

Place: Lurgan Baptist 23:9:2003

Reading: Revelation 1:1-11

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

1. A VERY SPECIAL BOOK

Many people are fascinated, even obsessed with the future. They faithfully read their horoscopes, seek out Tarot card readers, have their palms read, feed on futuristic science fiction, or call one of the many “*psychic hot lines*,” advertised in the press. Some delve more deeply into the occult, seeking out mediums, as King Saul did, attempting to obtain information about what is to come by

“*consulting the dead on behalf of the living.*”

(Is 8:19) All such attempts to discern the future are vain. There is only One who knows and declares the future. The Lord says, “ *I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times, the things that are not yet done.* ” (Is 46:9-10) Only in Scripture can truth about the future be found. Indeed, the book of Revelation provides the most detailed look into the future in all of Scripture. For this book unveils the future of the world, all the way to history’s climax in the return of Jesus Christ and the setting up of His glorious earthly and eternal kingdom. Now all of this makes Revelation a very special book. Someone has rightly observed that the Book of Genesis and the Book of Revelation are like two bookends that hold the entire Bible together. The parallels between these two books are many. For example, in the Book of Genesis, the first man Adam reigns on the earth. In Revelation, the last Man reigns in heaven in glory. In Genesis, the darkness and the seas are created. In Revelation, there is no more darkness or any sea. In Genesis, a bride, Eve is presented to her husband. In Revelation, the church is presented to her husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Book of Genesis we see the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. In the Book of Revelation, we see the tree of life in God’s new creation. In Genesis we see the beginning of sin brings death and a curse. In Revelation, sin is done away with: there is no more curse and no more dying.

In Genesis, Satan appears to man for the first time. In Revelation he appears for the last time. In the book of Genesis, man is driven from the garden and from God’s presence. In the book of Revelation, man sees God’s face again in glory. In Genesis men look for a city by faith. In Revelation, the holy city is presented to men in glory. In Genesis Satan utters the first lie ever heard, “ *ye shall not surely die.* ” (Gen 3:4) In Revelation, there is a city where liars will never enter. Now its important to see the books of Genesis and Revelation in comparison and contrast with one another. What God began so long ago at the first creation, He will ultimately complete in His new creation.

" Few books of the Bible provide a more complete theology than that afforded by the book of Revelation. Because of its apocalyptic character, the emphasis of the book is eschatological in the strict sense of dealing with last things (note ' the word of this prophecy,' 1:3). More specifically, however it is Christological, as the material of the book relates to the ' revelation of Jesus Christ.' The objective is to reveal Jesus Christ as the glorified One in contrast to the Christ of the Gospels, who was seen in humiliation and suffering. The climax of the book is the second coming of Jesus Christ. Events preceding the second coming constitute an introduction, and all events which follow constitute an epilogue."

So the Book of Revelation offers the believer a dramatic overview of the end-times, from the Rapture of the Church to the very end of the age. The apostle John was called away from fishing by Jesus Christ, became His best friend, and watched the ministry of the Lord develop. He was there on the Mount of Transfiguration, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and at the foot of the cross of Calvary. Some of the last words Christ spoke in this world were to John asking him to care of Jesus' mother Mary. John became a fearless preacher of the gospel, a leading evangelist and teacher in the early church and a holy writer of Gods Word. He penned the fourth gospel, and three letters he wrote to young believers are part of the holy canon of Scripture. Yet at the end of his life John was exiled to the barren island of Patmos by Domitian for preaching the truth of the Gospel.

And while there John heard the voice of God calling him to heaven, where he was shown

the events that would lead to the end of the world. John wrote the things that the angel told him to, and his book offers to us a clear look on the end times.

(1) THE SPECIAL NATURE OF THE BOOK

J. Vernon McGee writes, *" This book is like a great union station where the great trunk lines of prophecy come in from other portions of Scripture. Revelation does not originate, but consummates. It is imperative to a right understanding of the book to be able to trace each great subject of prophecy from the first reference to the terminal."*

The first three verses of Revelation form a preface which tells us something about the purpose of the book, the importance of the book, and the attitude in which this book is to be read. There are also some words in this opening paragraph that reveal to us *the special nature of this book*:

(a) MYSTERIES ARE EXPLAINED:

The Greek word which is translated *" revelation,"* is apokalupsis which literally means *" an unveiling."* A revelation removes the veil which obscures our understanding, it unravels the mystery, it makes the meaning plain. *" Some years ago the city of*

Chicago was given an original by Pablo Picasso to adorn the plaza outside the new city hall. For months, as the statue was being erected, it was heavily screened from the curious gaze of the passers-by. When it was finished it stood in the plaza thickly veiled. The day came however when the Mayor of the city unveiled the statue to the astonished gaze of Chicago and the world. There it stood in all its glory, the latest offering at the altar of art, Chicago's own gigantic Picasso. Now what the Mayor did for Chicago when he unveiled the statue, the book of Revelation does for us. It draws aside the veil." As we move through the book of Revelation, we will find many mysteries made clear. Here is there set before us God's impending purposes for both the human race and the planet on which we live.

(b) PROPHECIES ARE ENCOUNTERED:

The other word used to describe the book of Revelation is "*prophecy*." (1:3) The Revelation is a book of prophecy. Seven times the noun "*prophecy*," (*propheteia*) appears (1:3 11:6 19:10 22:7,10,18,19) This is a book that deals in predictions. It deals with people and events which lie in the future. Powerful personalities are waiting to make their entrance on the stage of human events. Extraordinary circumstances are waiting to unfold as the juggernaut of history rumbles toward its consummation. And we will meet these personalities and witness these events in the book of Revelation. Of course the grand consummation of all prophecy is the coming again of Jesus Christ.

Seven times it is stated in this book that He will come. (1:7 2:25 3:3 3:11 22:7, 12, 20) So then this book is all about His Coming. The first time He came as Saviour, but the next time He will come as Sovereign. The first time He came humbly, and died on a cross as a suffering servant. Even though the OT prophets foretold the birth of the King, most people on earth missed it. But when Christ comes back no one will be able to miss it. He will return in power, and in glory and in majesty. He will defeat Satan and his armies, wipe sin from the face of the earth and set up His eternal kingdom.

(c) SYMBOLS ARE EMPLOYED:

The word signified (*semaino*) is interesting. If you want to get the true sense of this word pronounce it aloud: *SIGN-I-FIED* ! In other words Christ made His revelation known to John by signs or symbols and once you grasp the symbolic "*sign-ificance*," of this book, you can begin to understand and apply the book of Revelation. Revelation is a book of symbols and these symbols are important. Now some symbols are explained, lamps for example represent assemblies of God's people: stars represent angels: incense represent the prayers of saints. Other symbols are understood from OT symbolism (Rev 2:7 17: 4:7) and some symbols are not explained at all. (the white stone in 2:17)

Now because of the symbolic nature of Revelation, questions arise as to whether certain parts of it are to be understood symbolically or literally. A proper understanding of the book of Revelation requires both. For example (Rev 12:3-4) describes Satan as a great red dragon having a tail that could sweep one third of the stars out of heaven. Now that is obviously a symbolic description but it does not mean that Satan himself is not a literal being. The characterization of Satan as a dragon shows his ferocity and power. The stars represent angels that chose to follow him and fell from heaven. Now this is a symbolic representation of Satan, but it is to be believed quite literally.

(2) THE PERSONAL AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

Who is the author of the book of Revelation ?

(1:1) This book had its origin not in the mind of John, but in the mind of God. But how did the Lord convey the contents of this book to his servant John ? The Father gave the revelation to the Son

(Matt 24:36) and the Son shared it with the apostle using " *His angel*," as intermediary. Now sometimes Christ Himself conveyed information to John (1:10) sometimes it was an elder (7:13) and often it was an angel. (17:1 19:9-10)

Sometimes a " *voice from heaven*," told John

what to say and do. (10:4) The book came from God to John no matter what the various means of communication were, and it was all inspired by the Holy Spirit. (2 Tim 3:16)

Now its interesting to notice that the Holy Spirit used John to give us three kinds of inspired literature: the gospel of John: the three epistles: and the book of Revelation. These five books are in three main groups.

(a) THE GOSPEL: OUR PAST

The gospel of John has to do with our PAST and deals with the theme of salvation.

(b) THE EPISTLES: OUR PRESENT

The three epistles have to do with our present and deal with the theme of sanctification or daily growth in the Christian life.

(c) THE REVELATION: OUR FUTURE

The book that points to the future, to that glorious time when we shall see Him. The *Gospel* tells us to believe: (John 20:31) The *Epistles* tell us to be sure: (1 Jn 5:13) and the *Revelation* tells us to be ready (22:20) But who is this man John, whose pen has preserved for us this awesome and powerful vision of the future ? In (1:4) he

simply identifies himself as John, in (1:9) he describes his circumstances.

(1) GEOGRAPHICALLY:

Patmos. A rugged volcanic island off the coast of Asia Minor, it was about 10 miles long and 6 miles wide located just off the coast of Turkey. Now Patmos was a penal colony settled by the Romans. It was the Alcatraz of the day. Like being shipped to Siberia for the winter. It was a remote place for exile for serious criminals against the Empire.

(2) CIRCUMSTANTIALLY:

" For the Word of God " (1:9) He was exiled there from AD 86-96. Probably put there by the Roman Emperor Domitian. John was labouring in the mines and quarries of Patmos. Busting rocks on a chain gang. Ninety years old. Separated from believers. Suffering persecution. Aged and forgotten. Confined. Without sufficient food. Improperly dressed. Sleeping on the bare ground of a dark cave. Cold. Lonely. Under the severe lash of an overseer. Imprisoned for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was Domitian who instigated emperor worship. It became law that no Christian escape punishment who failed to worship Caesar and to renounce his allegiance to Christ. When John was brought the tribunal he would not deny his Lord. The result ?

Patmos. It's when we are suffering and forgotten that God often unexpectedly breaks into our lives to use us in the greatest ways. This was true of John. And it is often true for us. John thought that his life and long ministry were over, but his most significant ministry was still before him. It was when the hour was darkest when the church was suffering and was seemingly defeated that Christ broke into John's life ! So that the Patmos of persecution became to John the open door for service.

(3) THE ORIGINAL READERS OF THE BOOK

The book is addressed in (1:4) *" to the seven churches which are in Asia."*

(a) THE PEOPLE THAT ARE IDENTIFIED:

Paul had sent letters to seven churches Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and Thessalonica and now John sent one book to seven different churches. Upon arrival in Ephesus, the messenger would present the scroll to the leadership of the church and they would read it publicly to the congregation. (1:3) A copy would then be made before the other messengers would depart with the original document to the next city. (22:18-19) Thus, all seven churches received the entire book of Revelation. Why were these seven churches

singled out by the Lord. Certainly there were more than seven churches in the area ? (Col 1:2 4:13 Acts 20:5)

But the spiritual conditions found in these seven are typical and representative of what every local church has been throughout her history and what she is like today.

(b) THE PROMISE THAT IS SPECIFIED:

" Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy." (1:3) No book in the Bible has an introduction and a conclusion quite like this one. It commences with a promised blessing and it closes with a promised blessing. (22:7) Indeed there are seven beatitudes in this book, all beginning with the word *" blessed."*

(1:3 14:13 16:15 19:9 20:6 22:7 22:14) Now the blessing here relates to those who hear what the book has to say and to those who heed what the book has to say. Just to hear the book of Revelation read is a blessing ! Sure, much of it is difficult to understand, but so constant are the glimpses of Christ in glory: so consistent the outworking of the will of God: so glorious the ultimate consummation, that just to hear the prophecies of this book being read is a blessing in a troubled world like ours. But we must also heed what is written. To *" keep,"* is to give *" heed to,"* *" to watch over,"* *" to observe attentively."*

We must keep an eye on things in the light of what the book has to say, for John says, *" the time is at hand."* (1:3) Now this phrase is similar to the phrase in (1:1) where John says, *" The Revelation shortly come to pass."* Of course *" shortly,"* does not mean *" momentarily,"* because nearly two millennia have passed since John wrote about these things. Rather it means *" suddenly,"* or *" without warning."* Now that's what this phrase means, *" the time is at hand,"* the things prophesied in this book can happen at any time without warning. Now it is characteristic of John in his writings to put a key either at the front or back door of the book, which will unlock its meaning ? In (1:19) we have the:

(4) THE BIBLICAL OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Now this verse contains the golden key to the book of Revelation. It tells us that there is a Past, a Present, and a Future in this book. This is its threefold division and the division's are clear.

(a) " THE THINGS WHICH THOU HAST SEEN."

These words refer to the vision of the glorified Christ which was just shown to John. This division constitutes chapter 1.

(b) " THE THINGS WHICH ARE."

These words refer to the letters to the seven churches and they compose chapters two and three, which have to do with this present era.

(c) " *THE THINGS WHICH SHALL BE HEREAFTER.* "

Now to an unprejudiced mind it seems evident that the third section of the book commences here at

(Ch 4) And everything in the book from chapter four to the end, will occur after the church is taken out of the earth. Now these three divisions are clear and they do not overlap. Each division is complete in itself and distinct from the other two. This is God's own division of the book.

(5) THE CENTRAL FIGURE OF THE BOOK

The central person of the book of Revelation is not John (as the title may lead you to believe) but Jesus Christ. This is a revelation of Jesus as told to John. And if we study the book of Revelation and don't learn anything about Christ, then we've misread the book of Revelation. Revelation is meant to be an unveiling of Christ to us, but it also tell's of the time when Christ's glory will be unveiled, or revealed to all people. When Christ came to us the first time, His Glory was veiled but when He comes again, His glory will be completely unveiled. Now when studying the book of Revelation, its every easy to become focused on trying to decipher and understand the prophecy. However, our main focus is to be on the One whose coming is prophesied. After all, its not the Coming we want to be familiar with but the person who is coming.

Imagine a train station. In that station there is a station master whose main objective is to know as much as possible about all the trains. And so he has all kinds of intricate charts to help him predict exactly where a train is and when it will reach the station. Imagine also that there is a young lady at the station. Now she's not nearly as well informed as the station master, but she knows that her fiancée is on the train that is about to arrive, and she can hardly wait for it to get there. Our hearts also need to beat in anticipation of the arrival of the King. You may find a justification for your point of view, or you may find reasons to support some fine point of prophecy, but if you don't see the Lord Jesus in the Book of Revelation you've missed the real point. For this book is pre-eminently the revelation of Christ.

(a) *HIS DIGNITY:*

There is a reference to the Trinity in
(1:4-5: Is 11:2) Christ is presented here:

(1) THE FAITHFUL WITNESS:

He came to earth to be a witness to a dark and degenerate world. It was He who said, *"to this end was I born for this cause I came into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth."* (Jn 18:37)

(2) THE FIRST BEGOTTEN OF THE DEAD:

" First begotten," (1:5) does not mean the first one raised from the dead but the highest of those raised from the dead. (Rom 8:29) Others had returned to life to die again. He rose and is alive for evermore. (1:18) Is this not what a persecuted church needs to hear ? (1:9) Is this not what those facing trials, difficulties need to hear ?

(3) THE PRINCE OF THE KINGS OF THE EARTH:

He is the King of Heaven: (Dan 4:37) the King of the Jews: (Matt 2:2) the King of Israel: (Jn 1:49) the King of the Ages: (1 Tim 1:17) the King of Glory: (Ps 24:7) the King of Saints: (15:3) and the King of Kings (19:16) He is the mighty Prince of the Kings of the Earth. (Dan 8:25) The Lord is seen here in His three-fold Office. Prophet for He is the Faithful Witness. Priest for He is the first begotten of the dead, King for He is the Prince of the kings of the earth. The Lord is seen in His three-fold Work. *" Unto Him that loved us."* (literally keeps on loving us) *" and washed us."* (literally once for all washed us) That's His Past Work of Redemption for He is the Faithful Witness.(1:6) *" Kings and priests "* That's His Present Work of Sanctification for He is the First Begotten of the dead. *" Behold He cometh with clouds."* (1:7) That's His Future Work of Glorification for He is the Prince of the kings of the earth.

(b) HIS DEITY:

" I am Alpha and Omega." (1:8) These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. From A to Z, He is the beginning and the end and the one who encompasses the whole of creation. Nothing comes before Him. No-one will come after Him. *" For From Him and Through Him and To Him are all things."* (Rom 11:36) *" The Lord which is and which was and is to come."* He is eternally the same Past, Present, and Future. *" The Almighty."* Jesus Christ is God in every sense of the word. There is nothing He cannot do because there are no boundaries to His power.

(c) HIS DESCENT:

" Behold He cometh with clouds." (1:7) This describes our Lords Return to the Earth

and must not be confused with His Return to the Air to catch away his blood-bought people. (1 Thess 4:16) Here is an event that will be witnessed by the whole world and especially by a repentant nation of Israel. (Zech 12:10-12) He is Coming present tense. (1:7) His Coming is Near.

" A couple retired to bed for the evening. As they laid on their pillows, the grandfather clock downstairs began to chime. Ten o'clock ! Eleven o'clock ! Twelve o'clock ! but it continued to sound. Thirteen o'clock ! Fourteen o'clock ! Fifteen o'clock. Hearing all fifteen chimes, the husband popped his head up in amazement. His wife asked him, ' Honey, what time is it ?' ' I don't know,' he replied, ' but its later than its ever been before." None of us know the hour the Lord is coming. But its later than its ever been before. Are you so living that when He appears you will be unashamed before Him at His coming again ?