

THE MISSING STRING

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 1:1-8
First Message
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Revelation 1:1-8

At our pastor-elder retreat in January, a consensus emerged concerning a preaching series for the 2018-19 academic year: the book of Revelation. In two weeks, we'll be celebrating our seventieth anniversary as a church. As it turns out, Revelation was the last book that our first pastor, Ray Stedman, preached before his retirement in 1990. It is therefore appropriate, in a poetic way, for us to revisit this amazing book at this time. This will be the first time since Ray's series that the book will have been preached in its entirety at this church (assuming that nothing stops us before we finish!). So, after twenty-eight years, here we go!

The "book" of Revelation is not a book per se but a letter. The apostle John wrote it to churches in what is now modern Turkey toward the end of the first century. Believers were suffering sporadic persecution by Rome, the superpower of the day, but John envisioned the intensification of such persecution.

Just like many believers today, many believers then were troubled by the apparent non-fulfillment of God's promises. By all appearances, even after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and even after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the world was still ruled by evil, especially the evil of Rome, a pagan nation.

John's answer—indeed, the New Testament's answer—is as valid today as it was then: with the coming of Christ and the Spirit, the kingdom of God has been inaugurated but not yet consummated. Until the consummation of the kingdom, evil has a place in the world, but especially since the first coming of Christ and the coming of Spirit, it is being subjugated, and with the final coming of Christ, it will be vanquished. If we are troubled that the world is in bad shape today, we might wonder what kind of shape it would be in if Christ and the Spirit hadn't come!

Transcendent perspective

John is given visions so that he, his first readers, and finally we might see the world from a heavenly, transcendent perspective. Much is going on in the

unseen realm, and Revelation gives us eyes to see. The visions, featuring a series of images, are designed to purge and stretch and fire our imaginations. As such, the book appeals less to our logical faculties and more to our imaginations.

The dominant image is that of a throne—that is, the throne of God. The word "throne" is used twenty-nine times in reference to the throne of God. The prevalence of the image in the book invites us to believe that though things may look as if they're falling apart, God reigns over everything and his purposes are being accomplished. Revelation tells us: God wins.

John instructs the churches not to compromise with the evil, oppressive Roman system, and to persevere in the face of whatever persecution and suffering come their way. He wants them not to retreat into idolatry but to remain loyal to the kingdom of God. The book is punctuated by scenes of worship. Don't compromise with evil in any of its forms, and resist and challenge the secular ideologies of our day. Instead, worship God. Actively participate in the kingdom of God, which has come, is coming, and will come.

Wake up

Much ink has been spilled in an effort to define the meaning of the images and the timing of the events depicted. Because the kingdom of God has come, is coming, and will come, determining the timing of the events is in many cases problematic and, in the end, mostly beside the point. Most of the images, even if we can't be certain of what they specifically mean, in a general sense have to do with judgment and salvation. The book will not answer all our questions, but if we let it, it will help us ponder and pray and worship. It will help us wake up, peer into unseen realities, and live for the kingdom of God. "Wake up," Jesus says to one of the churches to which John writes, "and strengthen what remains" (Revelation 3:2).

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus himself, through John, straightforwardly addresses the churches. Revelation 4:1-22:5 features not-entirely-straightforward visions that serve to challenge and inspire the churches to

believe and do what Jesus tells them to believe and do in Revelation 2-3. For us, then, Revelation 2-3 tells us what to believe and what to do. Revelation 4:1–22:5 challenges and inspires us to believe and do. Even if we know what we're supposed to believe and do, we need help believing it and doing it, don't we? Jesus helps us in multiple ways, and he helps us in the book of Revelation by giving us these awesome images.

In the end, the most important sentence in the book of Revelation is in the last chapter, Revelation 22:9: "Worship God." Worship God, even unto death, and watch the kingdom come.

John wrote to seven churches. Seven times in Revelation 2-3 Jesus urges his readers to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Let's listen carefully to this awesome composition for what the Spirit is saying to our church.

Strap yourself in!

At the beach

After serving all day, in the morning leading Vacation Bible School for kids in the barrios and in the afternoon pouring cement, we set out for a beach in Ensenada to celebrate the Fourth of July. It was no longer "ministry" time. Instead, it was time for the youth group from California and its leaders to relax and enjoy each other. I no longer had to be "on."

As I walked toward the beach with my guitar in hand, a Mariachi band was just arriving. The guitarist spotted me, held up his instrument, and pointed to its neck to show me that one of his strings was missing.

I wondered if his actions meant that he was asking me if I could give him a guitar string. After four mission trips to Ensenada, I had perfected the art of saying no in the tourist areas. Any visit to a spot frequented by Americans was sure to draw a crowd of Mexican peddlers. To me, they were faces without names.

I viewed the Mexicans I worshiped with farther inland differently. I sang with them, ate with them, and enjoyed them. But at the beach, I was prepared to say no to anyone who asked me anything.

The guitar player has very much to do with Revelation 1:1-8. In fact, everyone we come in contact with has very much to do with the passage. How so? Let's see.

Symbolic communication

Revelation 1:1-3:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

The word "revelation" concerns the uncovering of something that had been hidden—in this case, the uncovering of unseen realities. The entire book is the revelation "of Jesus Christ": he, at the behest of God, is the one who is doing the unveiling. The first purpose of the unveiling is to show the servants of Jesus—first John, a prophet, then his readers, and ultimately all Jesus' followers—"the things that must soon take place."

In light of what follows, those "things" concern God's ongoing and ultimately final victory over evil. What the prophet Daniel expected in the "latter days" is coming upon John and his readers (Daniel 2:28, 44). It becomes clear in the rest of the book, however, that evil will not go down without a fight.

God gave this revelation to Jesus, who gave it to an angel, who gave it to John, the author of the book. In this way, Jesus "made it known" to John. The word translated "made it known" (*semaino*) was used of symbolic communication (Daniel 2:28-30, 45). Indeed, the book, by means of images, not straightforward explanations, conveys the things that must soon take place.

The "word of God" and the "testimony of Jesus Christ" are two ways of speaking of the Gospel, for which John has been confined (Revelation 1:9). The word, or message, of God is general, and the testimony of Jesus Christ is specific: the Gospel comes from God and focuses on Jesus Christ.¹ The Gospel is the good news of God's victory over evil. What John saw in his visions he passes on to his readers and, by extension, to us.

John expected his composition to be read aloud for people in the churches to whom it would be sent. Hence, he pronounces a blessing on both readers and hearers—that the power of God would accompany his words.

It's not just enough to hear the words, however; one must also "keep" them. Again, the book of Revelation will not answer all our questions about the future. We shouldn't "hear" the words in such a way, anyway; we should hear the words so that we might keep them—so that we might follow Jesus as the kingdom of God comes (Revelation 2:26; 3:3, 10; 14:12, 22:7).

John writes that "the time is near" (*engus*). When Jesus came, he proclaimed that the kingdom of God—that is, God's healing, loving rule—was "at hand," or "near" (*engus*), as reported in Mark 1:15. When Jesus came, the kingdom of God was present: it was breaking in. Some six decades later, when John wrote the book of Revelation, the kingdom of God was present and still breaking in. Today, many centuries later, it is present, and it continues to break in (Revelation 12:10). One day, the kingdom of God will be established (Revelation 11:15, 16:17).

However, we learn this in Revelation: as the kingdom of God breaks in, all hell breaks loose. It was true in Jesus' day. It was true in John's day. It's true in our day.

Because the time is near—because the time is always near and the kingdom is always near—hear the words of the book of Revelation, picture in your mind the visions that John received and conveys, and follow Jesus.

Use your imagination

What do we do with the book of Revelation? John lets us know right away. Picture what John describes, for he is using symbolic communication to depict unseen realities concerning the ongoing and final victory of God over evil. It is truth, but it is truth artistically presented. John uses words, of course, but he uses words to describe what he sees. In many cases, he has trouble describing what he sees, because he's never seen anything like this before. We can't see what he sees; we only have his words. Therefore, it falls to us to use our imaginations, to pay attention to John's words and picture in our minds what he describes.

Images can be powerful, can they not? Some, if they hit us in just the right way at just the right time, are searing. They can change the course of a life—or a community, or a church, or a nation. The power of Revelation is, not least, in its images. John sees visions that cause him to fall face-first on the ground. Next week, we will see a knee-buckling vision of Jesus that has the potential to change our entire conception of who he is. But we will need to use our imaginations, because John didn't take any photos.

When I began by describing my encounter with the guitarist at a beach in Ensenada, did you picture the scene? If so, you used your imagination. It's hard to pay close attention to a story and not picture it in your mind's eye. We all know how to use our imaginations.

Use your imagination, yes, but for what purpose?

Kingdom of priests

Revelation 1:4-6:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

John writes to "the" seven churches in Asia, but more than seven churches had been established in Asia. The number seven, being a biblical number for completeness, is likely representative. If so, then John intended the letter to be read by more than just the seven churches that are listed in Revelation 1:11. Taken together, these churches typify all the churches in that time—and in our time also.

God, who through John addresses the churches with both Greek- and Hebrew-oriented greetings—"grace" and "peace," respectively—is defined as being "him who is and who was and who is to come." He was existing in the past, though he was without beginning, and he is existing in the present and on an ongoing basis, without end. The first two verbs, forms of the verb "to be," make us expect last verb to be "will be." However, we don't get "who will be"; instead, we get "who is to come"—literally, "who is coming," in the present and into the future. God doesn't just exist; God also acts. He is coming, in the present and in the future, in judgment and salvation, through Jesus Christ.²

First, God greets the churches. Second, "the seven spirits who are before his throne" greet them. Again, the number represents completeness and is likely not a reference to seven individual spirits but to the Holy Spirit, who ministers to the seven churches, which stand for all churches (Zechariah 4:2-6).

Third and finally, Jesus Christ greets them. He, like God, is defined in three ways. Jesus is a faithful witness in many ways, of course, but primarily in this context a witness to the Gospel, the good news of God's victory over evil (Revelation 1:2). As the "firstborn of the dead," he signals the future resurrection of the people of God. Finally, having ascended to God, Jesus Christ is the "ruler of the kings of the earth," being sovereign over them in John's day and in our day also. One day, all rulers—indeed, all people—will have to answer to Jesus. Jesus is prophet (witness), priest (he sacrificed for us, having died), and king (ruler).

John then describes Jesus in three additional ways that concern what he is doing and has done for us. If Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth, what kind of ruler is he?

Unlike any other ruler, he loves us perfectly and eternally. The rulers of the earth can make promises about what they will do for us, and even if they can fulfill such promises, they cannot do what Jesus has already done for us. He "freed us from our sins by his blood," liberating us not from Egypt, as Israel of old, but from the power of sin so that we could fulfill our destiny as the people of God, both Jew and Gentile.

God, having liberated Israel from Egypt, intended it to be "a kingdom of priests"—a kingdom composed of priests, or a priestly kingdom (Exodus 19:6). He has made us a kingdom. Jesus shares his kingdom with us, giving us authority in the spiritual realm, specifically so that we might be priests.

When we understand who Jesus is and what he has done for us, we have to agree with John: "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever." Amen.

Share the love of Christ

Jesus has liberated us from the power of sin so that we might be priests, every one of us who believes in him. A priest is a mediator who stands between people and God, representing God to people and bringing people to God, not least by interceding for them. Being a priest, then, involves sharing the love of Jesus with others.

Jesus has "made" us priests. We don't make ourselves priests or turn ourselves into priests; we *are* priests because Jesus has made us priests. There is therefore something within us that wants to be priests. Therefore, part of being a priest entails simply being who we are.

We are not here for ourselves; we are here for others, and if you search within yourself, you'll know it. Try to fight it if you like, try to live for yourself, and you'll be fighting against yourself, against who Jesus made you to be, against who you are.

Jesus helps us to be who he made us to be not least by giving us awesome images in the book of Revelation. Use your imagination to picture the images so that you can be who you are: a priest who shares the love of Christ.

Fighting it

I wondered if the guitarist's actions meant that he was asking me for a guitar string. "*Yo no tengo* [I don't have]," I told the guitarist.

It was a lie. I had extra strings, but my guard was up.

I wasn't much of a priest, was I? Oh, I was a priest (I am a priest, and so are you, if you believe in Jesus), but I wasn't living like one. I was fighting it, I was living for myself, I was fighting against myself, against who Jesus made me to be. Above all, a priest shouldn't lie.

When we are who Jesus made us to be, we turn back the forces of evil.

He is coming

Revelation 1:7-8:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

John draws on Daniel 7:13-14 to proclaim that Jesus is "coming with the clouds." In Daniel's vision, the Son of Man, the representative of God's people, ascends to God to receive an everlasting kingdom. Daniel's vision was fulfilled in part with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Now, John declares that Jesus "is coming," as king, both in the present and in the future, both in judgment and in salvation.

The prospect is almost immediate for at least some of the churches John is writing to: Jesus tells them to repent or he will "come" to them (Revelation 2:5, 16; 3:3). On the other hand, Jesus will "come" to anyone who opens

the door to him (Revelation 3:20). By using the word “behold,” John challenges the churches to be watchful for the various comings of Jesus, not necessarily implying that they will see him with their eyes when he comes in such ways. Likewise, the clouds convey divine presence, not necessarily that Jesus literally rides on clouds when he comes. Then again, who’s to say that when Jesus comes to consummate the kingdom of God that he won’t come riding on clouds?

Some will perceive some of the comings of Jesus, but by the time Jesus has come to consummate the kingdom, “every eye” will have seen him. In the end, the apostle Paul tells us, “every knee” will bow and “every tongue” will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

Included among those who will see Jesus are “those who pierced him.” In that John speaks of “those,” he clearly speaks of more than just the one man who pierced Jesus as he hung on the cross (John 19:34). The Jews who handed him over to the Gentiles crucified him and pierced him. The Gentiles who crucified him pierced him. All of us, by our rejection of God that manifests itself in ongoing sinfulness, crucified him and pierced him.

Drawing on Zechariah 12:10-14, John expects “all the tribes of the earth” to “wail on account of” Jesus. In the book of Revelation, John distinguishes between humans who dwell on earth and humans who, though they live on earth, dwell in heaven: those who belong to God and those who do not. When Jesus comes to consummate the kingdom of God, the earth-dwellers will wail in misery, like the “kings of the earth” when “Babylon” is judged (Revelation 18:9-10).

“Amen.” Really? Yes, we long for the consummation of the kingdom of God, when God finally vanquishes evil.

Finally, God himself speaks, echoing John’s description of him in verse 4. God adds that he is the “Alpha and the Omega,” who created all things and will bring all things to fulfillment. He also adds that he is “the Almighty,” a frequent title for God in Revelation, which emphasizes the power of God over all powers that oppose him and his purposes.

Turn back the forces of evil

As we fulfill our vocation as priests, we are turning back the forces of evil, which would have humans turn in

on themselves and against each other. Instead of turning in ourselves and against each other, we look outside ourselves to share the love of Christ. We thus participate in the victory of God over evil. Jesus is coming, and when he comes in a final sense, the victory will be complete.

We’re not simply sitting around waiting for Jesus to make everything right. Jesus commissions us to participate in making everything right, to turn back the power of evil with the power of love. There is thus continuity between our priesthood and his coming. Because Jesus is coming, both now and in the future, we shouldn’t sit around; we should get on with it.

Use your imagination, picturing the images in the book of Revelation, in order to be challenged and inspired to share the love of Christ and turn back the forces of evil.

Second thoughts

Jesus made me to be a priest, but I lied. As I walked on, Jesus must have been displeased, because I had second thoughts about what I had just done. And it’s a good thing, because I have never forgotten what happened next, though it happened more than thirty years ago. In fact, if what hadn’t happened next hadn’t happened, I probably would have forgotten about the entire episode.

I stopped the guitarist, opened my case, and handed him a guitar string. The fact that my string was made of steel and his strings were made of nylon didn’t seem to matter to him. He quickly attached the string to his guitar and tuned it to the other strings.

Then he looked up at me. Tears had formed in his eyes. His name was Jorgé, and of all the things he told me, that was about all that I could understand. He was speaking rapid-fire Spanish, and it had been a long time since my last Spanish class in high school. I think he could tell that I couldn’t understand him, so he kept saying his name, and he kept shaking my hand, and he kept looking into my eyes. Then he happily rejoined his bandmates for their date on the beach.

Now, I don’t think Jorgé had showed me his guitar in order to ask me for a string. I think he was just making contact with a fellow guitarist. His utter shock when I gave him a string suggests that he wasn’t expecting one. I also now think he was missing a string because he couldn’t afford to buy a replacement.

Picture Jorgé

Can you use your imagination? Can you picture Jorgé? Can you see his face? Can you see the tears in his eyes?

Now, be a priest. Be who you are, who Jesus made you to be. Share the love of Christ. I wonder: whom will he bring your way this week?

Endnotes

- 1 Is the testimony “of” Jesus Christ testimony by him or about him?
Grammatically and contextually, it could be either, and it could be both (Revelation 19:10, 22:16).
- 2 The description of God here echoes the meaning of his name, YHWH (Exodus 3:14-15).