

A window to the Future

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[0 : 00] The theme of the sermon this evening will be a continuation of what I tried to speak about this morning. This morning it was the book of Revelation, a witness to the past.

And this evening I would like to concentrate on the book of Revelation, a window to the future. Now, if you remember this morning the passages of Scripture were from chapters 1 and 2, and just a few minutes ago I read you selections from the last two chapters.

Now, in between there are some very wonderful things that we do not have time this evening to look into. But the writer was inspired to provide a very structured kind of book.

And it's marvelous to see how, in a way, he repeats the same kinds of teaching, for as a good teacher he knows that repetition serves to reinforce the truth, while at the same time interlarding every so often an interlude so as to break the monotony of a repetition.

There are the seven seals that are broken from the scroll, the scroll which the Lamb has taken from the right hand of him who sits upon the throne.

[1 : 37] And successively judgments are meted out to those who have misused the power that God has allocated to them. This is followed by a second series of seven.

This time, seven angels sound their trumpets of judgment. And once again, there are many interesting and powerful descriptions, symbolic descriptions of great and terrible catastrophes, that reinforce this understanding that God rules and overrules.

And despite what human beings do, whether as individuals or as institutions and nations, God and his purpose prevail.

Then there follows successively a number of other chapters that provide again an interlude. So much catastrophe, so much chaos, and the quiet and the calm provided for the people of God to encourage them that despite what happens in persecution, God's eye is upon them.

He knows their needs and will meet them. And then the third of these three series, the sounding of the trumpet, is followed by the pouring out of the seven bowls of the wrath of God.

[3 : 18] And with the same kind of teaching that God rules and overrules. You might say that the author is trying to tell us that God is almighty, God has all power, and he has allocated to human beings a measure of power.

Since human beings have, in the exercise of that power, their free will, when they misuse the power that God has allocated to them, then God must of necessity punish through the judgments that come about because of that misuse on man's part of the portion of power allocated.

God does not intend that famine and persecution and war and hell should exist. But they exist because they come about through the aberration of human misuse of the power that God has allocated.

Now the climax of that kind of disruptive power comes at the battle of Armageddon.

And in chapter 16, verse 16, we are told that the kings of the earth are gathered together at the place which in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

[5 : 02] And now the great final conflict. Hitherto there have been individual skirmishes and battles. Now God against the devil Christ against the antichrist the people of God against the enemies of the people of God and the outcome of that conflict is the victory on God's part.

Now just before the opening of the section that I read this evening we pay attention to the fall of Babylon.

Chapters 18 and 19 just from the point of view of literature are magnificent pieces of just literature. It's inspired literature and tells us something about God's purpose.

if I had time I would like to read to you the whole of those two chapters in which we are shown the symbol of the antagonism of the Roman Empire portrayed as a harlot sitting upon a scarlet beast

with enticements that will lead people astray and which in the end will result in their own destruction.

Here we have under the term Babylon a kind of symbolism for the Roman Empire. We're told that she is seated upon seven hills.

[6 : 47] Well that of course would indicate the city of Rome. And throughout these two chapters there is a magnificent depiction of God's final judgment against that government that has begun a systematic persecution against Christian believers.

A persecution that began earlier in the 90s of the first century when the Emperor Domitian decreed that everyone should address him as Lord and God and should enter his temples dedicated to him a human being offer incense and worship him Domitian as Lord and God.

So this kind of turning the real reality of worshipping God on its head now comes to a climax. The author knows that he must use a kind of code language for if his book in which he says that God will destroy Rome would perhaps fall into the hands of the imperial police that would be not right.

So he uses the term in the Old Testament that typifies the antagonism against the Israelites in their Babylonian captivity.

He says Babylon will fall. But Christian believers know that he is speaking now in a cryptic way about Rome. In chapter 19 with magnificent Pesach speaks about fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great?

[8 : 40] In one hour thy fall has come about. Now Babylon was still magnificent when this was written in the 90s.

Rome did not fall until the 5th Christian century. But our author writes this as though Rome has already fallen because as the prophets in the Old Testament sometimes do, they use what is called the prophetic perfect tense, speaking about God's will as already having taken place because the prophet is so assured that God's will is to take place.

Well, at the end then of this series of accounts of the fall of Babylon at Rome, our author introduces the readers to the millennium in chapter 20, which has puzzled commentators over many generations, but it speaks about the time when God's will is to prevail.

And then it comes at the end of chapter 20, the last judgment, when everyone, small and great, high and low in the social ladder, will stand before the judgment seat of God.

There'll be no absentees, there'll be none that will be missed out, all will stand there to receive according to their work.

[10 : 32] book. This then ushers in the passages that were read a moment ago about the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven.

And it's here that we want to concentrate our attention for the next minute to feel the exhilaration of understanding that this prophet of God was inspired to disclose in his writing what is in the future for believers.

He begins in chapter 21, I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea.

Already in the Old Testament, Isaiah had predicted in both chapter 65 and chapter 66, that there would be a new heaven and a new earth.

And now the last book of the Bible describes briefly and just by intimation what this new heaven and new earth will be. Now in the Greek language there are two words that are translated into English by the word new.

[11 : 54] new. One of these Greek words means something that is other. It's new in the sense that it takes the place of something else.

It is something that is different, yes, to some extent. That word is not used here. The word in Greek that is used here and is translated new means something that's totally new.

Something that is absolutely different. Something that is not in time but in eternity. Something that we'll see in a moment involves a city of gold.

This is the new heaven and the new earth. There is some continuity of course but it is renewed totally. Here then we have John saying that the first earth has passed away and there is no more sea.

That's a remarkable statement. For some people land and sea together comprise and balance each other and to have only one rather than the other means that the terrain is somehow missing in its two components.

[13:21] What would this mean that in heaven there is no more sea? Once again we remind ourselves that this author uses symbolism in various places and we need to take into account that his descriptions are descriptions of the symbol rather than of the reality conveyed by the symbol.

He has used in this book and Jewish people in the Old Testament days used the term sea as typifying what is turbulent, what is disruptive, what separates people from loved ones.

And if we think of it in this light we can see how beautiful this thought is that he tells us there is no more sea in heaven in the sense that there's peace and harmony, no longer turbulence, no more that which as earlier in this book he spoke about the beast that rises out of the sea.

Of course there's no place for that in heaven. I, John, he continues, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven.

Coming down from God. This city is not created by human ingenuity. This city is created by God and comes down and is prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

[15:03] husband. Someone has said, perhaps humorously, that the time in the life of any woman to be extravagant is to prepare for her wedding.

Certainly in the Near East, a bride is adorned at the time of the wedding. And the author here uses this homely, everyday expression to indicate something of the magnificence of this city.

This city is adorned, beautified, as a bride for her husband. Then John continues, I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men and he will dwell with them and they shall be his people and God himself shall be with them and be their God.

That's in the positive way. God will be sensibly present with his people. And then negatively, God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things have passed away.

Those are comforting words that often are read at a committal service at the graveside. And down through the ages, from the time that John was inspired to write these words at the close of the first Christian century, until today, they have brought hope and fear and encouragement to the hearts of believers.

[16:58] Then, verse 5, He that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.

And he said to me, Write, for these words are true and faithful. I wondered at various times when it was that John who had been incarcerated as a prisoner on this rocky island of Patmos, he had been sent there, as they say, in white martyrdom because he was persecuted for not bending the knee to worship Domitian.

I wondered when it would be that he would acquire writing material. I doubt whether these were available to him on that desert kind of island.

But tradition tells us that after the death of Domitian in year 96, John, an elderly man by now, was able to return once again to his beloved city of Ephesus.

And certainly then he could acquire writing materials. He put down for words that are true and faithful.

[18:22] These words are true and faithful. That phrase is repeated in the last chapter where it says these words are faithful and true.

True. truth is against falsehood but faithful carries with it the idea of the encouragement, the trustworthiness, the fidelity with which a person can put his or her trust and commitment wholly in the scriptures.

well, we must omit at least part of the intervening but I really must tell you something about the description that he follows, which was not read aloud a moment ago, of this heavenly Jerusalem. He tells us that the heavenly Jerusalem is also the bride and as the bride joined now with the lamb it means that he is using with mixed metaphor heavenly Jerusalem as an image of the church.

The church and heavenly Jerusalem involve the society of the people of God now in union with the lamb at the marriage supper of the lamb.

[20:07] He goes on to describe rather precisely the dimensions of this city and we are astounded. He says that it is 1,200 furlongs each direction broad high wide.

Architecturally that's preposterous for a city. But he wants us to understand symbolically that he's talking about the perfect city.

To the ancients among the geometrical shapes the cube was regarded as the perfect geometrical shape. this was in fact the dimensions of the holy of holies in the tabernacle in the old testament days.

Same height width length. So he wants us to know that in every respect this city new Jerusalem is a perfect city but it's lustrous it's gleaming it is gold.

He says the street of this city is gold. Now of course in ancient times there were not macadamized roads or cement highways roads in antiquity and rainy weather were a mass of mud.

[21 : 36] in dry weather a cloud of dust but in heaven the street is gleaming as gold. He tells us also that it had a wall and twelve gates and these three gates on each of the four sides and at the gates the gates were in the shape of a pearl.

once again astounding. He simply wants to overpower us. How could a spherical shape serve as a gate?

We're not to ask ourselves in this pedophaguing literalistic way. We should allow us to have a disciplined imagination and to be carried along with the poetic imagery in order to convey to us truths which are really beyond our comprehension.

Well he tells us that the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones and he indicates these successively and concludes verse 22 I saw no temple therein for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

the whole city is a temple nor did the city have need for sun nor moon here the gates shall never be shut by day an ancient city if it were besieged would have the gates shut day and night at peace an ancient city would have the gates open by day but closed by night lest there be a sneak attack here there is no night and the gates are open constantly then this angel showed me chapter 22 a pure river of water of life clear as crystal proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb if it comes from the throne of God and of the Lamb then we can be sure that it is abundant there is no drought there is no diminution of the water of life its abundance is assured and then in the midst of the street of it on either side of the river was the tree of life the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nation that real ecology providing not only life spiritually but for the healing of society and nations now we come to what to my mind is really the climax of the whole book of Revelation there shall be no more curse but the throne of

[24 : 49] God and the Lamb shall be in it and his servants shall serve him there's a caricature about heaven that there the redeemed will each be sitting on a whiff of cloud and idly strumming at a harp with nothing to do and all eternity in which to do nothing no there's activity in heaven his servants shall serve him we're not told exactly what this activity will be but I'm sure it will be exhilarating it will be captivating in ever new ways of knowing about God and the most grand part comes in verse 4 the redeemed shall see God's face and his name shall be in the forehead to have the name on the forehead means that that person is precious in the sight of

God the philosophers have wondered what is the sumum bonum in life what is the greatest good that we can ever anticipate we're told here that the greatest good is to see God the opening question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism bears upon this what is the chief end of man why were we created the chief end of man of men and women is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever to see God St.

Augustine in his classic work the city of God was meditating what it means to see God he says now suppose in heaven we close our eyelids will that shut out the beatific vision no he says it can hardly mean that because we can see God also with the eyes of our mind not simply with our physical eyes eyes well every language uses the word see in different ways to see God is more than simply to look at him to gaze at him here's a boy working away at a problem in arithmetic he just works away he cannot find the answer and all of a sudden he says

I see it but he been looking at it all along he sees it and understands and comprehends to see God in this way means that we will comprehend and understand more of God and his way and his will and his glory to see God means that we'll have to have purified eyesight 20 20 vision to see God this we are told in the sermon on the mount when our Lord in the beatitude says blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God more than once in the new testament we are exhorted to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in order that we may be able the more readily to comprehend and to see God little by little now and more completely in heaven to see God in a word is to be near God to know God and to rejoice in God all at the same time there's an old saying that in heaven everyone's cup of joy will be full but some cups will be larger than others that is the degree to which one will be able to see God will depend in part upon the development of the capacity to know

[29 : 48] God to enjoy him and that means that purity of heart is necessary for those who will see God what does it mean to be pure gold is pure when it's not mixed with an alloy justice is pure when it's not mixed with partiality anything is pure when it's that thing alone purity of heart is to have a heart that is uncontaminated with selfish ambition it is to have an eye single to what God is purity of heart is to will one thing God's will the writer of the epistle of the hebrews says that we are to pursue holiness without which no one will see

God in the first epistle of John the author reminds us that now we are the children of God it does not yet appear what we shall be but we know that when he Christ appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is and that everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself as he is pure here then blessed are the pure in heart they shall see God as Paul to the Corinthians now we see through a glass darkly but then face to face but let us notice precisely what our author says the redeemed shall see his face what special nuance of meaning does this give to us to see the face of God in ancient days as we see in the Old Testament a person is described he sees the face of the king that does not mean simply that the king is happening to ride by and looks up and he sees the face of the king no to see the face of the king means to be given permission to enter the throne room of the king and to present personally face to face to the sovereign one's complaint or whatever it is that you need to consult with the sovereign that is to say to be ushered into the presence of God is what is spoken of here and to have that privilege of speaking openly freely to the

God who is the creator of the ends of the earth they shall see his face well our author at the end of this chapter brings it to a conclusion in what I read to you I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches I am the root and the offspring of David and the bright and morning star once again we must use our discipline imagination to say that Jesus is a mass of the morning star inert mass of star no we must not take it with flat footed literalism the morning star has this wonderful encouragement that after a long night the speck of light in the sky brings hope that now the night is soon past this is to be understood in a poetic way

Jesus Christ is the bright and morning star then at the end of this chapter he testifies unto everyone that hears the words of the prophecy of this book if any man shall add unto these things God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy God shall take away his part out of the book of life and out of the holy city and the things which are written in this book keep in mind that before the invention of printing with movable type Johannes Gutenberg 1456 in Mainz Germany but I may say parenthetically 40 years before that date

[35 : 21] Koreans had begun earlier to print with movable type I close the parenthesis now that before the invention of printing with movable type every book had to be transmitted to the next generation by patiently copying out by hand a long and laborious work it was at the end of some of the manuscripts of the Greek classics we find a two line couplet at the end put there after the text of the book is finished and the scribe says as the traveler rejoices to see the home country so the scribe rejoices to see the end of a book because for weeks and months sitting hunched over writing carefully yes it was laborious work to write a book now our author here is inspired to include these words of warning that any scribe who makes a copy of this book in handwritten or other form is to be certain to make a full and complete copy that if anyone omits anything it's very tiresome and perhaps the middle chapters can be omitted nobody perhaps notices at first and the book then is pawned off as a complete copy that is very wrong or on the other hand if some scribe reading these accounts with a vision gets all hepped up and he has some visions himself and he puts his visions with the visions of

John and enlarges the account adds to the account that again is wrong no the words of this book are like the words of the prophetic books of the Old Testament they are the inspired word of God and are to be transmitted with fidelity you might say in one way perhaps this would be the equivalent in ancient days of copyright today must be repeated unchanged but I come now to the last verse of this book the last verse of the Bible a wonderful verse of compassion of hope the book has contained some very distressing accounts of persecution of judgment it also has in some wonderfully encouraging things picture of new Jerusalem the possibility that to redeemed in heaven will see the face of God he ends now in this wonderful way the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all here he has in fact summed up that in this book there is hope there is encouragement because it is the grace of Jesus Christ the kindness the love the

compassion of our Lord and Savior that is committed to the readers of this book amen let us bow in a moment of meditation and then a prayer O eternal God seated upon the throne high and lifted up we thank thee that thou didst give the revelation of Jesus Christ through an angel to thy servant John and that faithful scribes have transmitted copies down through the ages help us we pray so to read mark inwardly digest and live out these promises that we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and in thy good time grant O Lord that thou wouldst welcome us into thy nearer presence saying well done thou good and faithful servant enter thou into the joy of thy Lord this we ask in the name of the Redeemer amen let us conclude our worship by singing Psalm 73 verses 23 to 26 the tune of Tiverton Psalm 73 verses 23 to 26 to the tune Tiverton Nevertheless continually

O Lord I am with thee thou dost me hold by thy hand and cheer the hold and me now with thy counsel while I live with me conduct and guide and to thy glory thee afterwards receive me to a high who can die in the heavens die as in the Lord alone and in thee death to my beside beside me there is none my pleasure of heart your faith has failed but

[42 : 29] God does fail me never for all my heart so in the strength and portion forever and forever now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and evermore amen