

16. See He is coming

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Date: 10 April 2011

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[0 : 0 0] Some time ago, a prominent theologian said, an event which hasn't happened in 2,000 years isn't going to happen. It's a non-event. Proving, of course, what Peter says in his second letter, that in the last days mockers will arise who will say, where is this coming that he promised? Our subject today is, see he is coming, because the previous chapter have brought us to the very brink of that coming, but now in this chapter there's this long-promised event. This event promised as far back in the book as chapter 1, verse 7c, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will look on him. This event is now happening and ushering in the very end of this, the old order. The final downfall of the anti-God forces which have opposed God ever since the Garden of Eden, the coming to the end of the old creation and the introducing of the new creation. This week and next week we're going to look at these chapters 19 and 20 and I want to say one thing right at the beginning. We are not looking at these chapters as a Rubik cube, as a puzzle to be deciphered and everyone gasps at the ingenuity of how it all fits together. That is not the point of these chapters. These chapters are given as a living word for God to help us here and now in the present. If these things are going to happen, how are we going to live now? And to refer back to 2 Peter again, that's exactly what Peter says as he talks about the solution of the old world order and the coming of the new. He says this, since all these things are going to be dissolved, what kind of people are we to be in all lives of godliness and honesty? This is about godly living in the present and though obviously it refers to the future, nevertheless the future is given to help us to live now in the light of then. I'm also going to take chapters 19 and 20 as parallel chapters describing the same event. So when we come to the millennium muddle next week, I hope that will give us some light on it because Revelation 20 has been described as the most difficult chapter in the Bible. So if you think what we've had up to now has been difficult, just wait till next Sunday. Hopefully by then I'll have some idea of what it means.

He is coming with clouds. And in this chapter we have, if you like, three parallel movements. Let me see what they are and then we'll go into them. First of all we have accepting God's judgment in verses 1 to 5. Perhaps better at claiming God's judgment. Then in verses 6 to 10 anticipating the wedding. And then in verses 11 to 21 announcing the coming.

These are the events surrounding the coming again of Christ. I'm going to suggest next week that what we have here as a kind of snapshot is presented in chapter 20 more as a kind of sequence of events, a more gradual series of events. First of all then, rejoicing in God's judgments, acclaiming, accepting God's judgments. Now, if I were to ask you, where in the New Testament does the word Hallelujah appear? You probably might, you might well think throughout the whole book, but it isn't.

The word Hallelujah appears only in one chapter in the New Testament, that is to say this chapter, and it appears four times. This great word, praise Yahweh, praise the God of Israel, praise the God of creation, praise the God of history, very fittingly comes as God's purpose is near its climax.

And here, as in chapters 4 and 5, as in chapters 11, 14 and 15, we have echoes of the worship of heaven. It's just like if you tune into a particular channel, and then music breaks through from another dimension.

[4 : 45] Now, it's real music from a real channel, and it can be annoying, of course, if you're trying to listen to something and something else is breaking in. So this music from heaven is not fantasy music, it's not music from La La Land, it's music from a real dimension, the saints in heaven.

Real music from a real place. And they are rejoicing because evil has been destroyed. You see, in the new creation, it's not just about personal salvation.

I think that's important for the later chapters of the book, and we'll come to that in due course. It is about personal salvation, that's hugely important. As we've seen in Romans, in our studies recently, God is bringing his children to glory.

But as in Romans chapter 8, when the sons of God, the sons and daughters of God are made perfectly like Christ, that's accompanied by the renewal, the glorious renewal of creation.

So it is in these later chapters of Revelation. So, saying and singing hallelujah is not just saying and singing hallelujah because we've been saved, which is wonderful and glorious.

[5 : 58] We don't thank God often enough for that, do we? But it is praising God that his purposes are going to be fulfilled, that creation is not going to be filled with tsunamis and dust bowls and violence and plague and earthquake, but it's going to be a renewal of what he originally intended.

Now that can only happen if evil is destroyed. Only the removal of evil will make possible this new creation. That's why in the Old Testament, when people, when the psalmist in particular, praise God for his coming, this is what Psalm 96 says, Let the heavens, the earth rejoice, let the seas, let the fields clap their hands, let the forests shout with joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth.

That is why the world creation is rejoicing, because its curse is going to be removed, its true king is going to return, and he comes to judge the earth.

And this is also the answer to the prayers of the saints earlier in the book. In chapter 6, in chapter 8, in chapter 10 of this book, the saints have prayed, How long, O Lord?

How long is this violence? How long is this persecution? How long is this unbelief going to continue? Well, here is the answer. It will not continue forever, because Christ will return, and when Christ returns, enemies will be destroyed.

[7 : 34] So they are rejoicing, verse 2, For he has judged the great prostitute, who corrupted the earth with immorality, to avenge on her the blood of his servants. We remember some weeks ago, we looked at these chapters, 17 and 18, about the fall of Babylon, the anti-God city and the anti-God spirit.

And that's why they are rejoicing, in verse 3, The smoke from her goes up forever and ever. Sometimes felt this is sub-Christian. Some of the commentators go badly astray at this point, and say this is sub-Christian.

He's not sub-Christian. Unless Babylon is destroyed, there can be no new creation. There can be no full salvation. There can be no will of God done on earth, as it is in heaven.

That's how serious it is. And that is why heaven is rejoicing. But notice verses 4 and 5. It's not just heaven who is rejoicing. From the throne came a voice saying, Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.

That's very clearly his servants on earth. Because the servants in heaven are already rejoicing. They're already praising God. This is a call to join the worship of the redeemed and of the angels in heaven.

[8 : 51] Singing in anticipation. And what are they singing? And what are we to sing? And there are really two notes. There is hallelujah, of course, which is rejoicing in the victory of God.

He has won. He has conquered. This is the day of coronation arriving. And as we struggle on earth, we sing that song in anticipation.

In anticipation of the day that will come. Now, R.L. Stephenson said that to travel, hopefully, is a better thing than to arrive. We all know that experience. Plan and long for something, and it turns out to be an anticlimax.

The whole point about these later chapters of Revelation is that there will be no anticlimax, because there will be so far beyond anything we could have anticipated. But as we sing and rejoice on earth with the saints and angels in heaven, we're already joining that victory chorus.

One of our hymn says, which we'll probably sing in a few weeks' time, We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. But it's the same song. The other note of the song is Amen.

[9 : 57] What does Amen mean? Amen means responding to the God's purpose with all our hearts. Not a grudging, Oh, Amen, you know, so be it, and so on.

It is a vigorous, purposeful rejoicing in God's purpose. As we sing on earth, we sing many things, and we thank God for the great variety of songs and hymns that we have today.

Some of it old, some of it new. And we thank God for those He has gifted to write words, and those He has gifted to play tunes, and so on. But all of them really are summed up in this Hallelujah and Amen.

That's the song of heaven, and it's the song on earth. So, acclaiming, rejoicing at His judgment, praising the Lord, for He comes to judge the earth.

Now, I've often said that the book of Revelation is rather like an art gallery, where you go around various pictures, and sometimes in art galleries, you have pictures on a particular theme, or by a particular artist, clustered in a particular room.

[11 : 07] Now, as we have seen the church in heaven and on earth, acclaiming, rejoicing, anticipating God's judgment, we now come to anticipating the wedding.

Great Pian of Praise, verse 6, Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, Hallelujah.

Once again, you say, Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. But there's a new picture introduced here, the picture of the wedding. Now, one of the things we've noticed, all through Revelation, is how Revelation takes up, and brings to fruition, the imagery, the pictures, the ideas, of the Old Testament.

And one of the ways in which we can interpret this puzzling book, is by seeing how these earlier images have been used. So this is the culmination of the covenant imagery of Scripture.

Throughout Scripture, God relates to his people, and he relates to the universe by covenant. We've seen this before, creation itself is a covenant, a gift of love, which God gives.

[12 : 26] And throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh, the Lord, is the bride of Israel. And in the New Testament, the church, is the bride of Christ.

Now, in a Jewish, in a Jewish wedding, the betrothal, what we call the engagement, was as significant as the wedding. This was, this was part, indeed, the build-up to the wedding.

What John is saying here is, the engagement is over. The wedding day has arrived. That's what he's saying now. And the bride is dressed for her wedding.

Unlike the prostitute Babylon, who's dressed in scarlet and finery and luxury, the bride is dressed in white linen, fine linen, bright and pure. Once again, we go back to the Old Testament, for there, to find the meaning of that.

On the great day of atonement, Aaron, the high priest, and his successors, wore white linen to symbolise purity, to symbolise repentance. And that's why the bride is dressed in white.

[13 : 35] Now, this is not the gospel of good works, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. John is not saying that, well, the bride is dressed in fine linen, which is made for herself.

This is the gift of grace. The bride's life has proved, her deeds have proved, her loyalty to the Saviour.

Not, of course, perfectly, because we are still fallen, but the bride on earth has shown a transformed life, and now is dressed in white for the wedding.

This is the wedding supper, the wedding party, is about to come. You remember how often this appears in Scripture? In the book of Proverbs, wisdom and folly, both invite us to their parties.

They sound absolutely alike, they say the same words, and they look alike, until you get there, and you discover that folly's party is dust and ashes, very literally, whereas wisdom's party is all the blessings that God, the Creator and the Saviour, has to give us.

[14 : 41] In Isaiah 25 and 55, people are welcome to the great party. Everyone who is thirsty, come to the waters. And it's a very generous party.

Not just bread and water, but wine and milk as well. And then the parable of the great banquet that Jesus himself told. So, this is one of the pictures of the new creation, the wedding of the Lamb.

One of the things we'll notice when we come to chapters 21 and 22 is, if we're going to look at what the Bible has to say about the world to come, let's remember there are many, many, many pictures used, and we mustn't overemphasise one of them.

Otherwise, we're going to get a very skewed idea of the world to come. The idea of sitting on a cloud, strumming a harp, has never appealed to me. It doesn't excite me at all. The problem is, that's taking only one picture, the concert, the choir, which is our picture of the world to come, to be supplemented by all these others, like the joy, the glory of the wedding day, and so on.

And this experience is totally overwhelming. Look at verse 10. I fell down at his feet to worship him. John is so overwhelmed that all he can do is worship.

[15 : 57] But he said to me, you must not do that. I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers. John made a mistake, but it was the right kind of mistake. Rather like Peter on the Transfiguration Mountain long, long before this, when he had said, let's build three tents.

One for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Now, he wasn't wrong when he said, it's good for us to be here. What he was wrong was elevating Moses and Elijah to the status of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so it is here. John is so overwhelmed. He falls down to worship the angel. And notice what the angel says. I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers. I said before, we need to thank God more than we do for the ministry of angels.

Angels who help us in our earthly life. Who are given the task of bringing us to glory. Helping us in our earthly life. This is another example of it.

And then this wonderful phrase, the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Now I think what that means is this, that what the Bible is about is Jesus himself.

[17 : 06] What did the prophets speak about? They spoke of the one who was to come, the suffering servant, the reigning king, all these various pictures throughout the Old Testament.

The spirit of prophecy, and of course the spirit is also the Holy Spirit. The spirit who took these words originally and gave them, and now helps us as we read these words to see Christ in them.

That's why I have called this whole series on Revelation, Christ, the first word and the last word. Because in scripture he is the first word and the last word, and in time and eternity he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending.

So we're anticipating the wedding. The wedding day, the bride has made herself ready. Not made herself ready by her good works, but her good works have shown that the spirit of God in her has made her ready by the sacrifice of the Lamb.

And that then blends into the third picture, anticipating the coming, verses 11 to 21. In chapter 4, back in chapter 4, a door had been opened in heaven, and John had been summoned up to see more deeply what was there.

[18 : 23] Here now, heaven itself is opened, and the promised event as the warrior Messiah, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords rise out of heaven, accompanied by the armies of heaven.

It's hardly necessary to say this, but I will. This is not the rider on the white horse of chapter 6, which were rode out of heaven when the Lamb unleashed the seals of judgment.

because it's very hard to imagine the Lamb unleashing the seals and then becoming part of the drama himself. And in any case, that rider is accompanied by death and Hades and famine and pestilence and plague.

This rider is accompanied by the armies of heaven to judge in righteousness and to make war. And this is once again is a very rich picture drawn from the earlier scriptures.

And as John brings before us this awesome event, which he was given access to by the Spirit, he uses the image of the wine press in Isaiah 63.

[19 : 34] Isaiah 63 talks about the God treading out the wine press, anticipating the last judgment, trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.

So the image of the wine press of earth trampled out, which the, if you like, it's a version in some ways of the vine metaphor that Jesus had used so long before.

The bad branch is cast away and the good branch is pruned. Now here, as he treads the wine press, the damaged, the bad grapes are trodden underfoot.

And the good grapes are preserved for the harvest. It's also a reference to Psalm 2. We sang earlier, verse 2, he will roll them with a rod of iron.

That's once again Psalm 2 and in verse 15. God's King has come to reign. And what is being fulfilled now is the prayer that has been prayed for centuries.

[20 : 38] Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Now that will has only been done imperfectly and partially in our own lives and in the lives of the world.

On that day when the King comes back, when he establishes his kingdom, God's will will perfectly be done on earth as it is in heaven. So that picture of the conquering warrior Messiah, which ultimately goes back, of course, to the Exodus story, to the Lord, the warrior, who is like Yahweh, who can make war on him, and ultimately destroys the pretensions of the beast and the false prophet.

The second image that's used is in verses 13 and 16. He is clothed in the robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the word of God.

and then again in verse 16, a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. I know there's an earlier reference to the name in chapter 12.

I'm going to come back to that in a minute. The point about the name in verses 13 and 16 is this is the revealed name, the word of God.

[21 : 59] One of the many links between the gospel and the revelation because the word of God is particularly John's name. The word of God who became flesh and lived among us.

The word who is what God is saying to us. Not just in words but in his whole personal living word who is revealed to us in the written word.

And then King of kings and Lord of lords. Remember the background of the book of Revelation once again. This was the name the emperor Domitian claimed. He called himself King of kings and Lord of lords.

He had the keys of death if you like. Martyring and murdering many people. Martyring Christians and others. It wasn't just as we noticed already. When the devil slaughters it's indiscriminate.

It's not just Christians. It's not just God's people. He hates everybody in delights and slaughter and bloodshed. So here is the true king come. The king who has been revealed right from the beginning of scripture.

[23 : 01] The son of man the last Adam who comes to establish his kingdom on earth. Notice verse 12. He has a name written that no one knows but himself.

That means even with the revelation we are given there are mysteries about the Lord Jesus Christ that we will never fully understand. We must never imagine that we understand everything about him or we've got it all sewn up.

His mystery all let earth adore let angel minds inquire no more as Wesley sang the known name and the unknown name the name by which he is known which is the name of our salvation the name of glory the name of wonder but the name which is unknown what he is in himself which we can never fully understand.

But notice we come now to the battle of Armageddon which is mentioned in chapter 16 come gather for the great supper of God and notice this great supper of God is a grisly parallel to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

But to call it a battle is really a misnomer there is no fighting takes place at all because the opposition when it meets the rider on the white horse is totally and hopelessly outgunned.

[24 : 33] But the metaphor that's used here is the sword isn't it? Verse 21 The rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth.

Now what is that sword? That sword is the gospel itself the living word of God the word which as Hebrews says pierces right to the dividing of joints and marrow right deeply into our hearts.

This is the final vindication of that word. Remember why John was on pathmos? He was on pathmos for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

That word often seemed then and does seem now pretty ineffective. This word is not widely believed in. This word is not widely accepted.

On that day the truth of that word will be demonstrated beyond belief, beyond unbelief, beyond any kind of doubt. This is what one of the commentators says.

[25 : 42] It was by no material weapons but by the power of the gospel that Christ conquered the pagan Roman empire. By that same power he has continued to conquer in history and by that power he will conquer in the end.

So in our day we listen to the gospel being mocked. We listen to the assaults of the new atheism, the indifference, the political correctness and so on.

Let's remember that in the end that is the word which is going to prevail. Christ is the last word and he will have the last word. That's what we mean when we see he's king of kings and lord of lords.

He is going to have the last word. That word will not be a different word from what we preach and proclaim now, what we believe in now. You see why I say these chapters are given to help us to live today.

When we begin to lose confidence in the gospel, remember the gospel cannot be stopped. The gospel cannot be destroyed.

[26 : 51] It may appear to be destroyed, it may be driven underground, the world may mock it, the church leaders may deny it and refute it and reject it, but that word will one day reign in heaven and in earth.

So as we acclaim God's judgment, as we announce the wedding, as we anticipate the coming, let me just finish off by saying this, no matters because of then.

What we are doing now is of enormous significance. This is not telling us to go away and live in cloud cuckoo land, draw up road maps of the events that will lead to the coming and speculate on how these will be fulfilled.

This is encouragement to believe in that word, to proclaim it, to believe in its conquering power and to realise that one day it will be seen to be true, that nothing can prevent the coming of Christ.

Now how the book begins, I am he that lives and was dead and now I am alive forever more. When the New Testament writers speak of the resurrection, they don't just see it as something at the end of time or even an event in the middle of history, they see it as an irreversible move towards the last judgment.

[28 : 13] That's why Paul says in Athens, God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. How do we know that? Because he's raised that man from the dead.

The gospel will succeed, said Spurgeon. The gospel must succeed. It cannot be prevented from succeeding and to that let's say in the words of the worshipping heavenly host, hallelujah and amen.

Let's pray. God our Father, we know very well that sometimes as the bride of Christ we have been very unfaithful to our heavenly lover.

We have tired of him, we have disowned him, but we praise you that he has never disowned us, that he loves us and he will bring all his people safely to that great wedding day.

As we anticipate his coming, we say with the book of Revelation, even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.