

The Ultimate Vision

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Date: 22 June 2008

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[0 : 0 0] Can I invite you to turn again to the portion of scripture that was read for us from Revelation chapter 7. And as you turn in there, may I say what a privilege it is to be here.

I bring the greetings of the fellowship that I serve in Ohio, many of whom are more familiar with you than you even know.

And you should count yourselves well prayed for by considerable numbers in Ohio that only know of you by repute. And I'm delighted to be here.

I was thinking as Willie read the passage for us there, what a wonderful preparation Scottish people have at the moment for heaven. I couldn't resist just thinking that, and I'm sure I wasn't alone.

When I read 16B, the sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. And I thought, well, that's not going to be a surprise for some of us.

[0 : 5 7] Certainly not this morning. But anyway, we should pray before we turn to the Bible, and so we will. Father, we pray that you will conduct that divine dialogue within our souls as your word by your spirit is brought to bear upon each of our lives.

We come to you in total dependence upon you, asking for your grace and help in all matters. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. It's been a privilege for me to follow the progress. That is, you're building progress from a distance. I receive your news sheets.

The letters come to me, and I also have some inside track on it. And I have been delighted this week to be taken inside the premises and see what's going on.

But quite honestly, most of it passes me by. There are, and I saw them this week, sheets and sheets of plans. Some of them are nailed up on the wall.

[2 : 0 2] Some of them are in the subcontractor's offices and so on. And no matter how long I may look at them, they really, quite honestly, don't mean very much to me.

What I need is to see the end product. If someone can show me the picture or the painting of what it is we're heading towards, then that gives me encouragement.

It strengthens my resolve to press on and to contribute and to be a part of things. Because although I cannot fully fathom the details, I recognize what's in store.

Now, I begin there purposefully because there is a sense in which the book of Revelation does that for us as believers. There's many details along the way that may be hard to figure in.

Various bits and pieces of God's plan, as striking, as strange. But when we turn to the book of Revelation, we have this amazing painting that describes for us, once and for all, how things are going to be.

[3 : 0 6] And that is, of course, very, very important. Because when we think in terms of the task, and even as we've been led in prayer moments ago, we may often find ourselves to be feeble, feeling as though the contribution we're able to make is somewhat small.

Perhaps the dent that we are making for the gospel is apparently inconsequential. And whenever those feelings arise, as they inevitably do, we will be helped by going to the places in the Bible that remind us of how things will end.

If you like, providing for us what we might refer to as the ultimate vision, which is there in verse 9 of chapter 7. Although you will not hear this in university or in college, it is a fact that all of world history is ultimately defined by salvation history.

In fact, the history of the world cannot be understood without God's word to enable us to interpret it. Therefore, when we look at what God is doing in the world amongst his people, we have our eyes on the right place.

Hundreds of years before Jesus was ever born, the prophets spoke of things on their tiptoes, as it were, wondering at the very things that were coming from their mouths and from their pens. Surely Habakkuk could not have conceived of what was really in mind when he writes, And the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

[4 : 51] And his wife must have said to him, Why did you write that, Habakkuk? And he said, Well, God told me to write it down. Yes, but what does it mean? Well, he says, I'm not sure just exactly what it means, but it does mean something, and it will come true.

And here we are at the vantage point, having the scriptures for us, and we sing the hymn, don't we? God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year.

And God is working his purpose out, and so on, when the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. All of God's acts in history are purposeful.

They are never an afterthought to that which is contingent. God knows exactly what he's doing. He is fulfilling his plans from all of eternity, so that the cross at the very center of human history was not something that was added in time to correct a defect in a system, but rather it was God's plan from all of eternity that this one, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, would fulfill the purposes planned in all of eternity.

Well, if it is this way, as the little boy said, having read Revelation, he told his dad, I know what Revelation is all about. I can summarize it for you in two words.

[6 : 10] Well, said his father, who'd been at many Bible studies, in which nobody could summarize anything, tell me, he said, what is it about? And the boy said, Jesus wins.

Jesus wins. And in point of fact, if you stand far enough back from the apparent complexities and pictures of Revelation, the little boy was actually right.

But here's the question. If God has pledged himself to bring to completion what is portrayed here in Revelation 7, what are we supposed to do?

Can we just relax, as it were, and sit back and wait for it to happen? No. Because the multitude that is described here, that is assembled from all of the nations and languages, is not assembled automatically.

This company is assembled as a result of the gospel going out into all the world. So that, as Paul says in Romans 10, no one is going to be able to hear unless somebody preaches to them.

[7 : 16] And no one will go and preach unless they're sent. So that those who will be added to the company of Revelation 7, 9, from the communities represented in Glasgow in 2008, will be assembled in this picture, not haphazardly, but purposefully, and God has not only ordained them to salvation, but he has ordained the means whereby they come to salvation, namely, through the living of the gospel in the lives of those set in this fair city.

So I want us to have that clearly in our minds. I want you to imagine this picture. Some of you have better imaginations than others. I went this week into Princess Square to see the paintings of Bob Dylan, which are selling for an inordinate amount of money, and you don't need a lot of imagination with those paintings.

They're fairly straightforward. But with this one, you need a pretty good imagination. Can you see now this company in your mind's eye? And if you think in terms of it being a painting, when you go to galleries and view great art, you will often discover that prior to the completion of that work, the artist had done a number of preparatory renditions.

Indeed, the artist may have taken and made pencil sketches of small pieces of that which finally became the picture. And I want to suggest to you that we will be helped in thinking of this picture here in Revelation 7 by looking to one or two pencil sketches.

If you want to turn in your Bibles, then you can turn with me. If you don't, then you can check later to see if what I'm telling you is actually in the Bible. Pencil sketch number one goes from the book of Revelation to the book of Genesis, to the very beginning of the Bible, and to the picture, if you like, of God's call and covenant with Abraham.

[9 : 15] Now, we could turn to Genesis 12 or Genesis 15 or Genesis 22. I'm here at 12. The Lord had said to Abraham, Leave your country and your people and your father's household and go to the land.

I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. And so Abraham left as the Lord had told him.

The covenant in both the Old and the New Testaments is God's free decision to call out from all the peoples of the world a people to be his own special possession.

God's plan from all of eternity to put together a people that are his very own, that will belong to him entirely, and to put them together from all these different parts and places.

Now, if that, if you like, is the big concept, the idea of God doing this in a macro way. When you read your Bible then, and you read certain encounters throughout all the Bible, if you keep this in mind, you will start to see that God is actually filling in the painting of Revelation 7.

[10:27] So, for example, arbitrarily, let's take a normal morning in the house of a wealthy man. And the servant girl in the house is aware of the fact that her boss, that is the lady of the house, her husband is ill beyond repair.

And this little girl says to her mistress, if only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria. If only Naaman would go with his entourage to the house of Elisha. And you remember the story of Naaman and how Elisha doesn't come out to him, but gives him instructions to dip himself in the Jordan.

And how Naaman, in his pride, goes away. Says, no, we've got better rivers than that in Lebanon. I'm not going in that filthy river. And then you will remember that it is the servants in his entourage who say to him, my father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?

How much more then when he tells you, wash and be cleansed? And what is happening? Naaman is being painted into the picture.

[11:48] Or take all of the sadness in the life of Naomi. Lost her husband, lost both of her boys, and yet out of the very bitterness of her life, a young lady from Moab, one of the nations of the world, Ruth, is painted into the picture.

Second pencil sketch advances into the New Testament. You'll be glad of that, I'm sure, lest you thought I was going to go all the way through from Genesis, but getting back to Revelation sometime around 7 o'clock this evening.

No, you can turn to Mark's Gospel if you want to follow along with me. And in Mark chapter 1, the picture is now not of the call of Abraham and the covenant with Abraham, but of the calling of the disciples themselves.

Mark chapter 1 and verse 15. The time has come, or better still, the time is fulfilled, said Jesus. The kingdom of God is near.

Now, in that little phrase there, the time has come, or the time is fulfilled, what Jesus is saying to his disciples is that the whole process of promise in the Old Testament, all of the promises relating to redemption have found, are finding their fulfillment in the Lord Jesus himself.

[13:17] Now, when you then read the Gospels, you find yourself looking for the evidences of that. So, for example, with the woman at the well, whom some of us will think of this evening.

She says at one point in the conversation to Jesus, she says, well, I know that the Messiah is going to come, and when the Messiah comes, he'll clear all this stuff up. And Jesus says, the one that is speaking to you is the Messiah.

Or, when you find him in the synagogue in Nazareth, when he goes back to his own hometown, and the people in the town must have been intrigued that the boy comes back.

And now he has grown, and now he's invited to read from the scroll in the prophecy. And he reads these words, the Spirit of the Lord is on me, Luke chapter 4, because he's anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And then you remember, he rolls up the scroll, gives it back, sits down, the eyes of everyone in the place is fastened on him, because he sits in the place of the teacher. What will he say now, having read from the prophecy?

[14:28] They could never in their wildest dreams have anticipated the words that would come out of his mouth, because he looks the people in the congregation in the eye, and he says, today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

In other words, I am the one of whom the prophet wrote all these hundreds of years ago. The third picture, we go into Acts.

This is a sketch again, Acts chapter 1. And here you have a drawing again of Jesus with his disciples. They've all gathered, their tails are up now, unlike a few weeks previously, where they

thought the whole thing had come to a grinding halt.

And when they met together, Luke records in verse 6, they asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Now, the reason he asked this question was because the expectation of the Jewish people was, quite simply, that when the Messiah came, he would put everything to rights.

They would get the temple restored and rebuilt. They would get the Romans put in their place. And they would be re-established as the people of God, and obviously so.

[15:43] And now that Jesus is alive from the dead, still their thinking is oriented in a very nationalistic way. Hence their question. Are you at this time, the time in question, going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

The geography question. It's a question of chronology and it's a question of geography. And Jesus has to transform their thinking, recalibrate them. Now, he says, it's not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority.

You're thinking all wrong, he says. If you're thinking about the way in which all of the purposes of God will be fulfilled in history, then you need to think in terms of the coming of the Holy Spirit and of the proclamation of the gospel.

Here's the thing, says Jesus. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and this is what you will do. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Says Graham Goldsworthy, instead of the expected glorious reign of Christ in the new Jerusalem, we learn that the scepter of the risen Christ is the preached word that will be the focus of the worldwide missionary endeavor of the church.

[17:04] So Jesus stands with them and makes this clear to them. He ascends into heaven, the Spirit comes and off they go.

And you find Peter off to a tremendous start in Acts chapter 4, standing there and declaring, there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which they must be saved.

But he still has a way to go because at this point he's thinking totally nationalistically. At this point he's thinking solely in terms of Judaism. At this point he's thinking the way some people think throughout history which we might summarize as us four no more shut the door.

That is his approach to things. Very, very happy for this gospel to go out so that the Jewish people might be established in their place of solidarity and of usefulness.

And it takes a quite classic encounter that I'll leave you to read on your own in Acts chapter 10 the vision which is followed by Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius and there in that context he stands and he says I now realize that God does not show favoritism.

[18:19] I now know that God has no peculiar nations. I now know that this gospel is a gospel for the entire world.

That red and yellow, black and white, all the children in his sight, they are the precious children of the world and that dawns on him and that is a vast step forward in the putting together of this large painting because they are coming from every nation and tribe and people and language.

The history of the western world in terms of Christianity is the history of nations wrapping the cross in their own flag. Britain did it.

America does it. And every proud and arrogant nation needs to realize that God does not show favorites. That he has no special favored nation status.

And he is concerned for the peoples of the world. Therefore, those who are his children will be marked by their concern for the peoples of the world.

[19:33] Otherwise, we would be thinking completely selfishly and that would never do. The gospel shatters all man-made barriers of race.

We have a story to tell to the nations that will turn their hearts to the right. Let me just say parenthetically, let me remind you of what you ought to know.

The nations of the world are in Glasgow in a way that they are not in Cleveland, Ohio. The continents of the world are in this city.

People may be reached around the globe as a result of the activities of your fellowship placed strategically in the heart of a strategic city in the entire western world.

You know that. I'm jealous for your opportunity. I wish I were here to share it.

[20 : 45] I share it as I pray for you. But you are the hands. You are the feet. You are the lips. Oh yes, you are. Now when you take those little pencil sketches and come back to the big picture, let's go back to it again.

This is an indication of encouragement that we're starting to move at least towards the end. We've descended to 10,000 feet. You can still make use of your headsets. I'll let you know when to turn them off.

But we are now looking again at this great multitude. Some of you who read the Bible very quickly have already gone back up to the beginning of chapter 7 and you've seen that it all has to do with 144,000.

And you're saying to yourself, typical of someone like Begg that he starts at verse 9 so he could skip all the 144,000 stuff, all the good stuff. Well, no. No, that may not skip it for you so that you can't lay that charge to my feet.

There are more theories about the 144,000 than I've had hot lunches. They are as wild as they are unnecessary. Let me tell you what I think is right and you can enjoy a good conversation over lunch concerning this.

[22 : 02] I think that we are on the right track when we see the 144,000 and the company in verse 9 as one and the same multitude.

In the same way, the Israel of God as described as an exclusive community is the same community as those described as a company that is so disparate in its multinational complexity that nobody from a human perspective could analyze it and systematically put their arms around it.

So in other words, what you have is from God's perspective you have a perfect number and you have the Israel of God. From the human perspective, you have an innumerable company that we cannot quantify and you have a complex gathering of people that are frankly from all over the place with no apparent rhyme nor reason to them at all.

But from God's sight, the perfect number here, the square of 12 by the cube of 10 is what John heard. That's what he heard. I heard there was a company that was a perfect number and what did he see?

He saw a number that he couldn't count. Jews. And how did God describe them? As the Israel of God. As those who are redeemed by his purposes, Jew and Gentile, all put together in this community.

[23 : 28] But from a human perspective, it just looked like the rag bag of humanity. Who are all of these people? God's ways are not our ways.

Nor are his thoughts our thoughts. But the picture is clear. And this is the issue. There will be no empty seats. There will be no no-shows.

There will be nobody coming to the box office asking if anybody has returned tickets and if there is a possibility that they could get in for the late showing. That will not happen.

That's not for a moment to suggest that somehow or another the company will be sparse. No. It is a company that no one can count. That's why we started in Genesis 15 with pencil sketch number one.

And in Genesis 15 God takes Abraham outside and he says, look up at the stars. And he does. And he says, now I like you to count them before you go to bed. And Abraham said, no, I can't count them before I go to bed.

[24 : 36] They are impossible to count. And God said, and that is the way it's going to be when I put together a people for myself from every nation and tribe and language.

It will be an innumerable company. God loves saving people. He loves saving people. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

That whosoever believes in him may have eternal life. You would think if we actually believed that, that we would be on the streets to declare it.

Incidentally, I had a thought this morning. I have great ideas for other people and never for myself. But as I was in the shower this morning, I thought of the Tron players.

the Tron troop. I thought that God may put together a group of artists, that is, dramatic artists, to engage the traveling company of this city.

[25 : 55] After all, if somebody can put the crowd together, he put on Thursday afternoon, standing on top of a stepladder, trying to get himself out of a bunch of chains that didn't look that hard to me, and can make as much money as he did, and if this is an arts community as it is, and if there are

converted actors as there are, then what an amazing opportunity.

You've got your hope. Somebody made a precinct for you right out here. And there will be people added to the big picture as a result of that.

Well, you see, the people in the big picture, we need to be in no doubt as we draw this to a close. Who are they? That was the question that was asked. Who are these folks? Well, I answered, you actually know who they are.

They are the ones who are, if we might summarize it, they are cleansed and they're clothed. Cleansed and clothed. These individuals are those who by faith have received the gift of the righteousness of Christ to clothe them before the searching gaze of God.

They are those who have come in repentance and have trusted in Jesus and they have been covered over by his righteousness. They are, if you like, in the words of the hymn writer, those described in these terms, all these once were sinners, defiled in your sight, now arrayed in pure garments, in praise they unite.

[27 : 24] That's the company. Now, here's the final exercise. Imagine the company. I'm going to imagine it. This is the painting right here.

And you'll just see it's quite magnificent. I'm sure you can see the people forming up in your mind's eye already. And I wonder, do you see up in the right-hand corner there, the lady who was looking for love in all the wrong places.

Zacchaeus. She had gone out to the well. She had five husbands and a live-in lover. But actually, you'll see her. She's up there in the right-hand corner. And on the far end, on the back row, surprisingly, the small man, the little cheat, remember who was skimming the profits, working on behalf of the Romans and sticking it to his own people?

Crafty little businessman, Zacchaeus. There he is. You see him? What about the black man that was riding in the chariot coming back from the equivalent of the EMA in Jerusalem and reading his Bible?

Morgan Freeman in his chariot riding along. And up comes Dustin Hoffman and says, do you understand what you're reading? And the big black man meets a funny little Jew. And you'll see him.

[28 : 47] He's right there. He's right there in the painting. You'll see also the thief who got it right just at the last moment. He's there too. You might see faces of people who've gone before.

Do you see your own face there? Do you see your own face there? You can't paint your face in. It is by grace that every name and every face is added.

And if you do see your face there, then do you realize, I'm sure you do, that the privilege and responsibility that is given to us is to say with Samuel Rutherford, a good Scotsman from an earlier era, because I am his own, God be thanked, he may use me as he pleases.

Because I am his own, God be thanked, he may use me as he pleases. The key to the impact of the Tron in the next quarter of a century, under God, enabled by God's spirit, lies in the mobilization of the congregation en masse.

So that the work of the building of the church, the work of the engaging of people with the gospel, is a work into which those enter happily who long to see this painting enlarged and expanded to the point where it runs right off the canvas, top, bottom and at either side.

[30 : 36] yesterday when we were driving around in Ayrshire, I drove just for part of the time and I drove past a monument about a hundred yards and then back up again.

And there it was and you know what it was, it was a monument just to five covenanters, I haven't remembered their names. They just said their names. Just a date, 17 something.

We just stopped and looked. Without them, there's no us. And the next generation waits to take the torch from this generation.

We bear the torch that flaming fell from the hands of those who gave their lives proclaiming that Jesus died and rose.

Ours is the same commission, the same glad message ours and fired by the same ambition to God.

[31 : 49] We yield our powers. Father, thank you for the Bible. Thank you for the assurance that we have that Christ reigns supreme.

It doesn't always seem so, but it is so. And we pray that this will not make us lethargic, but rather that it will enlarge our vision, establish the work of our hands, O God, we pray.

For we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.