

“Behold, I Am Coming Soon”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 31

Texts: Revelation 22:6-21 Isaiah 55:1-13

Having given us a glimpse of the back of the book, so to speak, John now wraps up his panoramic vision of the course of redemptive history in the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Revelation. In the epilogue of his apocalyptic vision, John reminds the church of Jesus Christ that the things recorded in this book are soon to take place. But it is with great urgency that John also makes the point that all of human history is racing toward that glorious day when Jesus Christ returns in unspeakable glory, to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

As we now complete our survey of the Book of Revelation, Lord willing, next time we will spend our time together reflecting upon some of many points of application that we should take with us from our studies in this amazing book. During this series, we have been emphasizing the fact that as the various visions in this book are set forth, John is giving us a running commentary on the progress of redemptive history—giving us the big picture and telling us the story behind the story. In effect, John picks up where the Old Testament writers left off. Beginning with the expectation of the dawn of the messianic era, John takes us from the birth of the Messiah all the way to his second coming at the end of the age. In the last few chapters of this book, John gives us a glimpse of the final chapters of the redemptive story even before they play out on the stage of human history. Therefore, in the midst of our struggles in this present evil age, we have seen that glorious goal to which God will graciously bring us. And with this glorious vision now before our eyes, we should not grow weary or despair as we make our way to the heavenly city, even though the journey is difficult.

In the opening chapters of Revelation, John describes the persecution faced by those in his original audience at the hands of the Roman Empire. Using apocalyptic symbols, John has shown how the Roman empire and its supremely evil emperor, Nero, is, in turn, a type of all those evil empires and their leaders yet to arise throughout the course of this present evil age. In fact, John foretells of the rise of a whole series of world empires and dictators all waging war against the people of God. But this series of empires will finally culminate in one last evil empire which will arise in those days immediately before the return of Jesus Christ and which is crushed by our Lord as his coming. Knowing how the redemptive drama will turn out in the end, John comforts his readers with the prophecy of the total defeat of this Satanic world empire and all those who ally themselves with it (the harlot, the beast and false prophet). By looking at the back of the book, we know who wins in the end. Thus the Book of Revelation is not a book of esoteric information to give the curious something to do, it is a book filled with pastoral comfort.

The on-going struggle between Christ and the devil, began way back in Eden with the Fall of Adam and God’s promise of a redeemer. This struggle continues throughout the course of the Old Testament until the birth of the Messiah, before it enters that phase described by John in the first 20 chapters of Revelation. But one day that struggle will come to an end. Although Jesus has utterly defeated Satan when he died upon the cross, nevertheless, Satan wages a last-ditch war against the church throughout the course of the present evil age, a struggle which will not end until Jesus Christ returns to cast Satan and all of his agents into the Lake of Fire. While the struggle John depicts throughout Revelation is fierce, the final outcome is never in doubt. And this is why the devil rages against the church—he too has read the back of the book. He knows what the future holds for him.

Recall that in our text last week (Revelation 22:1-22:5), John describes the glories of the new heaven and a new earth, which is also called the New Jerusalem and which even now, John says, is coming down out of heaven. This is the new creation, and is what we commonly refer to as “heaven.” This new heaven and earth will replace the present heaven and earth, because the present heaven and earth are said by John to pass away at the time of the final judgment.

Unlike the city of man (Babylon the Great—depicted in Revelation 17-18 as the bride of the harlot), the bride of the Lamb, which is the church, is radiant in her beauty. She has been purified and perfected for the day of her wedding. Because God dwells in the midst of the New Jerusalem, there is no need for a temple—the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. There is no longer any need for sun, moon and stars—the glory of God provides all the illumination necessary for the heavenly city. In fact, in the New Jerusalem there is no longer any night. Furthermore, the New Jerusalem radiates with the beauty of countless precious gems and the radiance of its streets, which are said to be made of pure gold. But it is not the countless gems nor the streets of gold which give the city its undescrivable beauty. It is the presence of God which gives the city its splendor. For in this city God dwells in the midst of his people and all of his covenant promises are now completely and totally fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. In that place we will all see God face to face in resurrected bodies and live in his presence forever and ever.

In the new heavens and earth there is no longer any sea, because there will no longer be an abode for the dead. There will be no place for the dragon to hide! Our enemy is defeated. In addition, the walls of the heavenly city are said to be 144 cubits thick, demonstrating that the heavenly city is unassailable by any foe. Nothing can harm those who dwell within her walls. Furthermore, the city has twelve gates (which are always open), three on the north, south, east and west. The city is said to be built upon twelve foundations. These references are symbolic of the fact that the New Jerusalem is the culmination of all those glorious promises to which twelve tribes of Israel had pointed and is founded upon the testimony of the twelve apostles who bore witness to Jesus Christ. The twelve gates are set at the four points of the compass because the kingdom of God is composed of a multitude of people so vast that no one can count them, and who come from every race, tribe and tongue under heaven.

In Revelation 22:1-5, John depicts the new heavens and earth in terms of a restored and glorified Eden. There are a number of symbols here taken directly from Genesis 2-3. The water of life now flows out from throne of God, watering the new city, just as Eden had been watered by a great river. The tree of Life (which was the sacrament of the covenant of works) is also here, only no longer do cherubim with flaming swords prevent us from having access to it. Its leaves have brought healing to the nations by removing all racial, cultural, and political divisions from the people of God. Thus we will all be one, and we will never again thirst, nor will we ever go hungry. God will give us all good things without cost or limit. And in this glorious paradise, we will reign with God forever and ever. Therefore, heaven is not an eternal disembodied existence, but eternal life in a resurrected body in the new heaven and earth.

In Revelation 22:6-9, John wraps up his vision of the New Jerusalem, while at the same time completing what amounts to the epilogue to all the earlier visions. Throughout this final section (which includes verses 11-21), John will reiterate a number things which he has already affirmed in the book’s prologue.¹ Therefore Revelation ends much like it begins, with those wonderful words of encouragement from our Lord himself, “behold, I am coming quickly.”

¹ See Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 324.

Having described the glories of the New Jerusalem and the renewed heaven and earth, the angel now speaks to John beginning in verse 6. *“The angel said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.’”* With the broad panorama of the redemptive drama now set out before the apostle, the angel reminds John that since these words come from God, they are utterly trustworthy and true. In fact, these words come from the same God who spoke through Israel’s prophets. That which Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah saw in the dim light of pre-messianic revelation is now made plain with the greater light associated with coming of Jesus Christ. Notice, too, that the angel reiterates to John that which was stated in the opening verse of Revelation, the things John has seen, *“must soon take place.”*

Therefore, the various visions contained within Revelation describe the entire inter-advental period, not just the time immediately before the return of Christ, although certain events associated with the time of the end have become the main focus of Revelation beginning in chapter 16, with John’s discussion of the bowl judgments, which are the third and final cycle of judgment and which are focused upon the end.

Not only does the angel remind John of the trustworthiness of God in keeping his covenant promises and not only does the angel remind John that these things are soon to come to pass, but John also hears the glorious testimony of Jesus Christ himself to the same effect in verse 7: *“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”* This glorious promise of our Lord’s second advent will be reaffirmed two more times in the epilogue. But announcement of the imminence of our Lord’s return should not come as a surprise to the reader of this epistle. This same affirmation was made by Jesus in the prologue. Recall that in Revelation 1:7, Jesus promised his people that *“he was coming with the clouds,”* a reference to the divine glory which will accompany his return, and that this coming must soon take place.

In Revelation 22:7, we also find the sixth of the seven benedictions in Revelation, when Jesus reminds John of the covenantal blessing associated with keeping the words of this prophecy. This, too, is a reiteration of an earlier benediction (the first benediction) found back in verse 3 of the opening chapter when John tells his reader: *“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”* As one commentator points out, there is an important reason why both the beginning and at the end of Revelation we are summoned to keep the words of this prophecy.² The reason for this repeated benediction is so that we will not be deceived by the lies and deception of Satan. Because the words of this prophecy are the words of God, these words will keep us from losing hope in the midst of our struggles with our three great enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil. The Book of Revelation is nothing less than the testimony of Jesus himself about the course of human history between Christ’s ascension into heaven and his return on the last day.

Therefore, these words must be heeded. They warn us of what to expect from our enemy, the devil, and they also set forth in general terms the future course of redemptive history so that we will not be caught unawares when chaos comes. These words must be kept, because they give us a glimpse at the final chapter of this great story. They give us the true picture of the nature of things in a world that is filled with Satan’s lies. John, likewise, bears witness to the truth of his testimony and once again is overcome by the awe and the glories of what he has just seen. *“I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been*

² Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 325.

showing them to me. But he said to me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!' We are reminded yet again that we must not worship the messenger, but the one to whom the messenger bears witness.

In Revelation 22:10 and following John wraps up with the final testimony of Jesus Christ to his church now that the vision of the new heavens and earth has been completed. But the angel gives to John very different instructions from those he had given to Daniel some seven centuries earlier as recorded in Daniel 12:4, a passage which we have read several times as our Old Testament lesson during our study of Revelation.³ In Daniel 12:4 the angel tells Daniel: *"But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."* But to John, the angel now says *"Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near."*

The difference in the angel's instructions is because when Daniel was given his vision, the coming of the Messiah was centuries away and the vision was therefore sealed until his coming. Now at the end of the 1260 days, the three and a half years, the time, times and half a times, that is, after the remaining portion of Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks has run its course, all is now revealed. Unlike Daniel who looked ahead to what God *will do*, John now looks back to what God *has done* in Jesus Christ. John understands things Daniel could not—that the Son of Man, who possessed an everlasting kingdom, and who was lead into the presence of the Ancient of Days is none other than Jesus Christ.

Once Jesus Christ has been revealed, the message contained in the mysterious scroll that Daniel was ordered to seal until the time of the end, has now been brought out in the open for all to see. No longer will those things written on the scroll be hidden from God's people. In John's apocalyptic vision of the final testimony of Jesus Christ, we have been given a glimpse of the end and those things Daniel was forbidden from publishing. This is why John is now commanded to take the scroll, and instead of sealing it, John is to publish it for the people of God so that they might read it and understand the testimony of Jesus which it contains. Therefore, everything we need to know about the course of future history has now been to us revealed in Jesus Christ. And in that testimony he tells us that he is coming soon!

While God directs all of human history towards its appointed and final goal, life will go on until the Lord returns just as it did in the days of Noah. God's people will hear the word of this prophecy, believe the promises they set forth, and endeavor to obey the imperatives they contain. But those who have taken the mark of the beast and who have worshiped his image will neither believe God's promises nor obey his commandments. Throughout the course of this present evil age believers will differentiate themselves from those who are not Christ's, even if they are professing members of the covenant community.⁴ Thus John can say in this regard, *"Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy."* What will become clear at time of the end, then, is that those are Christ's will demonstrate themselves to be such. Those who are not, will likewise demonstrate their allegiance to the dragon. At the end of the age, all of God's judgments will be seen to be what exactly they are: holy, righteous, good and just.

Notice that in verse 12, another voice begins to speak, but the voice is not that of an angel. It is Jesus Christ himself who now addresses John. *"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will*

³ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 325.

⁴ See the discussion in Beale, Revelation, 1133.

give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” Not only does Jesus comfort John one more time with the promise that his coming is soon, but Jesus re-affirms a major point from the previous section (Revelation 20:11-15). Jesus himself will judge all men according to their deeds, that is, according to the terms of the covenant of works, first established back in Eden with Adam on behalf of the human race. Jesus will indeed reward all those who are justified, that is, who have his righteousness imputed to them. That Jesus is God Almighty is also clear from these words. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, and the beginning and the end. Therefore, Jesus is the Lord over all created things which lie between the beginning and the end of time. When Jesus promises to return soon, he is now directing all of human history toward that end.

In verse 14, we come to the seventh and final benediction recorded in the Book of Revelation. And it fits perfectly with the theme of the last several chapters. Says Jesus, *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”* Recall from Revelation 19:8, the Lamb is said to give these white robes to all the citizens of the New Jerusalem. The saints have already been washed by the blood of the Lamb, and they are spotless, without stain or blemish. But here, they are described as “washing these robes,” which is probably a reference to the fact that all those who have been washed (justified) will be characterized by new obedience (sanctification). This is depicted through the imagery of the saints washing those white robes already given them by Christ.⁵ With this seventh and final benediction, which is to be realized in the eternal state, our inheritance is now complete (seven being the number of perfection or completion). What this means is that all those who dwell in the New Jerusalem will receive all of those things promised to them by God. We will freely enter the holy city. We will freely eat from the tree of life.

But even as God’s elect receive their eternal inheritance in Jesus Christ, those whose names are not written in the Book of Life now face the ultimate covenant curse—eternal punishment. Jesus now speaks directly to the fate of those who freely and willfully reject the salvation he has offered to all. *“Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”* Those who do not believe the gospel remain forever outside the heavenly city, suffering the wrath of God. They are confined to the lake of fire.

The balance of the epilogue returns to the central theme of this letter. The Book of Revelation contains the testimony of Jesus on behalf of his people so as to encourage them in the midst of the persecution he knows that his people will face.⁶ Once again, Jesus reminds John of the purpose of this series of visions he has been asked to record: *“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”* Not only is this the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John, Jesus now bears witness to his church of which he is Lord, about those things which are soon to come to pass. Jesus alone possesses the authority to bear such witness for he alone is that one of whom the prophets of Israel had foretold. He is that one to whom David’s royal kingship had pointed. Jesus is also the morningstar foreseen by Balaam (cf. Numbers 24:17). Jesus is that one who will arise and conquer all of God’s enemies at the time of the end.⁷ Because Jesus is all of these things, his testimony is true, and it is given to the churches so as to comfort us while we await his second advent.

⁵ Poythress, *The Returning King*, 196; and Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 326-327.

⁶ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 327.

⁷ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 328.

In Isaiah 55, our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah speaks of a glorious age in which the nations are invited to share in all the blessings God has for his people, Israel. But the language Isaiah uses is overtly evangelistic. God's people are invited to the messianic feast depicted here, but the invitation is also extended to the Gentiles. Thus we read in Isaiah 55, what amounts to an Old Testament evangelistic invitation to an unbeliever. *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor. Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."*

Likewise, the final words of Revelation not only resound with echoes from Isaiah 55, these words reiterate the same gracious invitation to all who hear these words. *"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."* All those who hear these words are invited to receive the blessings which they promise. Notice too that the Holy Spirit and the church are the one who do the witness-bearing to the reader/hearer of John's vision. This is because Jesus has spoken to his people in this vision. His messianic credentials are impeccable. His words are the words of God. He has purchased his people through the shedding of his blood. Because he has risen from the dead, he holds the keys of death and Hades in his hands. And now his people, in the power of the Holy Spirit, are to invite all who hear these words to likewise believe Jesus' words and come to the savior who freely offers them the water of life.

But since these words are the words of God, Jesus also issues a solemn warning to anyone who regards them lightly. *"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."* While some extend these words to cover the entire canon of Scripture, this warning much more likely extends specifically to the witness of Jesus Christ found in this prophecy, in other words, to the Book of Revelation. No one should dare remove the words of Jesus from this book. To do so is to come under God's covenant curse.

As the book concludes, one last time, John hears the voice of the Savior: *"He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'"* John's only response is to say, *"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."* And having heard these words of Jesus, added his *"Amen,"* to them, John now extends an apostolic blessing to his reader as he closes out this letter, *"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."*

Thus we have come to the end of the Book of Revelation. But let us not overlook the fact that this book ends with a promise and an invitation. Three times in the final verses, Jesus reiterates that he is returning for his people at any moment. *"Behold, I am coming quickly,"* he repeats. In fact, our Lord may return before this sermon is over. And then again, he may not return in our life times. But make no mistake about it, he is coming soon. And at his coming he will judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. He also extends to everyone who hears his words a wonderful invitation: *Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."*

If you are thirsty and hungry then this is your moment. For Jesus Christ is coming soon and all of these promises will be yours if only you acknowledge your sins, renounce your own righteousness and trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation! The Holy Spirit and all of God's people who are gathered here this morning testify to you "Come!" and drink from the water of life. Amen.