

# Our Beautiful Lord and His Beautiful Church

*Rev. Michael Fintelman*

Psalter: 228

Scripture: Psalm 84

Psalter: 386

Sermon Text: Psalm 84:1-4

Psalter: 227

*How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God. Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee.*

—Psalm 84:1-4

Uplifting godly music has long been an important part of the saints' worship throughout the ages. From the Old Testament time to our present day, both the preached Word and scriptural music have been inseparable. They augment each other. Many years ago, the poet wrote these touching words that reflect Scripture which the church still loves to sing today:

Beautiful Savior, King of Creation,  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Truly I'd love Thee, Truly I'd serve Thee,  
Light of my soul, my Joy, my Crown.

The beauty of the Savior as King and Lord inspires the heart of the saints to love Him in return and live for Him as an expression of Christian thanksgiving.

There is another beautiful song recorded in Psalm 84:1–4. The psalmist sings and the faithful church has always echoed his exaltation of God resulting in a desire serve Him within His church.

The Book of Psalms is a collection of divinely inspired lyrics meant to be paired with music and sung by the church. When you read Psalm 84, you quickly get the impression that the psalmist’s heart is filled with delight as he considers the Lord and His church.

In the first four verses, he sees the beauty of church and the Lord of hosts; his heart is longing after the living God. In verse 6, he is thinking of a man who goes through the valley of “Baca,” or a “desert of weeping,” and yet there is rain, a cooling refreshment. In verse 8, he sees God as a shield or defense. In verse 10, he confesses that one day in the Lord’s house is better than a thousand days anywhere else, and he would rather have the simplest responsibility in the church, such as a doorman, than to be engaged in a lifestyle of sin. In verse 11, the Lord gives grace and glory to the needy within the context of His church. Lastly, the psalmist writes that no good thing will the Lord withhold from them which walk uprightly in His way.

We can immediately glean that the psalmist’s heart is greatly cheered and encouraged in the Lord his God. From the abundance of his heart, his mouth spoke and his pen wrote these expressions of strong, joy-filled faith. Now to be sure, the psalmist was not always experiencing such praise-filled times like this. There were other times in his life when he was in the pit of despair, just as there are such seasons for every Christian. But here, his heart is bursting with gratitude and humble joy! From the first four verses of Psalm 84, let us consider this further.

In our original unfallen state, our first parents, Adam and Eve, would not only have seen the beauty in each

other as husband and wife, but they also would have known and seen the beauty of the Lord as the perfect Designer and Creator of all things. Sadly, that spiritual insight all changed with the tragic fall of mankind shortly after time began. In fact, the Bible tells us that the natural man, that is the unsaved man, cannot truly discern that which is good and spiritual (1 Cor. 2:14), and Isaiah writes that we have no desire for the Lord because we cannot see the beauty in Him (Isa. 53:2). Mankind by nature is spiritually blind.

However, our great and merciful God rescues His children from our self-made mess. Thanks be to God, He opens spiritually blind eyes with His life-giving grace. He graciously grants us sight to see the King in His beauty, Isaiah writes (Isa. 33:17). This is a result of His enlightening grace and saving power working irresistibly in the soul. David, the probable author of this psalm, was a man who was saved by the Lord's redeeming grace. He had his spiritual eyes opened to see the beauty of the King of kings. He is inspired by the spirit express his faith in what he writes.

In the first verse of Psalm 84, he saw the beauty of the church and her God in the tabernacles and courts of the Lord. In other words, the worship of God with His people in His house was not an ugly, negative experience for him. It was "amiable." It was beautiful. It was his delight! He did not go to worship in God's house with a bitter, indifferent, or a callous heart. He looked forward to the time he was privileged to spend with the Lord, hearing His Word and singing the praises of Zion with God's people. The psalmist's mind and heart and emotions were tuned to give God the glory in His house in all aspects of worship, and therefore the entire worship experience was a satisfying delight for him. Is the whole experience of church a delight for us also? Can we sing along with

this song from the very opening line? Does the weekly privilege of gathering with the people of God in your local church, sing His praises, and hear Him speak to us from His Word cheer us?

The psalmist sings of beautiful “tabernacles.” He refers to it in the plural form. Why is that? There was only one tabernacle in the Old Testament time, but he probably was referring to the tabernacle being set up in various locations as the Israelites traveled.

Most commentators agree that the tabernacle building was not beautiful in itself. It was not an aesthetically appealing structure in terms of architecture, but rather angular with all kinds of animal skins covering it. Yet David writes that it was beautiful! Consider several reasons why.

It was beautiful because of ownership. He sings of “thy tabernacles.” The church building is representative of the people within in her. So the psalmist sees beauty in that the church is owned and possessed by Lord. That is still true today. In what ways?

First, because the church has been purchased by Christ, she is beautiful. When you purchase something, you become the rightful owner. So also with the Lord’s purchased possession—the church. Since she has been purchased by the Lord, the believing church becomes His possession. Paul writes, “You are not your own” (1 Cor. 6:19). Because the beautiful Lord owns her, the church is beautiful—even though she often feels ugly with sin. There is a folktale about Midas the king who was very careful what he touched, because everything he touched turned to gold. Similarly, when the Lord of heaven reaches down and touches a sinner with His saving grace, that sinner changes from being spiritually ugly to spiritually beautiful because of the saving touch and ownership of the beautiful King of kings.

Second, the psalmist also sees beauty in the church because the Lord owns all things, including His church. The psalmist addresses the God as the “Lord of hosts!” (v. 1). As Lord of hosts, He is Ruler and Possessor of all things. He owns the hosts of heaven and all on earth as well. Are you both humbled and cheered that He owns you, too? Due to our fallen nature, mankind sees no delight in being owned and ruled. In fact, fallen man desires to be his own lord without having to answer to any higher authority. However, by grace, we find comfort and security in belonging to our Lord and delightedly serve Him. The Lord’s saving grace changes our core desires and we learn to sing with the psalmist from Psalter 383:

All that I am I owe to Thee,  
Thy wisdom, Lord, hath fashioned me;  
I give my Maker thankful praise,  
Whose wondrous works my soul amaze.

The psalmist goes on to sing of the beauty of the church because this is where God met with His people. This is why the tabernacle is referred to in the Bible as the “tent of meeting.” Our beautiful Lord visits His church; He does not stay away! God had said to Israel, “And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory” (Ex. 29:43). The Lord could righteously pass us by, but for the sake of His Son He condescends to meet with us! This is a beautiful truth. It is a wonderful thing to receive a visit from someone who truly loves you and has your best interest at heart. Likewise it is a beautifully wonderful thing that the Lord stoops low to visit us in our need and to encourage us by His Word and Spirit. He dwells, He tabernacles, with His church.

The tabernacle, however, was most beautiful because all within it pointed to Jesus Christ, the beautiful Savior. The tabernacle’s wide open doors reflected the

wide open arms of Christ. He said, "All that come to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). When one walked through the doors, there was a brazen altar where sacrifices were laid. That pointed to the offering of Christ on the cross and thus to a sinner's salvation. The bronze laver full with water the priest was to wash in pointed to sanctification, or making clean. Every sinner needs to be made clean in Christ, who Paul says is "our sanctification" (1 Cor. 1:30). The golden candlestick in the holy place pointed to Jesus as the "Light of the world." The altar of incense with smoke constantly arising from it pointed to prayers offered up in name of our beautiful Savior. The table of showbread pictured Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. In the most holy place, the golden Ark of the Covenant represented the purity and holiness of Christ. On top of the ark was the Mercy Seat; the Lord has mercy only through Christ's blood. All of the tabernacle from the front to the back, from top to bottom—all of it points to the beautiful Savior! That is what moved Paul to write, "Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands" (Heb. 9:11). This Savior is altogether lovely! (Song 5:16). Is your heart also deeply moved by His beauty?

In the second verse of this song, the psalmist's heart was longing and fainting for the living God and for His church. In other words, his heartfelt desire was to meet with God and to be with His church. He did not go simply out of duty; not at all. His heart and flesh were crying out to meet with the living God within the Lord's courts where the people of God would meet! His heart and soul and emotions all were in tune to praise the living God of heaven! Is this our heartfelt desire and longing as well? Far too often even good Christians can get so busy, even with legitimate things, and inevitably the things of God and matters concerning His church can get overshadowed or

even displaced. J.C. Penny, founder of the chain store with the same name, once said, “If you are too busy to attend church twice on Sunday and the Wednesday night prayer meeting, then you’re doing more than God wants you to do.” When our spiritual condition is properly aligned with the Word we will sing, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Ps. 122:1). Gladness in God is what the psalmist was experiencing as he gathered with the Lord’s people in the Lord’s courts.

Note next in verse 3 that the house of God was even a lodging place for the birds. “Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God.” C. H. Spurgeon wrote that the psalmist had a “blessed envy” of the birds that went to the house of the Lord and were close by the altar of God. The psalmist longed to be as close as possible to God in His church. There are some beautiful pictures of application we can draw from this.

Birds found security in the house of the Lord. The sparrow and the swallow flew in and called it home. They built nests by the altar. They were not scared away; they felt secure. It is the same with us when we fly to the Lord by faith and meet with Him and His people in His courts. Security is what mankind craves, and true and eternal security is what the Lord grants when we may follow His prescribed ways. There is security and comfort to be found in God as we like the birds make the worship of God in His church our regular practice. If the experience of church is just an occasional fly-in, then even the birds have more sense! But far worse, if we don’t flee to the Lord and His courts, we will miss out on the security that is to be found only in His presence.

The psalmist also saw the birds raising their broods there. Birds built nests in the church and settled there

to raise their young. This is a lesson for us also. We ought to raise our children within the safe confines of the church environment. The church environment is there to grant doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and social safety for both parents and children. The church is a place of multi-generational security. Birds teach us this! “But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee.... Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this?” (Job 12:17). One elderly person commenting on this verse put it this way: “I’m an old bird now, but when I was a tender and vulnerable hatchling, I’m thankful my parents were like wise owls to raise me within the safety of the Lord’s church.”

Lastly, in verse 4, we read that those who dwell regularly in God’s house still praise Him. We don’t know if the psalmist was still thinking of birds here, but we do know that the birds sing habitual praises to God—and if they do, we should, too! Then we see the beauty of God and His house and the beauty of the Son of God within His church. In other words, when we “dwell”—that is, live constantly—there, we will praise God. When by grace we abide and dwell with the Lord by Spirit-worked faith, and when we meet with His people in His house, our hearts will continue to praise Him! As it was true for the psalmist, so it can be true for us. Praising God continually is what the Lord deserves, and that is what the Lord desires of us.

By faith, the psalmist saw the wondrous beauty of the Lord in His church. His heart and flesh were crying out for the living God as he met with the Lord’s people in His courts. He marveled at God’s little creatures, sparrows and swallows, as they lodged in the Lord’s house and made their home there, too. He sees the blessing of regularly engaging in worship with the people of God in

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His house and rightly observes that those will be the ones who habitually praise the name of the Lord.

May the words of this psalm be our song! May our hearts be touched not only by the uplifting pathos, but also by the beautiful power of the Lord in the words of this song. By grace may our eyes be open to see the beauty of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord! And may our hearts may be tuned by grace to sing:

Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations,  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Glory and honor, Praise, adoration,  
Now and forevermore be Thine!

Amen.

## The King's Final Hours

*Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven*

Scripture: Luke 23:32–46

*And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. <sup>33</sup>And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. <sup>34</sup>Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. <sup>35</sup>And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. <sup>36</sup>And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, <sup>37</sup>and saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. <sup>38</sup>And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. <sup>39</sup>And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. <sup>40</sup>But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup>And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. <sup>42</sup>And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. <sup>43</sup>And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. <sup>44</sup>And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. <sup>45</sup>And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. <sup>46</sup>And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.*

—Luke 23:32–46

The passion and death of Jesus Christ bring out an unlikely aspect of His three-fold office. Oftentimes His sufferings are linked to His high-priesthood, but in the Gospel of Luke in particular we see the glorious kingship of Christ being affirmed from the beginning moments of His humiliation. Luke establishes the kingship of Jesus from the very beginning of his gospel. The Magnificat, or Song of Mary in Luke 1, parallels the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. Both of those songs speak of the humble being exalted. Indeed, in both of these books of the Bible, we see that God introduces the man after His own heart to rule and protect His people—and the king arises from humble beginnings. In 1 Samuel, we are introduced to David. In Luke, we are introduced to Jesus, the Son of David, the greater than David. Both come from humble beginnings—David from the fields of Bethlehem, Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. Luke makes this linkage between David and Jesus clear. Joseph and Mary are both from the royal family of David, thus fulfilling the promise of 2 Samuel 7:12–16 that David’s throne would be established forever in the person of the Messiah. The angel’s words in Luke 1:30–31 also highlight the continuity of the Davidic dynasty culminating in the King of kings, “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.” Jesus is also born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Jesus’ humble beginnings and ties to the Davidic royal family affirm His kingship.

During His ministry, Jesus also confirms His kingship. He teaches about the nature of His kingdom through parables, “The kingdom of heaven is like....” He speaks and heals as a sovereign King over the created order. Jesus as King stands in contrast to Caesar Augustus and his *pax Romana*, ushering in true peace and prosperity

(Luke 2:1). The crowds jubilantly hail Him as King as He rides triumphantly into Jerusalem against the backdrop of His impending suffering and death: "Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest" (Luke 19:38). His kingship is affirmed in His trial, where the kings of the earth and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His anointed (Ps. 2:2). Their accusation comes down to this, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Cæsar, saying that he himself is Christ a King" (Luke 23:2). Jesus neither defends nor denies this claim, but simply refers His accusers back to Psalm 110 and their own witness: "Thou sayest it" (Luke 23:3). Though the verdict mocks Him, the truth of Jesus' kingship must be affirmed. He is robed; He is crowned with a crown of thorns, and His innocence is maintained by Pilate. The crowd is incensed with Pilate's claims of innocence and King Jesus sovereignly and willingly steps into the place of sinners as their substitute as Barabbas is released and Jesus is led away to His crucifixion. But even in the King's final hours, His kingship is proclaimed for the world to see and hear. The theme for this message is this: "The King's Final Hours." There are four things we need to see about His kingship in His final hours. First, His kingship is challenged. Second, His kingship is proclaimed. Third, His kingship is exercised. Fourth, His kingship is maintained.

*His kingship is challenged.* At almost every turn through His suffering and death, we find the kingship of Jesus challenged, but when it comes to the final hours of His life, this challenge is increased. All the forces of evil and darkness surround Jesus in His final hours and challenge His authority and power as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

In verses 32-33, we see His kingship challenged

through crucifixion: “And there were also two others, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.” Think about this for a moment. Jesus, the perfect and sinless God-man, is crucified between two criminals. He is counted as a criminal with them—the One who knew no sin was numbered with the transgressors (2 Cor. 5:21; Isa. 53:12). The One who gave the law of His kingdom is now brought under the curse of that law for the sake of His subjects! He is crucified on Calvary or Golgotha—a name meaning “skull”—outside the city walls. He is brought outside the camp (cf. Heb. 13:13). The King who has come from glory is led to the shame and suffering of Golgotha. His crucifixion implies being made a curse for sin. Paul writes in Galatians 3:13, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree” (cf. Deut. 21:23). His kingship is thoroughly challenged in the very act of His crucifixion.

His kingship is also challenged when the soldiers disrobe Him and begin to gamble for His clothing. In verse 34b we read, “And they parted his raiment and cast lots.” What is significant about all this? The King is stripped naked and shamed before the entire world, again showing how He has borne the curse of sin for us. He was openly shamed and His only possessions in this world were gambled away at the foot of the cross. His kingship and royalty are challenged through this shameful treatment. How sad that the soldiers walk away from the cross with only some pieces of clothing; that was far more important to them than the King whom they had crucified. They challenge His authority and power by walking away from

the cross with only a few earthly possessions. What will you walk away with from the cross?

His kingship is also challenged when the people around Him ridicule Jesus. The challenge becomes more overt as insults and words are hurled at Jesus as He hangs on the cross. In verse 35, we read, "And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, 'He saved others, let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.'" This challenge touches the heart of the claims upon which Jesus was tried. "If he be Christ." They call into question His claim that He is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. They mock Him, "He saved others, let him save himself." Let Him exercise His power and dominion if He is the Messiah. Let's see what He can do now that He's crucified on the cross. Oh, the depravity and darkness of the ruler's hearts. Jesus' words in Luke 19:42 ring true, "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now are they hid from thine eyes." Their hatred and depravity blind them to the glory, power, and grace of King Jesus.

The soldiers also mock Jesus by bringing vinegar to drink. Sour vinegar is no drink for a king. They accompany their mocking actions with words similar to the rulers, "If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself." They make fun of the fact that Jesus is King of the Jews. These are foreign soldiers who mock, not only Jesus, but also the Jews. What a farce this king is, they think. If He is really a king, where are His troops, where are those who are going to rescue Him? Where is His power to come down from the cross? The rulers, the soldiers, and now also one of the malefactors join the growing chorus of those who challenge Jesus' kingship. Listen to what he says in verse 39, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and

us.” Again the thief refers to Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Perhaps you think that all these challenges are so far removed from us today. We don’t challenge Christ’s kingship in this way, do we? But what about our sin? Does that not challenge the authority and power of Christ in our lives? When you sin, are you not saying that you will not have Christ rule over you as sovereign King? When you sin, do you not challenge the power of King Jesus by living in such a way that sin is exercising its control over you? When you sin, do you not challenge the grace of King Jesus, sinning so that grace might abound?

*His kingship proclaimed.* Through all this ridicule, hatred, and evil, there is one thing that cannot be denied that remains an unalterable truth—Jesus is King. He remains in authority even on the cross. He will not exercise His power for His own benefit, but He will exercise His power by remaining on the cross, proving the very thing that His rabid enemies thought they were disproving. He is the King who brings salvation. That is obvious as His kingship is inevitably proclaimed to the world. It is proclaimed on three levels.

First, the rulers, the soldiers, and the malefactor proclaim it perversely. Though they ridiculed Jesus, they were speaking the truth. Even the mouths of these sinful men and women proclaimed the truth that Jesus is King. If the crowd at the triumphal entry would be silent, the stones would shout out the truth that Jesus is King (Luke 19:40). Well, here it’s not stones, but the very enemies of Christ speak the truth of His kingship. What they deny in their hearts and minds and what comes out of their mouths still witnesses to the fact that Jesus is King. Nothing can change that; that is why the unregenerate are so opposed to Jesus as King. No matter how they might try, they cannot escape the truth that stares them

in the face: Jesus is King. Those who will not kiss Him, He will laugh to scorn and hold in contempt (Ps. 2:4). Will that be said of you if you are unregenerate, violently opposed to Christ—perhaps not overtly, but in your heart and life? Will your scorn and contempt be met with the derision and contempt of the One who even now sits in heaven as universal King? What a warning if you are proclaiming the kingship of Christ perversely, knowing the truth and yet denying it with every fiber of your being. Know that nothing will change the fact that Jesus is King.

The rulers, soldiers, and malefactors are not the only ones to proclaim Jesus' kingship perversely. Notice also what Pilate does through all this. In verse 38 we read, "And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, **THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.**" Other gospel writers give other details telling us this was Pilate's doing. Others show that this sign also identified who this King was, "JESUS OF NAZARETH." Placing this placard over the head of a criminal was common practice. The placard would identify the criminal along with their crime. Jesus is identified as the one who came from Nazareth. The accusation against Him is that He is the King of the Jews. In John's gospel, this did not sit well with the rulers and they wanted this placard changed to reflect that it was Jesus who claimed this. But Pilate's inscription and his firmness that it remain as he had written it reflect the fact that Jesus' kingship cannot be denied. It is a glorious fact that is proclaimed universally for all the world to see and hear, "This IS the King of the Jews!" It was written in the three most widely spoken languages for that day: Greek, Latin, and Hebrew/Aramaic. Everyone who came to Jerusalem that day would see the kingship of Christ universally proclaimed in the languages of the great empires and the language of the Jews. It would serve as a condemnation

for the Jews, “He came unto his own and his own received him not” (John 1:11). But it also serves to announce to the world that there is no salvation outside of King Jesus. That is the significance of this placard. What an encouragement for us as we engage the world in evangelism, as we speak to others about Christ. He is King. He is powerful. He is gracious. His salvation extends to the farthest reaches of the world. That is the truth which condemns and warns, but also saves.

But was all this lost that day on those gathered at the foot of the cross? Did no one rightfully acknowledge Jesus as King? No, there was one who proclaimed Jesus as King personally: the other thief on the cross next to Jesus. He has been silent until now, but he has been seeing things for the first time that he’s never seen before. The Holy Spirit opens his eyes even as he hangs there under judgment and fear of death for the crimes that he’s committed. He gloriously acknowledges Jesus as King. He proclaims that he has earned the judgment that he is under now, the meanwhile maintaining Jesus’ innocence. In verse 40b–41, he says to the other thief, “Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.” But then he turns to Jesus and pleads with Him, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” He comes into the throne room of Jesus seeking mercy. His eyes are opened in contrast to the blindness of the others to the kingly authority and power and grace of King Jesus. He addresses Him as Lord, as Sovereign. He acknowledges that Jesus has a kingdom that is not of this world. In the utter humiliation of Jesus, the thief saw this truth of His kingship and saw what he so desperately needed—entrance into the kingdom of heaven. In the supposed

weakness of Jesus in these moments, the thief saw the glorious reality of the power of King Jesus to save.

Paul calls the cross a stumbling block because of this fact. It displays weakness to the unregenerate heart, and yet what the thief witnessed and believed was anything but weakness. To him, Jesus on the cross became the power of God. This weakness of God was far more powerful than the strength of men. What do you see in this crucified King? Is He your salvation? Are you able, by grace, to see through the weakness and humiliation of Christ and see the One who has conquered sin, hell, and death? Is entrance into His kingdom your priority as you see the sentence of death you are under because of sin? Have your eyes been opened to see King Jesus? Do you personally proclaim Christ as King in your life? Does He reign over every aspect of your life?

*His kingship exercised.* Even in the midst of His greatest weakness and humiliation—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual distress—Jesus continues to exercise His kingship. He does so not for Himself, but for sinners around Him, His enemies. He prays in verse 34, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Does Jesus really mean these words? Is He really praying that those who were transgressing against Him so grossly should be forgiven? Yes; if He was praying anything else, what hope would there be of salvation? If Christ does not intercede for sinners even now, what hope do you or I have for salvation? Then both the worst and least sinner would be condemned to hell. Jesus exercises His mediatorial kingship in praying for His enemies. He not only prays for them, He prays that their sins would be forgiven. “Do not remit their sins to their charge.” It is staggering to the mind and soul to consider that the Savior is praying for sinners even as He dies for sinners. And is this prayer answered? Yes, indeed it is. At Pentecost, we find Peter

preaching to the crowds and three thousand are convicted and converted—even those who had crucified the King of glory. In Acts 3:17, after Peter and John heal the lame man at the Gate Beautiful, Peter is preaching again, pointing out the sin of the people in crucifying Jesus—and what does he say there? “And now brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.” Jesus prays effectively for those who crucified Him with wicked hands. He fulfills the Scriptures again as He intercedes, “He was numbered with the transgressors, and he bare the sin of many, and he made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12).

The good news is that Jesus not only exercised His mediatorial kingship then, but He continues to intercede for sinners even now—for those who sin willfully and those who sin in ignorance. What a glorious King we serve, who in the moment of His greatest weakness and facing death is praying for sinners like you and me. Is that not humbling? Is that not convicting? Does this sight of Christ not draw you to Him broken for your sin, seeking His lordship over you like the thief on the cross?

We see His kingship exercised as He intercedes for His enemies, but we see it again in His granting of a royal pardon to the thief who petitions Him. In verse 42, the thief petitions the King for mercy: “Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” And, in verse 43, we read Jesus’ response: “Verily, I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Jesus undergirds this royal pardon with an oath—“verily, truly.” He speaks sovereignly as King—“I say unto thee.” He speaks assuredly as King. There is no reason to doubt the King’s word, “Today, thou shalt be.” He speaks possessively as King, taking to Himself another subject from the kingdom of darkness, literally plucked from death and destruction, “You shall be

with me.” He opens the door of the kingdom to receive sinners; the thief is ushered into Paradise that very same day.

He grants this pardon to the thief on the cross, but this is the pardon He grants to all those who petition Him for mercy. Believers, this is the pardon you have received from King Jesus because of His work on the cross. “Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Remind yourself of the great cost of this pardon. It was the King’s own death! Remind yourself of your duty now as a result of this pardon, and live to His glory and honor. Here is pardon set forth for those who are under condemnation and conviction. Find relief in King Jesus. Your and my sin nailed Him to the cross, but see His mercy even from that shameful cross. He exercises His kingship for sinners like you and me. What a King!

*His kingship maintained.* Jesus’ kingship is maintained even in the midst of His deepest humiliation and suffering. He is no martyr who dies passively; as the humiliated and suffering King, He goes willingly and in firm control of His own life. This is also seen in the moments and final act of His death. As the King of creation hung in humiliation and forsakenness, even His creation retreats from the awful specter of death, destruction, and judgment. Thick darkness descends as the fury of the wrath of God against sin is poured out upon Christ, “There was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour” (Luke 23:44). The sun is obscured, and in the midst of this heavy darkness and suffering, the King in His glory is never diminished. Rather, as the King of heaven and earth, He remains in control of His life.

Even in the hour of His death, the significance and power of His death are not lost. As the King lays His life down on the altar for a sin offering, the offering is made, the blood of atonement is shed—and what do we read? In verse 45b, “And the veil of the temple was rent in the

midst.” The Holy of holies is exposed; the King is in His Temple! The Holy of holies where the train of the LORD of hosts filled the temple in Isaiah’s vision is opened. The King rends open the way into the royal, holy, and august presence of God for offenders and rebels. The kingly High Priest carries in the blood of atonement, sprinkling it on the mercy seat. Through the irresistible power of that blood, He draws those from obscurity and banishment of sin into His royal court. In His holy presence, He raises up those who confess to be dead dogs (2 Sam. 9).

His kingship is maintained so that you and I may enter into the Holy of holies. O blessed thought, that the way of salvation has been opened! Sinners can come into the throne room of the Most High God. In His sovereign and almighty power, Jesus opens up the entrance to God. He is the conquering King over sin, hell, and death.

Finally, He maintains His kingship in laying down His life. The life ebbs out of Jesus as the excruciating pain courses through His body and the wrath of His Father presses down upon Him in wave after wave. The King is spent and yet still firmly in control even to the very last breath He takes. We see that when He cries with a loud voice and says, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). His life is not taken from Him, but He gives it to His Father. This is the final act of His kingship on this side of death—He sovereignly places His life in His Father’s hands. And then we read in verse 46b, “And having said thus, he gave up the ghost.” Again, Jesus *gave up* the ghost. He breathed out His last, speaking to His own words of John 10:18, “No man taketh it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again.” Jesus maintains His kingship in death.

Through all this, He proclaims that He is King of heaven and earth. He rules victoriously over death,

anticipating His resurrection. He rules victoriously over your sin, child of God, because of His death. He rules victoriously over the tempter, over your remaining sinful flesh. Such suffering and yet such glory veiled in that suffering! This is what pertains to your peace. Do you see Him by faith? Do you wonder at it? Are you bowing before King Jesus? Amen.

# Introducing the Book of Revelation

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Psalter: 50

Scripture: Revelation 1:1–9

Psalter: 368

Sermon Text: Revelation 1:1–3

Psalter: 411

Psalter: 134

*The Revelation of Saint John the Divine*, the last book of the Bible, is sometimes referred to by its Greek name as *The Apocalypse*. The word *apocalypse* repeatedly appears in various forms of social media today. Many people describe the times in which we live as *apocalyptic*, saying these days are the end times. Even unbelievers talk—albeit flippantly—about the end of the world. Politicians frequently discuss the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust if rogue nations such as Iran and North Korea acquire nuclear capability. We suspect that such nations might easily bomb Israel or even the United States in the near future, which could cause the final breakdown of society—indeed, of the world.

People inside and outside the church are talking about eschatology, or, the doctrine of the last things. Even unbelievers are using language and imagery from the Bible, specifically from the Book of Revelation. Scientists and politicians and world leaders are quite at home talking about Armageddon and the end times.

What will happen to the United States, and by extension, to the world? Will our children and grandchildren continue to enjoy the freedoms and pleasures of peace that

we know today? Young people wonder if they will live long enough to marry and have children before Christ returns.

To address such concerns, we can turn to no better source than the Bible, specifically to Revelation. I must confess that I approached this series of studies on Revelation with considerable trepidation. I had wanted to take on this task for nearly two decades, but did not dare to do so because of the difficulty of correctly interpreting several chapters in the book. Yet, the importance of this book and a growing internal urge to attempt this task with God's help have brought me to a point where I can no longer hold back. I hope that you and I may approach this book with a sense of awe and wonder. Pray that God will give us what we need to explore this book biblically, doctrinally, experientially, and practically in an accurate and edifying way so that we all may be blessed by the Holy Spirit and bring God the glory due to His name.

We will begin by considering the first three verses of Revelation 1:

*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

These verses are the title page and foreword for Revelation. They contain all you would expect to find at the beginning of a book. The *title* is *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. The *contents* of the book are everything that John saw and attested of this revelation, including things that would shortly come to pass. The *author* of the book is the apostle John. John doesn't name himself as author, but he assumes that everyone would know he is the

apostle John. There must have been hundreds of people named John in the churches of that time, but referring to himself as “John the servant of Christ” was sufficient to identify himself as the beloved disciple and apostle who wrote the Gospel of John and the three epistles of John found in the New Testament today

These verses also give us a foreword to the book, offering details about the agencies and forces that helped John write the book. As revelation, this book is a prophecy that came from God through Christ. It was given by an angel to John and then delivered to the churches. Furthermore, the apostle commends the reading of this book, promising a blessing to those who read it, and exhorts those who hear it read to observe and safeguard what they hear. To summarize, these verses offer us (1) the title and contents of Revelation; (2) the manner in which the contents of this book were communicated; and (3) words of commendation from John to those who read and hear it. Let us use those divisions to help us look at the opening verses of the Bible’s last book.

### **The Title and Contents of Revelation**

Christians are often divided about the Book of Revelation. Many ignore the book altogether, except for some well-known texts found in the letters to the seven churches of Asia. Some texts here and there in the book are often preached at funerals. Some Christians ignore the Book of Revelation because of its unfamiliar context and its extraordinary imagery. A sea of glass, a lake of fire; six-winged beasts full of eyes before and behind; dragons, scorpions and serpents; vials of wrath, stars falling to earth, and a bottomless pit—such things are the stuff of myths and legends. The symbolism is foreign to most of us and difficult to interpret. Many people think Revelation is so dreamlike and confusing that it cannot really be understood.

At the other extreme are those Christians who are obsessed with the book and read it more than any other part of Scripture. They say the book holds the answers to all our questions and concerns regarding the distant past, the upheavals of our times, and the shape of future events.

Happily, there is a way to understand Revelation that falls between these two extremes, hinted at in the title of the book. The contents of the book are summarized as *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. The word for *revelation* in Greek is *apocalypse*, which literally means an uncovering or unveiling of something that was previously hidden or kept secret. Thus, this book is an unveiling or uncovering of Jesus Christ.

Revelation was never meant to be an obscure or closed book. It was not meant to be enigmatic. It was written to be read and understood. You may have read this book in times past without attempting to understand it. You were confused by the book's imagery and symbolism and put off by the many conflicting interpretations people have given to that imagery. You became so frustrated that you gave up trying to understand the book. That is a pity, because this book was meant to be understood. The very title suggests that we can and should try to understand what is written in this book.

We admit there are many strange things in the Book of Revelation. Perhaps we should begin our study by imagining ourselves as missionaries who are about to go out to a strange land. One of the first things we do to prepare for that mission is to go to orientation school. There we learn *how the language works* in this new country. People who have never learned a second language are often astonished to be told that not every language works the same way or in the same order as the English language. So we need to approach the language of the Book of Revelation as a new language that must be mastered.

Second, we must learn *the culture* of this new country. We need to understand that what we do may convey a different meaning to people in a foreign culture. Only when we know a culture can we begin to grasp what dress, habits, gestures, and other body language mean in that setting. In some cultures you may present a gift with one hand, but in other cultures you must use both hands or you will insult the receiver. You might say, “I am not insulting you,” but your actions will speak louder than your words. Some of us give up and say, “I’m not going to change my ways to suit those people. I want to do things my way.” If we do that, we will never understand a new culture or be comfortable living with the people who belong to it.

In that light, how can we begin to understand the language and culture of Revelation? First, we must view the content of this book as the “Revelation of *Jesus Christ*,” not merely as the “Revelation of *St. John the Divine*,” as the title in our English Bible puts it. This title simply implies that John was the human instrument who recorded the prophecy and that he was also instrumental in delivering it to the churches. John himself recognizes that his book is the revelation of Jesus Christ given to him as Christ’s servant.

This vision is about Jesus Christ, not the pope, Hitler, Napoleon, Saddam Hussein, or any other person in world history. It has much to say about world history and tells us much about the motives and methods of world leaders, but it is primarily focused on Jesus Christ and His further revelation of Himself to His church. Because Revelation is not primarily about world events or world personalities, we must take care not to read them into the book; we are rather to look at them in the light of the book. We may then understand what goes on in our world according to principles we find in the Book of Revelation, as it discloses

who Jesus Christ is and what He is doing in the world, and what He will do to bring all things to an end. So, the Book of Revelation is first of all a book about Christ.

Let me put it this way: *the Bible was not written to satisfy the hunger of the human mind for knowledge of future events*. Many Christians use the Book of Revelation as a kind of horoscope to predict the future. They might as well read the stars. The Bible is not a horoscope; it is a revelation of Jesus Christ. It is to be understood rationally, spiritually, and practically—not superstitiously or speculatively. Indeed, reading Revelation as a horoscope is not only useless but downright sinful because all such efforts are forbidden in Scripture (Deut. 18:9–14). The technical term for this abuse of Scripture is *bibliomancy*, or, using the Bible as a literary divining rod or Ouija board.

Jesus said, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power” (Acts 1:7). Instead, walking by faith, we live one day at a time, knowing that Jesus is Lord, committing the keeping of our souls to a faithful Creator, and casting all our cares upon Him. We must not attempt to pry into the future, for God alone holds the key to it. If He were to hand over that key to us, we would be sorry. So we are not to interpret Revelation speculatively or superstitiously. We must understand the book in terms of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it is a revelation of Him.

Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, is seated on the throne of heaven. He is the theme of this book, as the One revealed. But He is also the Revealer, the author of the book. Verse 1 says this book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.” “Things which must shortly come to pass” can also be translated as “things which must soon begin to happen.” This phrase is the key to understanding the

Book of Revelation: Jesus Christ wants to show us things that must shortly come to pass.

Some interpreters say these words refer to the immediate historical context of the apostle John, who lived in the first century after Christ. They say Revelation refers to events of that time, such as the persecution of Christians under Domitian, who ruled as Emperor of Rome from AD 81 to AD 96. At that time, it was a capital offense for a person to be a Christian. Following this view, everything in Revelation that would shortly happen should thus be understood in that specific historical context.

Others view these words differently. They say the things that “must shortly come to pass” refer to events and people that extend long into the future. They think that many of these events will occur during the Millennium or thousand-year period prior to the second coming of the Lord.

Still others believe “things which must shortly come to pass” refers to what will happen in all of church history—from the first advent of Christ to His second coming. Let me explain that in more detail here at the risk of being technical. With a book like Revelation, you must be technical. We will be studying this book for a long time, so from the beginning we must lay a solid foundation that will help us know exactly what we are doing, where we are going, and how we should best interpret this book.

Let me explain it to you this way: in church history, five predominant ways of interpreting Revelation have emerged. While these approaches have some substantial overlap at points, they still represent five distinct views of the message and themes of Revelation. Let us summarize those approaches.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For a succinct summary of these five views, see Cornelis P. Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” *Tabletalk* 36, no. 1 (Jan. 2012):10–13.

First is the *preterist* approach. This views Revelation wholly in terms of the circumstances that transpired in John's day prior to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, or in the early Christian centuries leading up to the destruction of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, without any reference to future events. The word *preterist* is derived from the Latin word *praetertum*, meaning "that which is past." Preterists believe that any interpretation of Revelation must be confined to the historic past rather than projected into the future. This view interprets Revelation's opening words, "things which must shortly come to pass," as events that happened in John's own time. Preterists argue that, just as the seven churches of Asia were real first century churches to which letters were addressed, so the entire Book of Revelation contains only things that came to pass in John's day or shortly thereafter, with the exception of chapters 21-22, which clearly refer to the time of the new heaven and new earth. The strength of this approach is that it strongly affirms the operative framework of the book as "things which must shortly come to pass." Its weakness is that Revelation then has little to say to the church today in the midst of her struggles.

Second is the *historicist* approach to Revelation. This view, which was held by most sixteenth century Reformers, sees the Book of Revelation as a symbolic representation of the panorama of church history, from the first coming of Christ to His second advent at the end of the world. A historicist would say that the seven churches of Asia do not refer to seven particular churches in Asia Minor, but to seven ages of church history. They would then conclude that today we live in the age of Laodicea, or the era of the lukewarm church. They thus view Revelation as a chart of church history, offering a series of historical pictures moving from Christ's first

coming to the end of the present age. In Revelation 13, the beast rising from the sea is the rise of Islam in the seventh century, while Revelation 17, several centuries further along, refers to the Roman Catholic Church and rise of the papacy. The strength of this approach is that it embraces all of church history; its weakness is that it too easily assumes that Revelation prophesies a linear movement through church history with no repetition of events seen from different points of view.

Third is the *futurist* approach to Revelation. This was the most popular view of evangelicals at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially premillennial dispensationalists, but it has lost ground in recent decades. The futurist believes that the visions of Revelation 4–22 refer to events that are still future, that will transpire immediately prior to and along with Christ's second coming at the end of history, which will then usher in the millennial age. Most futurists are premillennial, who believe that Christ's return will precede the millennial age. The problem with this view is that it reads the book as almost entirely without reference to the needs and struggles of the churches to which John first sent this book. It also affords little consolation for the suffering church at any other point in church history, including today, because it exclusively focuses on events surrounding Christ's second coming. The strength of this view is that it emphasizes the ultimate victory of Christ and His elect over the world at His second coming.

Fourth is the *idealist* approach, sometimes called the *poetic* or *inspirational* approach. This position is sometimes called *iterism*, from the Latin verb *itero* meaning "to repeat," because such interpreters hold that the events described in Revelation are repeated from time to time in the experience of the church from age to age. This approach teaches that Revelation is relevant for

everyone, since it deals with principles and symbols that are always valid in our personal history and experience. The idealist scarcely wrestles with the problem of chronology in Revelation, preferring to see this book and its symbolism as a tract written for persecuted Christians of any period. The symbolism is interpreted loosely, in a very general way, to give comfort and encouragement to persecuted Christians. The strength of this approach is its applicability to the church of all ages; its weakness is that it is difficult to affirm this view exegetically, based on the description, “things which must shortly come to pass” (1:1).

Finally, the *eclectic* approach embraces the apparent strengths and rejects the apparent weaknesses of the other four approaches. This approach acknowledges that there are elements of truth in all of these approaches. Personally, I believe this is the best and safest approach to take. Though there are serious problems with each of these approaches, we can also glean something from each. Cornel Venema explains this approach well:

Preterism rightly insists that the visions of Revelation reflect events and circumstances contemporaneous with its writing or the period immediately thereafter. But preterism fails to adequately account for the way Revelation also reveals events and circumstances that characterize the struggles of the church throughout the entire inter-advental age. Futurism partially solves the problem of preterism by emphasizing the way the visions of Revelation portray events that will take place shortly before the end of history. But in doing so, futurism exaggerates the future orientation of the book. As for historicism, although the events portrayed in the vision of Revelation have occurred in the past or may reoccur at various points in history, these events are not limited to a particular time in the past, present, or even future.

The obvious strength of eclecticism is its ability to incorporate the primary emphasis of the other

approaches without the one-sidedness that often characterizes alternative views. The weakness of the approach may be its tendency to ascribe different meanings to the same vision.<sup>2</sup>

In accord with many Reformed theologians, I propose an eclectic approach that accents the idealist or iterist approach. This approach has also been called the *parallel* or *cyclical* view of Revelation. Imagine a man with a video camera who is taking pictures of the congregation. He pans over the people, starting on one side of the church and going all around. Then he goes up into the gallery and does the same thing. Then he goes to the back, comes from behind, and pans over everyone again. That is what we see in Revelation. The book offers us views of the entire history of the church, but seen from different vantage points.

I believe there are seven parallel sections in Revelation. All told, the Book of Revelation offers different views of the church in history, as we will see as we make our way through the book's seven parallel sections. With this parallel or cyclical view of the book, we will see how each section spans the entire dispensation of the gospel from the first coming of Christ two thousand years ago, down to His coming again at the last day.

The great theme of Revelation is the victory of Christ and His church over the old serpent and his helpers and all the kingdoms of this world. We will track that theme through each of the seven sections and see how this book accomplishes its purpose: to inspire, comfort, and encourage God's people in the church in every era to press on in the face of persecution and amidst all our struggles, knowing we are on the winning side in this anti-Christian world. I believe this is the right way to interpret the

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2. Venema, "Interpreting Revelation," 13.

Book of Revelation. It puts Christian warfare into proper perspective. God pulls back the curtains to offer us a glimpse behind the events we read and hear about in the news media, or learn about in history, so we can see what unseen but powerful forces are shaping reality in the world around us. Such insights from Revelation will help us fight the good fight of faith and endure to the end. I hope this revelation of Jesus Christ will strengthen our faith, and afford us greater hope and comfort as we progress through this study of the Book of Revelation.

We will look at the book's seven parallel sections, each dealing with the entire present age or dispensation, from the first to the second coming of Christ. We will divide it like this:

- first section, chapters 1–3;
- second, chapters 4–7;
- third, chapters 8–11;
- fourth, chapters 12–14;
- fifth, chapters 15–16,
- sixth, chapters 17–19; and
- seventh, chapters 20–22.

In summary, the Book of Revelation is about Jesus Christ and His victory over the powers of evil. It was written to offer hope to Christians in times of difficulty and darkness and to warn others of judgment to come because of their persistent unbelief and impenitence. You might say the personal themes of Revelation are (1) Christ's revelations of His glorious victory over evil, (2) hope for believers in the midst of persecution, and (3) warnings to unbelievers who are fast approaching Judgment Day. Remember that each of these themes applies to you personally, but do not approach Revelation as if you were solving a difficult puzzle. Do what John did in Revelation 1:17: fall at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. If studying Revelation doesn't

make you bow before the Lord Jesus Christ in wonder, adoration, and joy, then somewhere along the way you have missed the point of the whole book.

### **The Communication of Revelation**

Consider the beauty of the opening verses of the Book of Revelation:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.

Revelation has been communicated to us in four ways that we must keep in mind to properly understand this book. First, it comes to us *from God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. It was delivered by an angel to the apostle John so that we might all benefit from it. It comes to us as an apostolic epistle (1:4), handed from one person to another, from church to church, and from age to age. When you want to send a valuable item through the mail, you don't just stuff it in a mail slot and hope for the best. You send it by registered mail to ensure that the item is received and signed for by the person it is addressed to. Revelation has come to us as a letter registered by God for believers in the church throughout history.

The last verse of the book is much like the ending of many other epistles in the New Testament: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (Rev. 22:21). This benediction implies that, although this epistle was sent to the churches in Asia Minor in the first century, it has profound implications for all Christians and for

the church everywhere and in all times—even in our present century.

Second, this book comes to us as an *apocalypse*. It must therefore not be read literally throughout. As a specimen of apocalyptic literature, it is filled with imagery, symbolism, and other kinds of figurative language. To read it all literally is a basic error in interpretation, a failure to do justice to the literary character of the book.

Most of us understand this when we read a book. Fiction has different rules than non-fiction: one allows for imaginary people, places, and things, while the other is based on reality. Allegorical literature must be read allegorically; you cannot read Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as you would read Calvin's *Institutes*. Thus, it is crucial to understand that the Book of Revelation cannot be interpreted as mere factual data. Most books in Scripture can be accepted at face value unless there is a special reason for not doing so. But Revelation was not meant to be read that way. If you read it that way, you end up with things that are simply impossible. You must see it as a book that uses imaginative symbolism to help you see more clearly the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, for example, numbers in this book are symbolic rather than mathematical. Colors are symbolic. So are animals, many of which we have never seen. So are patterns that keep on repeating.

Revelation draws us into a world that is full of symbols that leave us with profound impressions. As we examine the symbols in this book and see what they mean, we will begin to understand the message of this book. Revelation is a kind of picture book of the glory of Jesus Christ. It is, as John says, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. What you and I are meant to see in this book is not a book of puzzles but a catalogue of paintings depicting the glory of our Lord and Savior.

Third, this book is communicated as *a divine vision*. Ordinarily Scripture speaks of words and hearing. But Revelation uses the language of seeing and perceiving. In this revelation Christ is not just *speaking* to His servants but *showing* them things that must soon take place. Indeed, as you read through Revelation, you will find the recurring expression, “I saw.” In most of the Bible the recurring expression is, “Hear the Word of God.” But Revelation invites us to *see* the Word of God. John is offering us these views of the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, “I saw this,” and “I saw that.” As he presents one image after another, the scenario builds in scope and depth until at the very end of the book what we see finally begins to make sense.

Finally, this book is communicated as *prophecy*. John says in verse 3, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy.” We usually understand a prophecy as something that foretells the future. But in the Bible most prophecy does not speak about the future as much as it applies the Word of God to the present situation. There may be indications about the future, but by and large prophecy is given so that we may know how to live for God’s glory in the present.

Revelation 1:1 says God gave this revelation to Christ “to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.” At the end of verse 3, God says, “Keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” So the book writes about things that must “shortly come to pass...for the time is at hand.” So we have things that will happen *soon* and events that are *near*, but that is not so much for us as it is for John and his companions. The language here echoes Daniel 2, in which Daniel interprets an astonishing vision of God’s kingdom, to be fulfilled “in the latter days” (2:28), or at the beginning of the *last days*. Now John is shown that those promises have come to fruition because of the work of Jesus Christ,

and the time is short. As the Lord Jesus often declared, “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:14). So this revelation of Jesus Christ is a revelation for Christians living in the last days.

When people ask me if I think we’re living in the last days, I answer, “Of course we are living in the last days, but we have been living in the last days from the Bible’s point of view for the last two thousand years.” The New Testament says the onset of the last days was marked by Christ’s pouring out His Spirit on the church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17). That is when Christ inaugurated His kingdom, which is now spreading to the ends of the earth. The last days include the days in which we are living. Thus, John is being told, “You stand at the beginning of the days when the kingdom of Jesus Christ will extend to the ends of the earth.” That is what Revelation is all about. It is communicated to us as a letter from God, an apostolic epistle, an apocalypse, a divine vision, and as a prophecy.

### **The Commendation of Revelation**

In verse 3, the apostle John commends the book of Revelation to all who read it, or, hear it read. He says, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” We must remember that this book was sent out in times of controversy. Not everyone acknowledged the authority of John; thus, he could by no means be sure that everyone would receive this epistle with the due measure of faith, reverence, and submission. We must also remember that in those days, many in the church could not read. One of the duties of the minister of the Word was “to give attendance to reading” (1 Tim. 4:13), that is, the reading and exposition of Holy Scripture, so those who could not read could at least hear them read and expounded for their edification. John promises a bless-

ing to both faithful ministers who read and expound this book and also to those who hear it with faith and do what it teaches and commands. We may therefore conclude that we shall be blessed by doing the following things:

- *By reading and studying this book with faith, reverence, and godly fear, as the Word of God and the Word of Christ.* Repent of any past neglect of this part of Scripture. Embrace Revelation as a book God wants you to read and understand. Read it “with an high and reverent esteem...with a firm persuasion that [it is] the very word of God...with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in [it]; with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of [it]; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer” (Larger Catechism, Q. 157).
- *By being obedient to Christ.* John says in verse 3 that people are blessed who hear what Revelation says and “keep those things which are written therein.” Notice that God’s blessing is not pronounced upon those who own a copy of this precious book, nor upon those who only read it or have it read to them, nor upon those who specialize in debating the meaning of this prophecy. The blessing is pronounced upon those who “keep those things” written in it. We *keep* the words of this prophecy by cherishing them as the Word of God and by applying them to ourselves and to our lives in such a way that, as followers of Christ, we are looking forward to the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We want to live as He would have us live until He comes. Knowing that this world will pass away, we look forward to a city with a foundation whose builder and maker is

God (Heb. 11:10; 2 Peter 3:10–15), and we live as strangers and pilgrims in the earth.

So, Revelation calls us to be faithful, willing, obedient subjects of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Various parts of the Bible call us to different forms of obedience to Jesus' office-bearing ministry. The gospels primarily tell us about Jesus as a prophet—"He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt. 7:29)—and call us to respond to that teaching: "Take heed therefore how ye hear" (Luke 8:18). The epistles open up the work of Christ as high priest. He is the One who offered Himself as a complete sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God. And today, He continually makes intercession for us. We are to respond by presenting our "bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is [our] reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1). The Book of Revelation is primarily about Christ the king. Like Psalm 2, it calls on us and all mankind to "kiss the Son" in sweet submission, "lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little" (Ps. 2:12). But Christ also speaks in Revelation as prophet, intercedes as high priest, while He reigns as king. The Book of Revelation calls us to bow before Christ as prophet, priest, and king, and then to go out and be prophets, priests, and kings standing under His banner and ministering to a perishing world.

- *By being prepared for Christ's coming.* Verse 3 concludes: "for the time is at hand." The lesson embedded in these words for every person in every age of the Christian church is *be prepared to meet your King in righteousness and peace at all times.* We ignore or resist Christ's lordship to

our own peril. You may bend the knee to culture, gurus, Pharisees, libertines, false prophets and prophetesses, or other idols of the times, but know that the sure judgment of King Jesus will soon fall upon you and all others who live carelessly, or walk disorderly, and on every church that does not submit to Christ as Lord.

- *By overcoming through Christ.* The implication of verse 3 is that Christ has power to bless His people even in the midst of severe persecution, and they will be blessed in overcoming the world by faith in Him. Christ promises in Revelation 2:7, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” God’s overcoming grace and your overcoming faith will be a blessing to you, enabling you by faith to overcome the powers of evil at work in a wicked world. This blessing is sure because, as Peter declared at Pentecost, “God hath made that same Jesus... both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

The counterpart to this promise of blessing is the curse John pronounces at the end of Revelation: “Cursed is he that hears the words of this prophecy, and does not keep those things which are written herein: for the time is at hand.” Believers who read these words are promised blessings, but unbelievers are warned against the danger of despising and disregarding God’s warnings, for the end is near. “Behold, the judge standeth before the door” (James 5:9). Here, John specifically invokes the wrath of God, in the form of a deadly curse, upon those who deal lightly or deceitfully with these words, imposing on it ideas and words of their own choosing, or else discarding anything they disagree with or don’t understand.

Dear friend, examine yourself. Are you reading about Christ, being obedient to Christ, preparing to meet Christ, and overcoming sin through Christ? If you have not found blessing in Christ, you are ignoring Christ at your peril. You will be cursed forever if you do not repent of your sins and take refuge in the mercy of the Lord of glory. But, if you seek for blessing in the reading, hearing, and keeping of the words of this revelation of Jesus Christ, then you will be blessed indeed. Amen.