

BEHIND THE SCENES OF HISTORY

by Ray C. Stedman

We have just come through the earthquake of October 17, and can give thanks that most of us survived without serious damage. There is one thing that can be said about an earthquake -- it is a great priority adjuster! When the World Series was being held it was regarded in its beginning games as one of the greatest events taking place on this planet at the time. Almost everybody thought it was tremendously important which team would win. But at 5:04 p.m. on October 17, there was a remarkable and visible change. At 5:05 all priorities were suddenly different.

An earthquake is admittedly a scary event as is also, of course, a great hurricane, such as the East Coast recently went through. The reason these natural disasters frighten us is because they are entirely out of our control. We have nothing to say about them. They come when they want to; they do what they want to; and there is nothing we can do about it. Many people learned that during this recent quake. It awakened much fear among the people, and fear makes us often change our minds about what is important in life.

That is also the attitude often produced by the book of Revelation. It is the scariest book in the Bible. It contains fearsome revelations of plagues and earthquakes, wars, and frightening invasions of strange creatures upon the face of the earth. It makes us all wonder whether we would be able to survive the judgments depicted there. Dr. Earl Palmer, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, has said in his fine exposition of this book, "Revelation is hard to understand, but it is impossible to forget." And so it is!

It is not an accident that this is the last book of the Bible. It gathers themes from the whole Bible and brings them into focus in its pages. Someone has well said that the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation are like two book ends that hold the Bible together. In Genesis you have the story of the beginning of human sin; in Revelation you have the end of it recounted. In Genesis there is the beginning of civilization and of history; in Revelation we learn the end of both. In Genesis you learn of the beginning of the judgments of God upon mankind; in Revelation you see the end of them. These two books belong together.

Many of the great themes of Scripture are brought into final focus in the book of Revelation. It is, therefore, a most important book to read and understand. It has been likened to being at a major airport when planes are landing. Go down to SFO and watch the people get off the planes. You may see a crowd of people who have well-tanned faces and warm smiles and are wearing leis around their necks. You know immediately where they came from -- from Hawaii! Watch another group and they have raincoats over their arms, are carrying umbrellas, and their faces are wreathed in gloom. They are obviously from Seattle! Another crowd may have a murky pall of smoke and grime on their faces. They are obviously from Los Angeles! So also as we go through this book you will recognize many of the great themes of the Bible and will know from what Old Testament book they originate.

Let us let the book introduce itself in the three verse prologue, or preface, with which it begins:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw -- that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. {Rev 1:1-3 NIV}

There are two words in this paragraph that tell us the nature of the book. The very first word, "The revelation," is the Greek word *apocalypse* which means "an unveiling," a taking away of that which obscures. Apocalypses have to do with mysteries -- and their meaning. So, throughout this book we will find many mysteries made clear. The mystery of evil is unveiled. Why does it persist on the earth and what is its ultimate

end. That is revealed to us, unveiled in this book. The mystery of godliness is made clear. How can one live a godly, righteous life in the midst of a broken and evil world. That is unveiled. Many other mysteries are unveiled. That is why the book begins with that term.

A little later in that same paragraph we read, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy." This book is not only an unveiling, it is also a prediction. It deals with persons and events which are yet to come, as the prologue tells us; "What must soon take place." We will learn what personalities are yet to appear on the stage of history in the last days, and what great events will unfold as history rolls on to its final consummation. This book will make that clear.

Now, the process by which all this comes to us is stated. The second sentence of the preface states, "He [i.e., Jesus] made it known by sending his angel to his servant John." In those words "made it known" there is a hidden meaning. It is actually one Greek word which in English should be translated *signified*, or, if you want to pronounce it more accurately "sign-i-fied," i.e., made known by signs or symbols. He *symbolized* it to his servant John. That is one of the first things we need to know about this book. It is a book largely of symbols. Symbols are important. They are ways of understanding things which you cannot draw a picture of. Something that is rather abstruse or difficult to understand can be made known by symbols.

I once heard of a boy who was trying to explain to a younger boy what a radio was like. He said to him, "You know that a telegraph is a long wire that runs between two cities. It is like having a big dog with his tail in Los Angeles and his head in San Francisco. If you step on his tail in Los Angeles he barks in San Francisco. Now a radio is the same thing only you don't have no dog!"

That is a wonderful way of making clear what is difficult by the use of symbols! The book of Revelation is like that. It has strange beasts and fearful scorpions and many other weird persons and animals that appear, but they are symbols of something real and literal. We will need, therefore, to carefully interpret them.

We will be guided by the fact that almost all the symbols of Revelation are given to us before in the Bible. That is why it is wrong to read the book of Revelation without reading first the whole Bible. If you start with the book of Revelation you will soon be terribly confused, but if you read through the Bible, when you come to Revelation you will understand many of the symbols immediately. So let that fact guide you as you read this book through on your own.

The author is not John the Apostle, as many suppose, though John is certainly involved in giving us this book. The author is God himself! Notice the words, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him." This book began among the Godhead, and God, the Father, is its author. He revealed the book to his Son. It all began in the mind of the Father and then was revealed to Jesus, his Son. Remember that in Matthew 24:36 Jesus said that though he understood many of the events of the last days, he did not know the time when it would all happen. He said that knowledge belonged only to the Father. Now, of course, risen and glorified, he knows all these things, but at that time he did not know. It had not yet been revealed to him when these events would occur. But now Jesus is given this revelation and he passes it on to an angel who in turn makes known by symbols to John the Apostle what is in the mind of God, and eventually it comes to us. This means this book is unique in the Bible. No other book was given in quite this way. It comes from the mind of God the Father, through the agency of the Son of God, to an angel of God, and thus to the apostle of God, John the writer of this book.

Notice also the blessing that is promised. I do not want to miss that. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take it to heart." The word *blessed* is probably based on a Hebrew word which is not the usual word for blessing: The usual term is *Barak*, which means "to bow down," but the word *Esher*, which means "to guide," is more likely in the thought of John. That is what is being promised to us. If we pay attention to the book of Revelation, and keep it, take it to heart, we shall be guided through the morass of ideas and conflicting philosophies which abound in the world today. We will find the right pathway through all the confusing pathways that exist around us. That is the special blessing conferred by the book of Revelation.

Now, in the next section, beginning with Verse 4 through 8, we are introduced to the *Dramatis Personae*,

i.e., the people, the personalities, who will appear in the book.

First, of course, is John as he states in Verse 4:

John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia. {Rev 1:4a NIV}

That is all we are told about the author at this point, his name alone. We know from comparison with other Scriptures, and from the tradition of the early church, that this was very likely John the Apostle, the brother of James, and son of Zebedee. There is some question about that, however. Some raise the possibility that another John (called John the Presbyter) wrote this, but there is so much evidence that links this writing with the Gospel of John and the three letters of John in our Bibles that it seems difficult to view this as coming from any other hand than the apostle's. He wrote this toward the end of his life; probably he was in his eighties when this vision was given to him. The usual dating of the book is around 94-96 A. D. It comes to us, as he says, as a letter written to a series of seven selected churches located in the Roman province of Asia. These churches are named for us later and we will spend time with them as we go on in this series. The province of Asia is modern Turkey today.

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, {Rev 1:4b NIV}

That describes God the Father, the Eternal One. His name in Hebrew, *Yahweh*, means "I Am," and this statement is a parsing of that verb. "I am he who is, and he who was, and he who is to come," thus he is the eternally Existing One.

and from the seven spirits before his throne, {Rev 1:4c NIV}

This is the first of a series of sevens that are mentioned in the book of Revelation. Seven is the key number of this book. When you find seven of anything in this book, it is a symbol of completeness, of perfection or plenitude. This is the Spirit of God in the plenitude of his being. This is confirmed to us by a verse in the prophecy of Isaiah. In Chapter 11, Verse 2, the prophet speaks of The Spirit coming upon the Messiah, and he says:

**The Spirit of the Lord [number one] will rest on him --
the Spirit of wisdom [number two] and of understanding [three],
the Spirit of counsel [four] and of power [five],
the Spirit of knowledge [six] and of the fear of the Lord [seven] -- {Isa 11:2 NIV}**

So the seven spirits are the Holy Spirit in his fulness. It is he who gives us this book, the Spirit of God in the plenitude of his being, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Our Lord Jesus is the central figure of the book, as we will note often as we go through it, but here he is introduced to us for the first time, in a threefold manner.

1. He is the "faithful witness," i.e., what he says is true. You can count on it. He utters absolute basic reality. I do not think anything means more to me in reading the Bible than to understand that here is the revelation of things as they really are. This is a confusing world in which we live. We are bombarded by conflicting philosophies, many ideas are widely different, many value systems are wholly antagonistic to others, and we must often ask ourselves, "Which is right?" Well, here is the word from the Faithful Witness, the one who tells us the truth.
2. He is also called "the firstborn from the dead." That is a reference to his resurrection. He is the first one to rise in glory from having once been dead. All others who were raised from the dead in the Bible returned to the same earthly life they had before, but not Jesus. When he was raised, he was glorified, and it is that glorified life which he gives to those who believe in him. He is the life giver.

3. Third, he is introduced as "the ruler of the kings of the earth." Is that not encouraging? All these powerful leaders which we have today claim to be sovereign and able to work their will, and yet here is one who appears as the "ruler of the kings of the earth." He sets the limits in which the others must live. Thus he is the great law maker, king over all other kings.

So he is introduced here, as the truth teller, the life giver, and the law maker.

The text goes on to tell us what he does, in Verse 5:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father -- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. {Rev 1:5b-6 NIV}

This is the first doxology of the book. A paean of praise that recognizes the greatness of our Lord. Notice the threefold division:

First, he loves us. That is in the present tense. It is not past tense. It is true that he loved us. He loved the whole world for "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son," {cf, John 3:16}. But Jesus loves us now. That is the point John makes. Everything in the life of a believer ought to be based upon the love of the Lord Jesus. It is the most amazing thing, that we who know in our hearts that we are faithless and foolish and often arrogantly sinful and selfish, still he loves us. What a difference it makes when one begins to believe that.

Years ago, when I was traveling with Dr. H. A. Ironside, we were in the state of Virginia, and there met a man who was Rector of an Episcopal church. He told us the story of his conversion. I have never read this story anywhere, but I have never forgotten his amazing story. He said that he was a student at Cambridge University when D. L. Moody was invited to speak to the students there. He was one of a group of students who were very angry that an invitation would ever be given to a backwoods American preacher like Moody, who murdered the king's English (He was said to be the only man who could ever pronounce Jerusalem in one syllable!). When these young men knew that he was coming to what they regarded as the center of culture of the world, they determined that they would upset the meetings by mocking and jeering at him. When the meeting began, the young men were right on the front row ready to call out names, and upset the meeting. But before Moody spoke, Ira B. Sankey, his great gospel singer, stood and sang. His voice quieted the crowd and immediately when he finished, without a word of introduction, D. L. Moody stepped to the platform, pointed his finger at the young men in the front row and said, "Young gentlemen, don't ever think God don't love you, for he do." They were so stunned by this ungrammatical beginning, that they listened quietly to Moody. He came back to his theme a little later and said it again, "Young gentlemen, don't think God don't love you, for he do." This man said that Moody went on to speak of the love of Jesus for a lost race, and he told us, "I began to see myself in a different light, and by the end of the meeting I gave my heart to Christ."

That is what John is seeking to emphasize here. He dedicates the book to "Him who loves us" and, in addition, "has freed us from our sins by his blood." He breaks the shackles of evil habits in our lives. He sets us free from the dependencies that we have allowed to harass us, shackle us, and limit us. Some of you here, I am sure, have struggled with drug dependency or alcohol dependency and you know what a horrible grip they can get upon your life. But here is one who frees from our sins! We are all sinfully dependent people. We have all been shackled by evil of one sort or another: Selfish attitudes and hot tempers, or lustful passions, or angry self-centered talk, etc. We are as much victims of evil as any alcoholic or drug addict may be, but here is one who has freed us by the sacrifice of his own life.

"He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
And sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me!"

But more than that he "has made us a kingdom of priests to serve the Lord our God." A priest's work was to heal the sense of alienation which people felt with God. Sinners feel estranged from God. They cut themselves

off by their behavior from a God of holiness and justice. But they are to be brought near by priests. In the Old Testament, the priests explained the meaning of the sacrifices and thus brought people near. That is the work of believers today. We are to help people in their agony and their injury, their darkness and lostness, to realize that God is longing to draw them to himself and to heal their alienation. For this work Jesus has made us "a kingdom of priests." Do you ever think of yourself as a priest? That is what God has sent you to do and sent me to do as well.

So our Lord is introduced to us not only as to who he is and what he does, but also what he will do in the future.

Look, he is coming with the clouds, {Rev 1:7a NIV}

This is the focal point of history. This is "that one far off, divine event, toward which the whole creation moves." One of these days he will break through the skies, as he once left this earth, and come again in glory. His coming will have universal impact.

First,

... every eye will see him, {Rev 1:7b NIV}

Jesus himself tells us this. If you have read the 24th chapter of Matthew, you know that he himself describes this event.

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. {Matt 24:30 NIV}

No one will miss it. You will not need a television set to see him come. He will appear everywhere in that uniqueness of Deity that can be visible to everybody around the earth at once. So when he comes he will be visible to all. Paul calls this event, "the splendor of his coming" {2 Th 2:8b NIV}, literally, "the outshining of his *parousia* ." Then, even the Jews will recognize him. John tell us:

even those who pierced him; {Rev 1:7c NIV}

This is a reference to a prophecy in Zechariah, the 12th chapter, where we are told that when he appears those who pierced him shall look upon him and shall mourn for him with a great mourning. They shall ask him "What are these wounds in your hands," and he will say, "Those which I received in the house of my friends," {cf, Zech 13:6 KJV}.

I was with a number of rabbis some years ago in Los Angeles, and we were discussing the differences between Christianity and Judaism. One of them said to me, "You know," he said, "when the Messiah does come, the Jews will say, 'Welcome' but you Christians will say, 'Welcome back,'" And I said, "But what will the Messiah say?" He said, "I think he will say, 'No comment'." One of the puzzles of history has been why the Jewish people have so resolutely turned their backs on the evidence that Jesus is their promised Messiah. It is the "blinding in part" {cf, Rom 11:7, 2 Cor 3:14}, that Paul says will happen to the nation because of long standing unbelief. But it will not be forever. The day will come when Israel will recognize their Messiah. Prophecy predicts it, and Jesus here confirms it; "even those who pierced him" {Zech 12:10}, shall see him in that day.

The third result is:

and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. {Rev 1:7d NIV}

I believe this is a reference to that great event that is described in Philippians, the second chapter. There we are told that, "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father," {Phil 2:10-11 NIV}. At last men will

realize, in the appearance of the Lord himself, where they have stood in relationship to him. They will mourn because they will see how terribly they have treated him and his work for them upon the cross.

Now we get, in Verse 8, a most impressive thing. It is as though God takes a pen, and with his own hand, signs this book with his own name:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, [Alpha and Omega are the first and last characters of the Greek alphabet] who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty [One]. {Rev 1:8 NIV}

In no other book of the Bible do we have this wonderful imprimatur of God. God has signed this book with his own name, and has identified himself for us. When we read this book we are reading a copy autographed by the author!

Finally, in Verses 9-20, which we will conclude with, we get the history of this encounter with Jesus.

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a short double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. {Rev 1:9-16 NIV}

Even this early in the book of Revelation we begin to get truth imparted to us by symbols. This is not what Jesus will look like when you see him in glory. It is not the way he will look when he appears. These are symbols that tell us what role he is fulfilling at the moment, not what he looks like but what he is like, his character, or some aspect of it that he particularly wishes to stress.

John tells us that all this happened to him one Sunday morning when he was on the island of Patmos, a tiny island only 4 miles wide and 6 miles long, just off the coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea. There the Roman Empire maintained certain mines and quarries, and John, apparently, was banished to this island because of his testimony and preaching of Jesus. He was a prisoner on Patmos. But one Sunday morning, (that is what is meant by "the Lord's Day," for the early Christians began immediately to meet, not on Saturday as the Jews did, but on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection), John was "in the Spirit." What that means is that he was worshipping. It does not mean he was in a state of high ecstasy. It meant that he was honoring God, thinking about him, paying tribute to his majesty, his greatness and his power, worshipping God.

Remember Jesus said to the woman at the well in John 4, "The time is come," he said, "when they that worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth," {cf, John 4:23}. John was "in the Spirit" on this Lord's day when he heard a voice behind him like a great trumpet blasting out. The voice said, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches." John did what you and I would have done, he turned around to see who it was that sounded so powerful, and what he saw was the Lord standing among seven golden lampstands, holding seven stars in his hand. There is the second series of seven in this book. He was dressed in priestly garments, revealing his role as the Great High Priest.

This vision is given to help us see that our High Priest is still ministering among his churches. His ministry is characterized by what is revealed here. He had on, first of all, a long robe reaching down to his feet with a

golden sash about his chest. Gold speaks of deity in Scripture. So it indicates Jesus is a priest who is himself God. His head and his hair were white. These symbols are used in the book of Daniel to speak of wisdom and of purity. Here is one who is characterized by these virtues. His eyes were like blazing fire, from which nothing could be hid. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace and his voice like the sound of rushing waters. His face was like the sun shining in its strength. Fire speaks of judgment and his face was lighted with unbearable brilliance, symbolizing the intensity of truth.

I wonder if John was not taken back in memory to that scene in the north of Israel when he and James his brother, along with Peter were led up a high mountain by Jesus and there, as they prayed, suddenly Jesus was transfigured before them. His garments began to shine with a whiteness that nothing on earth could equal, and his face shone like the sun. Undoubtedly that scene would have flashed into John's mind when he saw Jesus here. Peter tells us in his second letter that that experience on the mountain was a preview of the coming of Jesus. This, perhaps, explains why at the close of the Gospel of John we are told that Jesus was asked by the other disciples, "What do you want this man to do?" referring to John. Jesus answered with a strange word. He said, "If I will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" {cf, John 21:22-23}. The word went out among the disciples that John was never to die because Jesus had suggested that he would remain until he came. But here in this book of Revelation is the explanation. John did remain alive till he saw the coming of Jesus in this vision given to him. Though he died at the age of 90-some years, and was buried in Ephesus, as tradition tells us, yet he did see the coming of the Lord.

The voice he heard was like the sound of the surf as it dashes on the rocks, the sound of many waters, a great roaring voice. The two-edged sword is clearly a symbol of the Word of God. These symbols tell us what he will be doing in this book. He is the Great High Priest ministering to his own in a scene of desolation and judgment, yet he is in charge of all the events and in the midst is revealing truth by the Word of God.

Now, throughout the book, Jesus also appears in other capacities:

- He is a Lamb in Chapter 5.
- He appears also as a lion there.
- He is a rider on a great white horse, in Chapter 19.
- He is a Bridegroom, coming for his Bride in Chapter 21.

So various symbols are employed as descriptions of the various ministries of our Lord as he seeks to minister to his people.

In Verses 17-18 we learn John's reaction to this remarkable vision.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." {Rev 1:17-19 NIV}

This is John's commission to write this book, and his reaction is one frequently seen whenever a man encounters the glorious God. He "fell at his feet as though dead," struck dumb by the awesomeness of the character of God. Isaiah does the same when he sees the Lord high and lifted up with his train filling the temple. Job does this also when to him is revealed the wisdom and wonder of God. Throughout the Bible it is the only place to be when God appears -- fall on your face as though dead.

But the reaction of Jesus is typical, very characteristic of him. Notice that he does three things.

- First, he touched him! He laid his right hand upon him. Read the Gospels and Jesus is always touching people. When he healed a leper he touched him. When he opened the eyes of the blind he put his hands upon their eyes. So here, he touched him.

- And, then, he reassured him. "Fear not," he said. "Don't be afraid. I am not your enemy. I am your friend. I am the First and the Last. [i.e., I set the boundaries of time and history. Everybody must live within the limits that I have determined]. I am the Living One [I am always available.] I am alive forevermore, for ever and ever. [There will never be a moment when you need me that I will not be there, available to you.] And I hold the keys of death and Hades [death, the enemy of the physical life]; Hades [or Hell], the enemy of the spiritual life. [I am in charge of both places, both forces.] So you need not fear."
- Then he commissioned John: "Write!" And he told him what to write -- in three divisions. "Write what you have seen," That covers what we are looking today in Chapter 1. And write "what is now," i.e., Chapters 2 and 3 of this book, the letters to the seven churches. And write, "what will take place later." This would be Chapters 4-22, the rest of the book of Revelation. So Jesus himself gives us the divisions of this book, and if we follow them carefully we will be able to understand what he is saying.

Now, in Verse 20, which really belongs with the next chapter, he explains the two symbols that John has seen: the seven golden lampstands and the seven stars. Jesus says:

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. {Rev 1:20 RSV}

That will introduce us to our study next Sunday. We will explain more of these symbols when we come to that. But the point of this first chapter is to focus our attention upon Jesus.

He is the central figure of the book, as he is the central figure of all history. No life can ever be lived realistically without reference to him. Christians are called to live as seeing him who is invisible. Everyday this ought to affect us. Here is the One who goes with you to work tomorrow. This is the One who rides beside you as you drive your car. This is the One who watches as you sleep. This is the One who selects the circumstances of your life. He is ready to impart, at any time you need it, courage, peace, forgiveness, wisdom, and help in time of need. So John fulfills the purpose that he was given: to elevate and focus our attention upon the figure of Jesus that we might know him, who he is, and understand what he is willing to do.

Prayer

Thank you our Lord Jesus for this revelation. Thank you that it does unveil to us and predict for us great events that will affect every human being upon the planet. We pray, Lord, that you will help us to understand these things and more than that, to take seriously what is written, to keep these revelations and let them adjust our lives to what they reveal. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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