

The End

by Ray C. Stedman

Many weeks ago we began a survey of the Scriptures. We began learning the purpose of all of revelation – what its objective is. It is summed up for us in Ephesians 4:11-13:

And [Christ's] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; {Eph 4:11-13 RSV}

All that God has done, the entire focus of the revelation of Scripture, all that is contained in the pages of the Bible, is aimed at one objective – maturing each one of us, making each of us an instrument of God's grace, an expression of the divine life, so that in us the fullness of God is at work, in order that each of us becomes a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself. God will never rest content until this is true. And all of the revelation that is given to us is necessary to accomplish this.

We have seen also how both the New Testament and the Old Testament make their unique contributions to this purpose. The Old Testament is a book of preparation. As we read its pages we find ourselves reacting in ways similar to these Old Testament men and women. Our hearts are prepared to feel the way they feel, to think the way they think. We see that they went through the same problems and faced the same difficulties that we do. The hunger of their hearts is the hunger of our hearts. The thirst of their souls is the thirst of our souls. All of this is designed to prepare us to receive the truth that the New Testament sets forth, which is the presentation of Jesus Christ – prepara-

tion in the Old Testament, presentation in the New Testament.

The Old Testament accomplishes its purpose of preparation in four ways, in its four major divisions.

- First of all, the five books of Moses set forth the pattern of God's working. If you want to know what God is going to do next in your life, I suggest you read those five books, for he invariably follows this pattern in the life of every single individual.
- In the historical books we find the perils of the pathway set before us. There is no peril we will face that is not met, and not answered, in this part of the Old Testament.
- The poetical books express the protests of the human heart – the cry of the spirit, the yearning of the soul, and the groan of the body. And faith, hope and love are set forth.
- In the books of the prophets we have the promises of God – what God offers to be and to do in our lives.

The New Testament sets forth the realization of Christ:

- In the Gospels and the book of Acts we have the presentation of what Jesus was, who he was, why he came, what program he followed, the process of living that was his.
- In the epistles, divided into three groups, Christ is explained for us:

- The first group is headed by the book of Romans. Nobody has any possibility of maturing as a Christian until he has begun to grasp what these books set forth: “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” the great secret of God’s operation in human beings, the lost secret of humanity.
- The second group, headed by the epistle to the Ephesians, sets forth “you in Christ,” the story of a new body formed by the Holy Spirit – the sharing of life by men and women of all ages, in all the nations of earth, throughout the entire course of human history since our Lord’s first coming – the body of Christ.
- Then, in our most recent study, we looked at the word which makes all this mighty truth available to us: *faith*, in the third group, headed by the book of Hebrews.

This brings us to the book of Revelation, the great consummation of Scripture, the book in which all the threads of doctrine which have been running through the Bible come together.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee says that this book is like a great Union Station in which all the trains terminate. As you stand in Union Station you can recognize where the train has come from by the people who alight. If they get off with overcoats and heavy clothing on, you know the train has come from the north. If people get off the train with ten-gallon hats and boots on, and talk with a slow drawl, you know the train is from Texas. If they get off with smiles on their faces, and they are happy, radiant, lovely people, you know they are from California! As we read the book of Revelation we can detect where all the trains of doctrine originate.

The story of sin finds its solution in Revelation. The agony of the human heart, in its groping after a God it does not want, and yet cannot live without, finds its explanation and its ultimate consummation in Revelation. This is a book that frightens many people. I have discovered that no book of the Bible is quite so fearsome to many as Revelation. Some people are literally afraid to read this book. To them it is like a chamber of horrors. They read of all those strange animals, remarkable visions, and

amazing beings which appear – the unusual, almost weird, personalities that occupy the pages of this book – and it becomes to them a sort of eschatological Disneyland where they are almost afraid to venture. They wonder what it is all about.

Because of this there are many who simply do not read this book. But if you read the first seven verses you will notice that this is the only book of the Bible which contains a promise of special blessing to those who read it; see Verse 3:

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, who keep what is written therein; for the time is near. {Rev 1:3 RSV}

Actually, I know of no book in the New Testament that lends itself more readily to a logical outline than the book of Revelation. It is not a difficult book to understand, once you grasp the key to it. We find the key right at the front door. Just pick it off the hook and use it!

In the opening chapter of the book, the Lord Jesus appears to John as he is in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, at the close of the 1st Century, and says to him, in Verse 8:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. {Rev 1:8 RSV}

Then he says to him, in Verse 19:

“Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.” {Rev 1:19 RSV}

There we find the key to the book:

- What John *sees* occupies the first chapter.
- *What is* occupies Chapters 2 and 3 – the letters to the seven churches.
- *What is to take place hereafter* occupies Chapter 4 through the rest of the book. It is a preview, in other words, of the course of human history from John’s day until now, dwelling especially upon the closing days of the age in which we live.

With that key, the book begins to fall into place.

The End

Many who are familiar with this prelude to the book are perhaps not aware that John wrote not only this prologue but also a postlude, an epilogue. He closes with a summary of its teachings. I want to turn to that, because we cannot take time to go through the entire book in detail. Instead we will use John's own summary of what he teaches, in order to help us understand something of the message of this book.

The message of Revelation ends with the vision of the city of God. The last thing John sees is a marvelous vision of the throne of God in the midst of the city, and the tree of life once again appearing in the garden, yielding its fruit. He closes with these words (Chapter 22, Verse 5):

And night shall be no more; they need no light or lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever. {Rev 22:5 RSV}

That is the story of man as it will end. Then John begins the epilogue, or postlude, and in it he highlights certain details summarizing what he has written. These are the last words of the Apostle John so far as we know. The last words of a man are always accorded special significance. We like to hear what a man says just before he slips over the river of death into the glory beyond. Quite unconsciously, a man's last words reflect the dominant passion of his heart, of his life.

It was said that the last words of P. T. Barnum, the great circus owner, were "How much was the take today?" – which is most indicative of what he lived for.

I heard of a restaurant owner whose dying words, gasped out just as he was slipping into the darkness, were: "Slice the ham thin!" This, of course, revealed what his dominant passion was.

When we come to John's last words recorded in this postlude, we discover that he is looking back over the book he has written, which was given to him by an angel who appeared to him. He is gathering up the great and pre-eminent theme of this book that had occupied his heart. The first thing he speaks of is found in Verses 6 through 9:

And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must

soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon."

Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

I John am he who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, "You must not do that I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." {Rev 22:6-9 RSV}

The speaker here is the angel that John mentions in Chapter 21, Verse 9, where he says:

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." {Rev 21:9 RSV}

That is the last vision of the book, but the angel stays on to explain a few things to John. In Verse 6 of Chapter 22, he states that he was sent by "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets." In Chapter 22, Verse 16, John reports that Jesus says:

**"I Jesus have sent my angel to you ..."
{Rev 22:16 RSV}**

In other words, Jesus is the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets. The great and pre-eminent theme of the book is this great fact: Jesus is God. The deity of Jesus Christ is the great truth which gradually grew in the mind of John as he followed Jesus and watched him and as he lay on his human breast and felt the beating of his human heart and the warmth of his human flesh and heard his human voice speaking those marvelous words which fell from his human lips. As he listened and watched and waited and meditated and thought, there slowly dawned on John the great conviction which he sets down in the opening of his Gospel, John 1:1:

In the beginning was the Word [Jesus] and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {John 1:1 RSV}

John has had this truth driven home to him over and over, and this is the great theme of the book of Revelation.

The book begins on that note. In Verse 8, Jesus says: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," i.e., the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the A to the Z. There is nothing on either side of him. He occupies the whole of everything. Then the book goes on to show how millions of angels gather in a mighty chorus singing, "Worthy is the Lamb ... to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" {cf, Rev 5:12} throughout the book. The first and pre-eminent theme is that in the hour of human darkness, when the most terrible forces are let loose upon the earth – in the hour when hope fades and faith grows cold and almost goes out – the great, dominant note sounded is that Jesus Christ is God.

As we often sing, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does his successive journeys run; His kingdom spread from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more."

John has this driven home to him in a most embarrassing manner in this book. He refers to it twice and is red-faced as he writes, I am sure. He says, in Chapter 22:

... And when I heard and saw ... [these things], I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; {Rev 22:8b RSV}

Now, he doesn't do that here. He is referring to what he did before, which is given to us in Chapter 19 as it occurred. In Verse 9 the angel said to John:

"Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God." {Rev 19:9b RSV}

Then John says (Verse 10):

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. {Rev 19:10 RSV}

Now, as John is looking back over his book and reading the pages he wrote, he writes down this episode again. With great shame and chagrin he records it: "I John am the one who saw these tre-

mendous things. I saw the Lamb enthroned in glory. And do you know what I did? I was so overwrought by what I saw that I fell down and worshipped an angel. And he had to rebuke me and correct me. He said that only One is worthy of worship: 'Worship God.'"

Someone has well said, "If Jesus Christ is not God, then heaven is going to be full of idolaters, because all the way through Revelation beings are making statements like 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,' and the worship of heaven and earth centers of Jesus Christ." Jesus of Nazareth is God.

Recently our high school young people had a very interesting visitor to their group – a young Moslem here as an exchange student from Egypt, a very personable and gracious young man who spoke about his faith. Among other things, he pointed out that they don't believe Jesus is God. They say Jesus is a prophet, like Mohammed and others, but nothing more. But that, of course, is a denial of the whole theme of Scripture, and certainly of the book of Revelation, for here it is unquestionably true that the whole created universe worships him.

So, the first great theme of this book is that Jesus Christ is the master of history.

Nikita Khrushchev said that history is on the side of the Communists. The Free World says, "No, history is on our side." Both are wrong. The book of Revelation says, "History is 'his story.'" That is the chief principle that John wants to emphasize in this book.

But there is a second great principle emphasized here, and John sets it forth in Chapter 22, Verses 10 through 15:

And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the beginning and the end."

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idola-

ters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood. {Rev 22:10-15 RSV}

The second great theme of this book is its revelation of reality, of things as they really are. All of us who are Christians know that we live in a bewildering and confusing world. We know there are forces at work in life which are deliberately designed to mislead us, to blind us to the truth, to teach us lies. The Lord Jesus put his finger on the source of it when he said of Satan (John 8:44b):

“He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” {John 8:44b RSV}

The world lies in the lap of the wicked one. The whole world is saturated with satanic philosophy, which is a lie, and it is very, very difficult for us, sometimes, to see that lie even as Christians. But the glorious thing about the book of Revelation is that it is a revealing of what is true and what is false – even though the true looks bad and the false looks attractive.

At the end of the book of Daniel, the Lord told him that his “words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end,” (Dan. 12:9b {RSV}). That is, “Don’t publish it yet, for the time is not yet at hand.” But when John finishes writing Revelation at the close of the 1st Century, he is told, “Do not seal of the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” {Rev 22:10b RSV}. That is, “These things are about to be fulfilled.” This is the book that sets forth the developing forces in the age of the Church, which will bring to pass the final, total collapse of human history and the return of Jesus Christ to planet Earth.

Let me point out what I mean. This book opens with the letters to the seven churches. These are wonderful letters. Every Christian should be thoroughly acquainted with them. And, in a most remarkable way, these seven letters gather together in brief compass a bird’s-eye view of the entire Church Age from beginning to end, from Pentecost to the second coming of Jesus Christ. They trace the development of ecclesiastical life from beginning to end. You and I will find our place in these letters.

Then, beginning with Chapter 4 and running on through to Chapter 22, Verse 5, the book focuses almost entirely upon the last seven-year period of this Church Age, in which all the threads of history are woven together and come to a conclusion. This is what occupies the major portion of the book.

Now, we need to know how things are going to end, even though we may not be directly involved in the end ourselves, because, as Paul tells us, the mystery of iniquity is already at work – even as it was back in his day – and it is this which will culminate in the life-and-death struggle of the last days. Therefore, we can recognize what is going on today only as we look beyond to learn how it ends. If we will evaluate the forces at work in human society today in the light of what Revelation teaches will be the end, we can tell whether they are good or evil, whether they are of God or of Satan, whether they are true or false. We will never know apart from this, because some of them look very good to us; but when we read the result in the book of Revelation, we see that they are very bad indeed. That is why this book is such a marvelous revelation of reality to us.

“Well,” someone says, “why does God stretch all this out for nineteen centuries or more?” The answer is in Verse 11:

“Let the evildoer still do evil, and let the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” {Rev 22:11 RSV}

Here is another instance – there are several of them in the Bible – where you have gathered up in very brief compass a statement of God’s procedure through human history, his historical method. It is to allow evil to run its course until its character becomes evident to all.

We used to have a saying up in Montana, “Give a bad man enough rope, and he will eventually hang himself.” In a sense, that is what God is doing in history.

When God spoke to Abraham about the land of promise, he said, “The iniquity of the Amorites who live in the land is not yet full; therefore you will have to wait awhile before you go in to take it,” {cf, Gen 15:16}. It is necessary for evil to run its course. And when it does, everyone sees that God’s judgment is right. That is why the history of these nineteen centuries has been the lifting of the

restraints of law and order on human life. And that, in turn, is why this Church Age grows more and more lawless as it nears its end. So long as law and government prevail, men are afraid to express themselves, of course. The reason why we behave, most of the time, is that we are afraid we'll get caught doing wrong. We behave because of pressures that are placed upon us. Human life is like that. But if we allow law and government to be lifted, the true character of human nature begins to display itself. This is what explains all the horrors of the book of Revelation. God is lifting the restraints, temporarily removing the bonds which have kept man in line, and allowing him to express himself. All the evil in human life flashes out in these terrible pictures in this book.

I know there are those who tell us that the world is getting better, in general, and that men are more tolerant, more understanding, and more sympathetic. Don't you believe it! If Jesus Christ of Nazareth returned to this planet Earth today, they would crucify him again – faster than they did in Jerusalem. You need only look at the outbreaks of violence on every hand today to see how true this is. Civilization is a very thin veneer indeed, and once the veneer of law and order is lifted temporarily, all the restrained violence of human evil breaks out.

Back in the 1930's, when Ethiopia was invaded by Italy, Emperor Haile Selassie had to leave the country. There was a four-day interval between the time his government left and the Italian armies came in. During those four days the citizens of Addis Ababa threw aside all restraints. Law and order disappeared. Some of the Sudan Interior missionaries who were there reported that it was a time of incredible horror, when bands of men would roam the city streets raping women, looting stores, doing anything they pleased. The mission compound was located four miles outside the city limits, but the fires ignited by these roving bands of unrestrained, lawless men illuminated the night skies to such an extent that the missionaries could read a newspaper by the light. Now, that is something of an explanation of the horrors of this book.

So, as restraint is gradually lifted, truth is made manifest. And at the return of Jesus Christ it will be crystal clear that the entire world is divided into two classes – those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, and therefore “have the right to the tree of

life” and to “enter the city by the gates”; and those who have rejected or refused Christ and thus remain exactly what they were: “dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters and liars.”

There is a third great principle emphasized in Revelation. It is found in Verses 16 through 21 of Chapter 22:

“I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.”

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price. I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen. {Rev 22:16-21 RSV}

The third great theme of this book is the present offer of grace. Did you notice what Verse 16 says? “I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches.” This book was not written for the end of this Church Age. It is written for today, for the present hour. It is for the churches, in order that the Church may know what its message to the world is. What is that message? It is one word – “Come.”

As we see the world moving with frightening rapidity toward the great chasm of history that this book describes, what shall be the hope to which the Church clings in this gathering darkness? Well, it is Christ as “the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.” “The root and the offspring of David” means that Jesus was the son of David, both as man and king. That is what David was – a man and a king. That is what Christ is – the man who is the King of all. And, as the morning star appears in the darkest hour of the night, before the sunrise, Jesus is the anchor of those who are living in the darkness of this world. We are to

The End

hold up this One to a perishing world with the simple message, "Come." Just "Come" – that is all.

The message of the Church is not to try to get the world to redistribute its wealth, or to solve its racial problems, or to end the nuclear arms race. Its message to the world is just one word – "Come." You will find in Jesus all that you need, whatever it may be. And this encompasses the total message of the Scriptures. That one word can be enlarged to include all the mighty, deep things of God, all the great revelation of the Scriptures. But it always comes to that one focus. All we really have to say to men and women today is this: "Come – Come to Jesus just as you are, without any attempt to correct or change yourself. He can satisfy. He can meet your need. If you are thirsting and hungering, there is One who can meet that need. If you are satisfied with yourself, your case is hopeless. But if you are thirsty – come!"

This invitation is so simple that even Christians are offended by it, and so there are two red lights hung on either side of it here. John says: "Do not add to it – and do not take away from it." That is: "Don't add any legalistic conditions to it; don't say that somebody has to be baptized, or confirmed, or simonized, or pasteurized, or anything else. And don't make any devious subtractions from it; don't make it less than it is. Just say, 'Come.'"

So, those are the great emphases of Revelation – the preeminence of Jesus Christ, the revelation of reality, and the present offer of grace. As you read the book you will see these three emphases repeated again and again.

Notice that each of these emphases is sealed by a promise of Christ's second coming. In each of these three sections the Lord Jesus interrupts his words to John to seal them with the promise that he

is coming "soon." Look at Verse 7 of Chapter 22 for his first reminder:

"And behold, I am coming soon."

Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book. {Rev 22:7-8 RSV}

This guarantees that he is the pre-eminent One. He is coming back again.

Then, in Verse 12, we have this second reminder:

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done." {Rev 22:12 RSV}

The second coming is the guarantee that all that has been hidden from man, all the devious deceit of the age; all the darkness and confusion and bewilderment under which men have lived, shall be lifted and we shall see things as they really are, when he comes.

The third reminder of his return is in Verse 20:

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." {Rev 22:20a RSV}

This is the message to the Church as it is declaring to the world the invitation to come. So, we have this final word of John as he closes the book:

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. {Rev 22:21a RSV}

Revelation is a book intended for us, to keep our hearts through the dark hour.

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