And that loyalty is invariably expressed in obedience to the Lord's commandments, no matter the difficulty, no matter the persecution that may result.

In the seven letters that comprise chapters 2 and 3, letters we may take as a kind of thesis statement of the book of Revelation, again and again the Christian congregations are summoned to *do* something in obedience to the Lord and out of loyalty to him. And they are forbidden to do other things. When the Lord tells them, "I know your deeds" – as he does in four of the seven letters, he is drawing attention to their obedience, their righteousness, or lack of it. He is calling on them to obey and to serve him. *That obedience will be the measure of their lives.* That is what it means to "overcome" and it is to those who overcome to whom the promises of vindication and reward in the world to come are made at the end of each of the seven letters. And along the way there is more of this, much more. We read in chapter 14 that the faithful saints will eventually "rest from their labor, *for their deeds will follow them.*"

And here in chapter 19 we read of the wedding of the Lamb and how the bride of Christ has made herself ready. How did she make herself ready? We read in v. 8: "Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the *righteous acts* of the saints.)" We encountered a similar form of words in 3:4-5:

"Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white."

The idea of the white clothes is very clearly there, as here in 19:8, that of righteous living: faithfulness to the Lord, a refusal to compromise with the world's way of life, a steadfast obedience to Jesus Christ. The white clothes are the Lord's *reward* to his saints who served him faithfully. Revelation is much about the believers' *doing!*

We are so used to thinking of our righteousness before God as *not our own* righteousness, *not* the righteousness of our own obedience or service *but* the righteousness of Christ that is reckoned to us when we trust in him, that Christians can be taken aback by Revelation's emphasis on the believer's *doing* and of heaven as its reward. To be sure, Revelation is crystal clear on Christ as

our Redeemer. We remember the glorious vision in chapter 5 of the Lamb who had been slain and the song that is sung in heaven about the Lamb purchasing with his blood men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. We are not at all surprised to hear in the last paragraph of the book salvation described as “the free gift of...life” not something we deserve but something given to us freely. John speaks of the divine election of the saints, of their names being written in the book of life before the foundation of the world. There is no failure on John’s part to remember that salvation is *sola gratia*, by grace alone; *solo Christo*, by Christ alone, and *sola fide*, by faith alone or at least our justification is, our peace with God.

But, as every other writer of the books of the Bible, John is equally emphatic that true Christians, genuine saints will be, must be the obedient servants of the King of Kings. The bride has made herself ready for the wedding by *her obedience*, as we read here. In chapter 20, and again in chapter 22, we will read that the Lord is coming with his reward in his hand – what is a *reward* except the acknowledgement of worthy behavior – and that he “will give to everyone according to what he has done.” We have noticed that often it is the prophecy of Jeremiah that underlies the last chapters of Revelation. Well so it is here. In Jer. 18:19 we read:

“...great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds [O Lord]. Your eyes are open to all the ways of men; you reward everyone according to his conduct and as his deeds deserve.”

There is an immensely important sense in which *even in the world of God’s grace, even in the world created by the redemption of Christ* righteous living and obedient serving *earn a reward from the Lord*, and that reward is a place and a station in the heavenly kingdom to come. There are, to be sure, other motives to live a godly and faithful Christian life. The love of God is a motive (“If you love me,” Jesus said, “you will keep my commandments.”). Gratitude is a motive. The joy a Christian finds for himself or herself in obeying and serving the Lord; that too is a motive. But in Revelation the motive is reward in the heavenly country for those who obey and serve the Lord. And since it is Revelation that we are studying, it is *that motive* that should be front and center in our hearts and minds these days. At the coming again of our Lord Jesus we must have proved ourselves worthy of walking with the Lord dressed in white and you do that with righteous deeds! We must be a *doing* people.

But you see this view of life is not the view of life entertained by the people of our society. The thought scarcely occurs to them that they are duty bound to God or that their future happiness depends upon their offering themselves in obedience as the servants of Jesus Christ. It is incomprehensible to them that every day as they begin their day they are to reckon with the fact that the day will be judged by one standard only: were they faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ and did they obey his commandments scrupulously, consistently, and from the heart. Did I consider my obedience to him more important than my own ease or the approval of others? The people of this society do not think of themselves as servants, as men and women under orders, as people for whom obedience to *someone else* is the be all and end all of life. Christians themselves struggle to think this way. Unbelievers *never* do.

Don’t mistake me. Everyone made in the image of God must be and will be moral in a certain fashion. Everyone is a moral zealot indeed, at least in some respects. There is in our time even a

curious kind of what, I suppose, we might describe as compensatory moral zealotry. People seem to be saying, “I may not keep the vows I made to my wife or husband; I may in fact seek my own personal fulfillment at the expense of my children’s happiness and wellbeing; I may live my life for myself, largely without consideration of other people – at least such consideration as is personal and serious and even costly –; I may do none of those things, but, by golly, you won’t catch me littering the highway or allowing someone else’s second hand smoke to pollute the air we Americans breathe!” Everyone will bear witness to his or her moral nature, however pitifully. But they do not think of themselves as living *to obey another*; they do not regard themselves as the servants of the Lord; they do not measure their success or failure according to the measure of their obedience to God’s commandments. They should, but they don’t. *And when they find that you do, they won’t admire you for it.* They are far more likely to resent you for it and to pity you for it.

But you cannot help thinking about your life in terms of your obedience to Jesus Christ. Why? *Because he is coming again!*

II. In the second place, the reality of the Second Coming forces upon us the prospect of divine judgment and so makes us in deadly earnest about human life and its ultimate issue.

Almost nobody in our world *except Christians* is in deadly earnest about those things. You have heard the story – true or not I cannot say – about the skeptical Scottish philosopher David Hume being caught by a friend hurrying away to hear the Great Awakening evangelist George Whitefield. His friend remarked in surprise, “but you don’t believe any of that.” To which Hume replied, “No, but Whitefield does!” We know Hume went to hear Whitefield a number of times. William Wilberforce summed up the great power of Charles Simeon’s ministry by saying simply, “Simeon is in earnest.” The first thing the gospel will do is to make a man or woman take a serious view of human life *precisely because of the question of its ultimate issue.* If eternity, if the world to come, does not make a man or woman serious, what pray tell, will?

The Second Coming makes people earnest or serious precisely because it *is* the Day of Judgment, the Day of Reckoning, and those who are unprepared for it must suffer eternal loss. This is the dismal, even terrifying message of the last paragraph of this 19th chapter as it is the message of the entire book. Revelation, perhaps more than any other NT book, is about the wrath or the judgment of God and particularly that wrath and judgment as it will be visited upon the world at the end of the age. The words for the wrath and anger of God, such as we have here in v. 15, are used 13 times in chapters 6-19.

Everyone knows John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

But there is another such summary in the same third chapter of John and, instead of “shall not perish” it puts the alternative to salvation in another form of words.

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, *for God’s wrath remains on him.*”

That word “wrath” is the same word as we have in Rev. 19:15. We have already spoken of God’s wrath a number of times as we have made our way through the book and will have to address it still further because John is not finished with that subject. When you think about the future as John is thinking about the future from the beginning of the book to the end you cannot help but think about God’s wrath; it is there *waiting* for us at the end. The moral nature of the universe is rooted in God’s own character; no one feels its violation *as he does*. No one measures the wrong of human life – man’s indifference to God and to his neighbor – *as God does*. You know how deeply you feel the misbehavior of your children *because they are yours*. When they rebel against you, when they embarrass you by their behavior, it angers you and offends you and troubles you precisely because *they are yours*; you are identified with them, you have a great interest in them, and you love them and care for them. You want them to be good. You want to be proud of them. You gave them life and when they abuse that gift, when they make of their lives something that is unworthy you feel keenly that unworthiness. How much more with God who has given everyone his or her life! There is something deeply abnormal about the world – most people usually think the world is normal – but it is not. It is abnormal. It is broken. It is not at all what it ought to be. It is broken root and branch in every kind of way. And this is a matter of the greatest displeasure and sadness and offense to God who made this world and made it to be something else than it is. Like it or not; protest it or not; such is in the universe God has made and such is God’s view of the universe.

The imagery of defeat in battle, of corpses being shredded by birds of prey, of the Lake of Fire, all of this is designed to revolt and frighten us, and not only for ourselves but for others, for our loved ones, and especially for the unbelieving world. *It is to galvanize our witness as well as our obedience. It is to make us people in deadly earnest. But this seriousness about life, this warning note that must be found in the conversation and the example of faithful Christians, will not be appreciated by the unbeliever.* It almost never is. No one likes to be condemned and you must tell him or her that unless they turn to Christ they will be condemned. You must tell them that what they are in themselves is an offense to God and something that he will punish in his holy wrath. They will not thank you for saying so. They will pity you, if they do not despise you, for thinking so.

Tertullian said in his day, in the 3rd century, “We get ourselves laughed at for proclaiming that [Christ] will one day judge the world.” And it has always been so and is in our day. R.V.G. Tasker was a typically liberal biblical scholar in the middle of the 20th century. He had risen to the pinnacle of his profession as Professor of New Testament at the University of London. His reputation as a scholar had been rewarded by his appointment as chairman of the translation committee of the New English Bible, the first of the spate of new English translations of the Bible produced in the second half of the 20th century. But he went once, largely out of curiosity, to hear Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the famous London preacher, speaking to a meeting of the University of London Christian Union (the equivalent of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship on U.S. college campuses.). Three years later Professor Tasker was the chairman of a meeting of the same University of London Christian Union and it fell to him to introduce Dr. Lloyd-Jones who was to speak again that night. He began his introduction of the speaker by saying:

"I don't know who else heard Dr. Lloyd-Jones speaking in this hall three years ago on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. But I know one man whose whole life was revolutionized by that address. That man is your chairman tonight!" [Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, ii, 130]

Reckoning with the Second Coming is something that R.V.G. Tasker had never done. He was a scholar of the N.T., a writer of commentaries on the books of the N.T. but he had never reckoned with the Lord's Second Advent, his coming again. Prof. Tasker forsook his liberalism and took his stand on the faithfulness and reliability of Holy Scripture in a university world in which those convictions were not appreciated. It led to a considerable measure of isolation. His colleagues "sent him to Coventry," as they say in England. He got the cold shoulder. But he didn't care. He allied himself with the believers and kept on going. His life had become a serious business for a reason that had never occurred to him before. No one can think of human life in the same way. Why? Because Christ Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead!

III. Third, and finally, the reality of the Second Coming alienates and separates us from the world around us because it demands of us a Christocentricity, a concentration on the person of Jesus Christ.

We live in a time in which it is typical of people to take offense at religious exclusivity, at any and every notion that there is but *one* way, *one* truth, and *one* life that God will accept and reward. But that is without question the emphatic proclamation of the book of Revelation and no less its account of the Second Coming. The figure who comes to earth is no one less than the Lamb who was slain. He is the King of Kings, the very phrase used to identify Jesus in the opening chapter of the book. The description of him in vv. 11-16 is very like the one in chapter 1:12-16. He is the Word of God, which is the term John used in his Gospel for the Son of God who made the heavens and the earth, but who in time came into the world as a man and dwelled among men. *That same Jesus* who by his incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection redeemed sinners is coming again to bring final salvation to those who trust in him and to judge those who do not. We hear of his wrath here and in 6:16 we read of the wrath of the Lamb. The Savior is the judge; the sympathetic and kindly healer of men is the warrior coming to do battle with his enemies. Jesus on the cross seems a very different figure than the warrior on his steed. The suffering servant does not at all look like the figure of insupportable majesty that we have before us in Revelation 19, but it is the same person in both cases and he demands the same absolute surrender of heart and will as the king and judge as he does as the Savior.

His place in this history and this account of the future renders him *the essential figure* in human life. One's posture toward him determines one's eternal destiny. The rest of the Bible teaches this of course and without qualification, but it is a dramatic emphasis in Revelation. The reason a person *must under any and all circumstances remain loyal to Jesus Christ and to demonstrate that loyalty in obedience* is because Jesus is the only one who can save sinners and is the one who is coming to judge the human race. Human beings have worshipped many other gods. The problem with those gods is that they *are not coming again to judge the living and the dead!* But Jesus is! To deny Jesus is to deny the history of the world and to deny its future.

There is no undifferentiated godhead here. No possibility of somehow diluting the Christian insistence that God has made himself known to mankind in one person, his Son and that he demands that we worship and serve that Son. There can be no wavering here. No army chaplains agreeing to offering prayers but not in Jesus' name. No Islam here as if somehow we can agree about God without making a point of Jesus. The God we know, the only God we can know is the one revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is Jesus who is coming again; Jesus who will judge mankind.

But the world will not thank you for calling your attention to the fact that if Jesus is indeed the Son of God then he must indeed be the object of their reverence, their faith, their love, and their obedience. Those who have practiced other religions must abandon them and become Christians. Those who have practiced no religion at all must begin to be and to be seen to be the followers of Christ. They may gnash their teeth at you for saying so, but it is the inevitable implication of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

That future event is a dagger pointed at the heart of our culture, of Babylon. But, it is also a summons to us to be true to what has happened and what will happen; not to live our lives disregarding the history of the world but to live them in real consistency with it.

It is a simple way to direct our steps, to make our decisions, to live our lives, simply to tell ourselves: given the fact that Jesus Christ is coming again, I will.... I should.... I must....