

The Conquering Christ

Message 1

The Magnificent Christ

Revelation 1:1-20

In the Spirit

Close your eyes and imagine you are the apostle John. You are living in the Roman penal colony on the island of Patmos. You were sent here because you were a constant disturber of the peace and a threat to society. You taught that some poor preacher named Jesus had risen from the dead and is establishing a universal empire which is better than Rome's. Romans are practical people, if anything, and they ignore the fantasies of such madmen – but you were different. Hundreds of people in Ephesus have already abandoned the gods and believe this nonsense. So here you are, an old man wasting away on this rock in the Mediterranean Sea.

It is the Lord's Day. You are gathered with the few other ragged believers to worship Jesus. According to the liturgy of the Lord's Day you have prayed for God's mercy on His people and read the holy scriptures. Now the pastor rises to preach, but suddenly instead of his scratchy voice you hear a voice, loud as thunder, clear as a trumpet. "Write what you see, and send it to the seven churches..." You turn around to see this visitor in the back of the congregation, and you are stunned! The rear of the building is transformed into a glorious scene. The back wall gives way to seven huge golden lampstands, and in the middle of them is a glorious figure. He looks like a man, but his appearance is overpowering. His hair is brilliant white, his clothing is amazing, his feet gleam like burning bronze, he holds seven stars in his hands (what sort of man can hold the stars?). But his face! A terrible sword shoots forth from his mouth, his eyes burn like fire, and his face blazes like the sun! You cannot look, you stagger and sway. You feel dead, and you crumple to the ground as this vision drains the life from you.

Who could this be? You must know. You have studied the scriptures and you know that the only man who wields the sword from his mouth and carries the stars in His hand is Jesus. But it has been 30 years since you last saw Him. Then He was rising into heaven, and since then you have been proclaiming that He rules the heavens and earth. But still, you know Him mainly as your earthy master and friend. Jesus is the man who taught the crowds, comforted the suffering, encouraged the poor, healed the sick, and raised the dead. Jesus stood up to the corrupt Jewish leaders, was unfazed by the Roman authorities, and bravely faced a horrible death. Then three days later He appeared again. For forty days He comforted and taught and encouraged you until He left. This is the man who loved you more than man is capable of loving – who died for you. Jesus is the man you love more than life – your master and friend. You hope to see Him again – but now the rush of memories and emotions collides with a vision so overpowering you fall over as though dead.

Why are you here tonight? (You can open your eyes now.) Are you here to meet Jesus? Really? If so, is this the person you expect to see? Or is the Jesus you seek a domesticated version of the real thing? Tonight we begin an exploration of the real Jesus – Jesus in all His magnificence, stripped of the superficial trappings that men cover Him with to conceal His glory. Join me this semester as we embark upon this wonderful journey – if you dare!

What is Revelation?

Before we continue to ponder this vision of Jesus, let us go back and fix the context. Revelation is a letter. Jesus told John to write a letter, that is what he did. The letter actually begins in verse four. The first three verses are a prologue which orients us to the letter.

The prologue makes three important points. First, this is a revelation. Some people treat this book as a concealment, not a revelation. They act as though God constructed some massive puzzle and challenges

us to figure it out. Some read Revelation and find it hard to understand, so they conclude that it is either incomprehensible, or is too difficult for anyone to understand. Others write massive books with complicated explanations which you and I never would have thought of on our own. Most people miss the simple clues to understanding this book.

Revelation is a picture book. We are not supposed to find meanings for all the details here, any more than you can find meaning in all the elements of the pictures in an art gallery. Pictures communicate by evoking thoughts and feelings that cannot be expressed in words. How can you explain in words the joy of a new mother when a baby is first laid on her belly, the distress of a father whose child was killed in an automobile crash, the delight of a child on Christmas morning? But you can capture these experiences in pictures. Most people misunderstand Revelation because they are looking for the wrong thing. They have read Paul's letters and grasped Paul's logical explanation of the Christian faith. Then they go to Revelation and look for a logical, systematic explanation of the end – but it is not here. Instead Revelation gives us pictures of the end – pictures which show us what will happen, and also how we should react to these events.

So why does God frustrate us like this, you say? Why does He tease us with pictures? Why does He not just tell us forthrightly what the end will be like? Why confuse us with pictures? Because that is the best way to tell the story. Remember, this is a *revelation*. God wanted to tell us about the end, and He chose the simplest, clearest, and best way to do so. If this frustrates you, the problem is with you. You have some preconceived idea of how God should communicate, and you insist on thinking you know better than He. That is not very humble is it? Part of submitting to God and His word is to submit to the form He chose to use in communicating with us. I urge you to stop expecting Revelation to speak in a way God never intended, and read it as He wants you to.

As a picture book Revelation has its own grammar. Pictures are made up of symbols combined in a certain way to create a whole message. In a simple landscape the symbols represent ordinary objects. A green puff with a brown stem is a symbol for a tree. But Revelation is a book about spiritual realities – things which cannot be seen with our earthly eyes. That means that God uses earthly symbols to represent spiritual realities. Here is where the difficulty comes. If this is the case, how can we know which spiritual reality is represented by a symbol? In the vision of Jesus in this chapter we see a sword coming from His mouth. What does that mean? Swords are sharp. Does it mean that Jesus speaks sharply to us? How can we know? Here is a vitally important point. One of the most fundamental principles of biblical interpretation is that scripture must be its own interpreter. We use the Bible to interpret itself. When we encounter a puzzling place in the Bible, we go to a clearer passage to find help in explaining it. So although there are a few places where it might seem on the surface that all people will be saved, we know from the many places that discuss the fate of those who never believe that not all will be saved. What this means for Revelation is that it is illegitimate to make up meanings for the symbols here. Virtually everything in this book comes from earlier scripture. The right way to understand Revelation is to understand the biblical use of the symbols. So when we read in chapter six that the sun became black and the moon turned to blood we do not think this means the moon will literally become red. We know this is a standard symbol with a specific meaning, because we saw it used in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Bible. As you become familiar with the whole Bible, Revelation begins to make much more sense.

Learning any language takes time, and this is true of the language of symbols. If I were to attempt to learn Chinese, it would be silly of me to argue with my teacher. After all, he is the one who knows Chinese. He may not be correct in everything he says, but I have to begin by trusting him to get it right most of the time. Similarly, I will not be right about everything as we discuss Revelation, but I ask you to give me a fair hearing. If you do, I think you will find yourself becoming much more comfortable with symbol language.

Events Soon to Come

The second point of the prologue is that this book is about events which will happen soon. It should not be necessary to state this because the book is self-evidently a letter to seven first century churches about their situation. But Jesus removes all doubt by using the word “soon” in verse one to mark the time of this prophecy. This word (Greek: *ταχος*) is used elsewhere to refer to events that were coming up immediately. (Acts 12:7; 22:14; 25:4; 1 Timothy 3:14) Then to emphasize the point, he says in verse three that “the time is near”. This word (Greek: *εγγυς*) is used all over the New Testament and means something which is just about to happen. (Matthew 3:2; 10:7; 26:18; Mark 1:15; 13:28-29; Luke 7:12; 15:1; 19:11; John 2:13; 11:18; Ephesians 2:13, 17; Philippians 4:5) Then at the end of the book, this point is hammered home again. In Revelation 22:6, 7, 10, 12, and 20 these two words are used to ensure that we get the message – the things in this book will happen soon! OK, so what does “soon” mean? We are not given a specific year and day, but by looking at the other uses of this word it is certain that it must refer to something in the lifetimes of those receiving the message.

Now I must admit that most scholars disagree with me on this point. I am not alone, but neither am I in the majority. Even my New Testament professor, Dr. Vern Poythress, whom I greatly admire, thinks Revelation predicts events yet to come. How can this be? There are several strands of thought that contribute to thinking Revelation speaks of the end of time. One is a dismal lack of understanding first century history. If you do not know what happened in the first century, you will not be able to recognize the events predicted here. Another problem is confusing several different first century periods of persecution. Revelation predicts a great persecution of the church. Was it the persecution under Nero in the 60s? Or Domitian in the 80s and 90s? Or some other emperor? Or is it some future persecution? Now you can see that the date of the book is of critical importance. If it was written late in the first century, as most scholars believe, either it is not a prediction of first century persecution, or it is not true prophecy. Christians who take the Bible as the word of God, who does not lie, will not accept Revelation as history masquerading as prophecy. Once you agree it was written late in the first century, you must take it as a prediction of events beyond the early church.

This means that the date of writing is critically important. Why do most scholars think it was written late in the first century? Because that is what virtually every other scholar says. But when you investigate the source of this thought, it all goes back to one man, a bishop named Irenaeus, who lived in the second century and grew up in Asia Minor. Now you would think that someone who lived that close to the time and place of Revelation would know when it was written. I also would be inclined to believe him. The problem is that Irenaeus’ statement was ambiguous, and he was wrong about other important dates. Irenaeus was a godly leader in the church, but he appears to have trouble with dates – like many of us! The best evidence points to Revelation being written between A.D. 60 and 70 before the first great persecution under Roman emperor Nero. That means that it is about events leading up to the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Maybe you think I am nuts to hold this view, but stick with me anyway. We can agree on the core meaning of Revelation even if we disagree on the exact reference point.

One brief additional note. Many people explain this first century reference in Revelation by pointing to 2 Peter 3:8. “...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Their thinking is that “soon” to God may take thousands of years. This is true as far as it goes. But a thousand years for *us* is still exactly a thousand years – and God sent this message to us. If He wishes to communicate with us, He will do it in terms that make sense to human beings. This sort of cryptic meaning only works if you assume that God is trying to make things difficult for us. Furthermore, the verse quoted is taken out of context. Peter used this comparison simply to illustrate God’s patience. It has nothing to do with how God measures time.

The prologue of Revelation concludes by conferring a special blessing on anyone who reads it. Notice the blessing is not for those who understand everything. It is for everyone – children and adults,

educated and uneducated, intelligent and unintelligent. In fact, it seems that children and uneducated people tend to understand Revelation best. They love the pictures and do not keep trying to unravel a puzzle that is not there. If there is a blessing to be obtained from reading Revelation, perhaps one reason the church is so weak today is that it has neglected this book or distorted its meaning.

The Eternal God

John's letter to the seven churches begins in verse four. Verses four to eight are a rich kaleidoscope of terms that describe the real author of this letter: God Himself. God is the eternal one – He who is and who was and who is to come. This is the New Testament version of God's covenant name which He revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:15. There God declared that His name was "I am what I am", typically pronounced Yahweh. This immediately sets God apart from any human being or any creation of human hand or mind. God spans time, is beyond time. God's reality is the most basic fact, and any attempt to replace Him with a man-made god, or the emperor, is entirely foolish.

Verse five introduces Jesus as the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the earth. These three attributes of Jesus provide three of the dominant themes of the book. Revelation is about judgment, and Jesus is the court's chief and most reliable witness. Revelation is about life and death. Jesus has power over both, for He experienced both. Revelation is about rule, and Jesus is the supreme ruler. There are other kings, some of whom pretend to the supreme throne. They will fall before Jesus. Revelation will show Jesus as the faithful witness, the giver of life and death, and the king who rules all other kings.

Next comes a three-part description about us, God's people. First, we are loved by Jesus. This is a mystery. Why would He who is, and who was, and who is to come love mere creatures like us? There is no rational explanation, but it is true. Because of His love for us, God has set us free from sin by His own death. This is a multiple mystery. How could the eternal one die? And how could His death set us free from death? This is awesome, but also true. Finally, He has made us a kingdom and priests to God the Father. This hints that we also shall reign as kings (that comes later), but now we are priests. Only those specially called and made holy are able to serve as priests. What a mystery that all believers are called and sanctified to serve God this way!

Verse seven recapitulates Jesus' prophecy of the end which is recorded in the gospels. This tells us that Revelation and the Olivet Discourse predict the same events. It also underlines that those who put Jesus to death will live to see these events come to pass.

This introductory part of the letter closes with a reaffirmation of the eternal nature of God. God is the Alpha, the beginning. Everything has its origin in Him, and nothing exists without His initiative. God is the Omega, the end. He brings everything to completion and brings history to its conclusion. God is the Almighty. His power is supreme.

Jesus the Terminator

Now we come again to John's vision of Jesus. This picture is the culmination of all previous visions of God. As on Mt. Sinai when God met Israel and gave her the law, here God announces His presence with the sound of a trumpet. Jesus is identified as the Son of Man – the name He most often used for Himself while on earth. He has the robe and sash of a priest. His hair takes us back to the Ancient of Days of Daniel 7:9. "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire." Here snow and wool show the glory of the heavenly King. In Isaiah 1:18 they are used to indicate purity. "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Jesus is the glorious King, utterly pure. His eyes penetrate every barrier and see everything in the universe. This x-ray vision enables Jesus to

render perfect judgment on all men everywhere. His gleaming feet are the feet of a warrior. Isaiah 63:1 describes the Servant of God as a soldier on the march. “Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? ‘It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.’” These are the feet of a warrior who can march anywhere on earth. Nothing can bar His path. Jesus is master of the stars. He made them, of course, and controls them. Job says He seals them up so they may not shine (9:7). Psalm 147:4 says, “He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.” Jesus is armed for battle with a sharp sword. But why is it coming out of his mouth? Ephesians tells us that the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. And Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” We shall have more to say later about God’s word as a powerful weapon. Finally, Jesus’ face is shining as brightly as the sun at noon.

What is the meaning of this vision? Each element tells us something about Jesus, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. John got the message instantly. This is one terrifying dude! This is God equipped for battle, and no one can stand in His way. Just to see Him is to flee in terror. This is Jesus the Terminator. He comes to kill, and He is invincible.

But there is another side to this vision. Jesus reached down and touched John. He said, “Fear not.” Are you crazy? How can you not be afraid when the Terminator is right there ready to squish you? Because He is the One who died for you. Now He holds the angels who protect you in His hand and He walks beside you. You see, Jesus is armed for battle to save and protect His people. The Jesus who loved the lost, healed the sick, and wept when His dear friend Lazarus died is the same Jesus who is now clothed in power and glory. Jesus walks among the lampstands as a sentry on patrol. He is guarding the churches against their enemies. Jesus is still the tender shepherd He always was. But there is one problem. Can you trust Him? Can you trust someone with this much power to use it for your own good? If not, you are in big trouble.

There are two ways people try to handle Jesus. Some indeed fear His awesome power. They recognize they are no match for Him, so they keep Jesus at a safe distance. They may avoid religion entirely, or they may be Christians of a sort. But at root, they do not trust Jesus, so they steer clear of Him as much as possible. Perhaps you are this sort of person. Perhaps you have been trying to tune me out tonight. Other people recognize that they have a gloomy future unless they believe in Jesus – so they claim to believe. But they cannot tolerate such a powerful person in their life, so they redefine Jesus. They domesticate Him so He will be more to their liking. Such people pray and read their Bibles. They may love to worship Jesus. But it is not the real Jesus. It is a nice, safe Jesus of their own imagination. Are you such a person? Does this vision of Jesus in Revelation offend you?

Fear and Trust

What would you do if Jeff Shaw walked through those doors just now carrying his assault rifle? Would you be afraid? I would be. He could kill many of us in a few minutes with that thing. It is a very deadly weapon. But, you might argue, it is only Jeff. He is our friend. It is wrong to be afraid. Which is it? Is Jeff armed for war a fearsome dude, or a friendly guy? The key issue is what he intends to do with that weapon, and whether we can trust him to use it for a good purpose.

We get the idea that when we are full of faith we do not fear God. This is partly true. Scripture teaches that faith draws us near to God as we trust Him to save us from our sins. But God is always simultaneously loving and frightening. No one knew Jesus or trusted Jesus better than John, but John was terrified when He saw Jesus as He really is. But this fear was not the sort of fear which drives us away. It is the fear which causes us to tremble even as we approach. And we do come to Jesus, because we trust Him to do good for us. Before Jesus was the Terminator He was the sacrifice for our sin. We may always have

some doubts about Jeff's intentions, but the death of Jesus is eternal, irrefutable proof that we can trust Him to save us.

The first application tonight is to fear Jesus. The real Jesus is a terrible warrior. Do not pretend He is a safe, predictable buddy. He is not. As Mr. Beaver said so emphatically in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Aslan is not a safe lion – and it is an insult to suggest that He is. This will affect how we think of Jesus, and how we relate to Him. Perhaps the most significant change for some of us will be in our worship. Such a God requires worship that respects His majesty and power – worship that is not frivolous.

Second, trust Jesus. He holds the angels in His hand. He patrols the churches to guard against the enemy. He loves us and cares for us. He even died for us. You can be sure He will never, ever use His power to hurt His own people.

Last, if you have never believed in Jesus – the real Jesus – now is the time. Do not play games. You have heard that Jesus means business. He calls you to turn from your evil ways and trust Him to save you from hell. Tonight pray, “Jesus, believe you died for my sins. I reject my former life and want to serve you forever.”

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