

## “To Him Who Loves Us”

### Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 32

*Texts: Revelation 1:4-8; Daniel 7:13-18*

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In many ways, the Book of Revelation is the most practical book in the New Testament. Hopefully, these words don't come as much of a surprise now at the end of our series as they might have at the beginning. Because Revelation is filled with apocalyptic symbolism and is difficult to interpret, we easily lose sight of the fact that this is the last book in the canon of the New Testament and that it is given to Christ's church for a very practical reason—through the testimony of Jesus Christ to his church we will be prepared to face those things which are yet to come.

We complete our series on the Book of Revelation and do something a bit different from our usual practice. Although we have touched upon a number of important points of application throughout this series, now that we have completed our survey of the entire book, we are in a much better place to go back and summarize several of the main points of application given us by John. Since Revelation contains the testimony of the Risen and Ascended Jesus Christ to his church, we are, in effect, given our instructions about what to do until the Lord returns. And so now that we have seen the whole panorama of redemptive history from the vantage point of the end, we are much better equipped to apply Jesus' testimony to our own situation. At the end of the day, what does the Book of Revelation say to us?

Throughout this series many of you have told me that the Reformed (amillennial) interpretation of Revelation has removed the “scary” character of this book, while at the same time preserving the mystery which is truly here. Many of you have told me that this was a difficult series because it is very hard to “unlearn” the dispensational way of reading this book that so many of us grew up with. Now that we have seen that the Book of Revelation is a divinely-given commentary upon all those redemptive historical themes which are left open-ended in the Old Testament, it should be clear that Revelation is not given to us to speculate about end times, or so we can connect the things it contains to current events.

Rather, Revelation is given to us to show us the big picture of redemptive history. In other words, Revelation is like the box-top to a puzzle. Having seen the whole picture, it is certainly much easier to understand how the individual pieces fit together. And the big picture is simply this: Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, he is the Lord of history, as well as Lord of his church, he is directing all things toward the goal he has foreordained, which is his second coming, the defeat of all of enemies, including Satan, and to establish the new heaven and earth as our eternal home. Studying the Book of Revelation is like reading the last chapter of a good mystery novel first. Having read the last chapter, we know what will happen to all of the characters. We know that the story has a happy ending and that the bad guys will get their just desserts in the end.

The first point of application is one that I just mentioned—the Book of Revelation gives us the big picture of redemptive history. The visions contained here demonstrate that God is directing all of human history toward its appointed goal, which is the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, we read of a Garden of Eden, a covenant of works, a tree of life, and that God dwells with Adam and Eve in the temple-garden. But we also read of Adam's act of rebellion against God which plunges the entire human race into sin and death and not only brings the first family under the curse, but also subjects all of creation to futility. From this point on, the rest of the

biblical narrative presupposes the fall of man and our banishment from God's presence as the struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent unfolds throughout the balance of the Old and New Testaments. And yet, many of the images from Genesis 1-3 re-appear in the closing chapters of Revelation. The new heaven and earth is depicted as Eden glorified. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the covenant of works for his people, reckoning them as righteous, and symbolized in the gift to his bride of white robes, without stain or blemish. But those who are not Christ's are judged according to their works and are banished eternally. In the new creation, God's people may eat from the tree of life without limit. God will dwell with his people forever and ever. Therefore the redemptive story comes a definite end. Human history will not go on forever and ever. In fact, throughout the Book of Revelation, we are told that human history is rapidly racing toward the day of Christ's return. And that day is coming soon!

The knowledge of how things will finally turn out in the end is very important. This knowledge gives us hope in the face of suffering. One day every tear will be wiped from our eyes. One day there will be no more pain, no more suffering, and no more death. But this knowledge should also give us courage in the face of persecution. We know what will happen to all of God's enemies and to those who seek to do us harm. Yes, we may lose our lives. But should we die, we come to life and reign with Christ. Therefore, even though God's people will suffer and will face persecution and death, it is never in vain. We win in the end, because Christ wins in the end. We are his people, redeemed by his blood and sealed with his secret name. It has been said that Calvinists do not fear men, because we fear God! Would that be said of us in the perilous days which are certain to come. May God give to us such hope and courage!

This knowledge of how the story ends, not only gives the entire drama of redemptive history a profound sense of purpose—things do not just happen randomly without reason—but this reminds us that God is directing all things toward their appointed ends. At the end of the age, all of the horrible effects of the fall of the human race will be undone. All injustices will be made right! The righteous who have suffered will be rewarded, the wicked who have flourished will be punished. In terms of application, this simply means that everything which happens, happens for a reason, even if that reason is known only to God. God is working all things according to the counsel of his will. From world-changing events like the Second World War, to the fall of the Soviet empire, to events which befall our nation like 911, all of these things are part of God's eternal plan, working itself out in human history.

The Book of Revelation clearly reminds us that God is sovereign over all of human history, and that he will do as he said he will do—turn human sin and suffering into good. Thus the redemptive story takes us from creation, to the fall, to redemption, to a new creation. God not only will save his people, he will save all of creation.

We have also seen that throughout the course of this present evil age, God's judgments repeatedly come against the earth and its sinful inhabitants. These judgments intensify like birth pains throughout the course of this age, until the time of the end when they culminate with our Lord's return to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. So while John does not predict specific earthquakes, famines or wars, he does tell us *why* such things come to pass. They come about because they are part of three cycles of judgment which God will bring against the earth and which point forward to the final judgment. But do the earth's inhabitants heed these warnings? No, we read in Revelation 9 that despite the preaching of the gospel, unbelievers continue to worship demons, and idols, neither will they repent of their sins (Revelation 9:20-22).

In Revelation 16:9, we read that unbelievers will curse God at the time of the end rather than repent of their sins. We should never underestimate the hostility that people have for Jesus Christ, for the gospel

and for his church. But for those whose names have been written in the Book of Life from before the creation of the world, and who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, the story is different. We will be spared from God's wrath. We need never fear hell, or the day of judgment.

**A** second thing we should take with us from our study of the Book of Revelation is that in these visions we are given the explanation as to why Satan hates the church and rages against it. We are also told about Satan's various methods of attack upon the people of God.

Recall that throughout the Old Testament, Satan repeatedly tried to kill the seed of the woman to prevent the Messiah from ever being born. Once Jesus is born, Satan attempts to stop him by arranging for Herod to slaughter all of the male infants in Bethlehem. And after Jesus grows to manhood, but before his messianic ministry begins, Satan leads our Lord into the wilderness to tempt him with the kingdoms of the world. But Jesus is not interested in these kingdoms and he completes his mission on Calvary's cross. Indeed, after Jesus Christ dies upon the cross and rises again from the dead, Satan is a thoroughly defeated foe. The devil rages like a wounded animal, and is more dangerous now, than before.

In Revelation 12 John describes Christ's messianic ministry in terms of a war in heaven, in which Satan loses and is cast down to earth. And having been cast down to earth, the devil, who knows his time is short is enraged and wages war upon the woman (symbolic of believing Israel and the church). But Satan is prevented from successfully attacking. Then, in Revelation 20 we read of Satan being bound to the abyss (the abode of the dead) through the preaching of the gospel during the inter-advental age, before he is released before the end of the age so that he might organize the nations of the earth to make one final assault upon the church of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, while Satan attacks the people of God, he is prevented from achieving victory over them. At the time of the end a great apostasy will come and Satan will unleash everything he has against the church. But he will not prevail.

Throughout the Book of Revelation there are three ways in which Satan carries out his war upon the people of God. The first method is very direct and frightening—through the point of the sword, as in those cases where Satan uses civil governments to attack the church directly, through the arrest and persecution of the members of Christ's church. The second method is much more subtle, and probably more effective and dangerous—the introduction of false doctrine and heresy into the churches so as to deceive people, divide the body of Christ, and then to draw as many people as is possible away from the Savior. After all, Satan is the father of lies, hence he is the author of all false doctrine. The third way in which Satan works is through the seductive efforts of the harlot (Babylon the Great, the city of man) which lures professing church members away from Christ through the promise of economic prosperity, and through the bright lights, the buzz, fame and celebrity, all of which the great city offers to those who seek the fleeting pleasures of the flesh, rather than the things of God.

When John writes this letter, this Satanic assault is already underway as seen in the letters to the seven churches. A number of the churches (Smyrna, Pergamum and Philadelphia) to whom John is writing were already facing persecution from the Roman empire. A number of people in Smyrna had already put to death and Antipas was a well-known martyr in Pergamum. Christians who refused to acknowledge that Caesar was "lord," were arrested or put to death because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. They suffered horrible economic hardship because by refusing to acknowledge that "Caesar is Lord," they were prevented from buying and selling. They refused to worship the beast or his image. And they suffered horribly because of their faith in Jesus.

John also lists a number of churches which were struggling against false doctrine. The church of Pergamum was plagued by the teaching of the Nicolaitans, in which Christians were enticed into engaging in sexual immorality. Christians were also tempted to participate in pagan feasts, which were dedicated to idols and involved pagan religious practices. Christians in Thyatira were struggling with the teaching of a certain Jezebel, who regarded herself as a prophetess and who was encouraging Christians to follow Jesus, while at the same time teaching them that it was perfectly acceptable to participate in pagan rituals. The church in Laodicea had become so complacent in dealing with these matters that Jesus calls them "lukewarm." They are about to be spit from his mouth. Unless the members of this church repent, Jesus will come to rebuke them. In all of these instances we see how deceptive Satan can be.

Only the churches in Ephesus and Philadelphia are commended for holding fast to sound doctrine. But in Ephesus, while the church held tenaciously to sound doctrine, it had lost its first love. Because the hearts of its members became hardened towards each other, Jesus warns them that they face the removal of his candlestick, that is, the symbol of Christ's presence and blessing toward a particular congregation. Jesus exhorts the Ephesian church to continue defending the truth, while at the same to go back and do those things which they did at the beginning, that is, to minister to the poor and needy, as well as to take care of the widows and orphans. Likewise, the church of Philadelphia is commended for holding fast to the gospel in the face of persecution from the Jews. Their reward will be that they will be kept from the hour of trial which, Jesus says, is coming upon the whole world.

The application for us is clear. Statistics tell us that 45 million people, or two-thirds of all Christian martyrs, have died in the twentieth century. According to some estimates, an average of 160,000 Christians have been killed every year since 1990. Although it is unlikely that in our own lifetimes we will see Satan attack us directly through the sword of our own government, nevertheless, our children may live to see exactly that. This is why we must never underestimate the dangers of the continual increase in power of federal, state and local governments and their increasing intrusions into the business of the church. As Christians we must always be on guard to preserve our civil liberties, especially our freedom to assemble and to worship.

Remember that in Germany, the land of the Reformation, the people whole-heartedly rejected a parliamentary democracy and embraced a madman named Adolph Hitler, because they wanted to restore a faltering economy and reverse the embarrassing defeat of the First World War. One of the first of those arrested after the Nazi nightmare began was Martin Neimoller, a Reformed pastor and the leader of the so-called confessing church. Neimoller refused to bow the knee to Der Fuhrer. The confessing church saw Hitler as a manifestation of the beast and spoke out against him, and for this Neimoller was arrested on the grounds of his lack of loyalty to the state church. Such things may never happen here. But they might. And we are very foolish if we don't think that Satan will certainly try.

Since we are free to worship as we wish, we of all people are morally bound to oppose all totalitarian governments which seek to persecute Christ's church, especially in Islamic nations which persecute Christians (Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Malaya and Indonesia) and secular dictatorships such as Cuba, Vietnam, China and North Korea, to name a few. We are warned throughout the Book of Revelation that the Dragon (Satan) will empower a mysterious and frightening beast who rises from the sea. That beast was the Roman empire. But the Roman empire serves as an eerie foreshadowing all of those God-hating empires which have followed and which are yet to come. So while we may never face the point of a sword and a demand that we renounce Christ or die, some beloved soul for whom Christ has died is even now facing the full fury of the beast. Christ's church suffers before it triumphs, just like its Savior.

Furthermore, we must always be on guard for false teachers who will inevitably arise and attempt to secretly introduce destructive heresies in our midst. As we endeavor to oppose all such false teaching and remain a church which is faithful to that gospel which Jesus Christ has revealed to us in the Scriptures, we must be equally diligent not to become like the church in Ephesus, which had become so embittered while defending the truth, they lost their brotherly love for the other. No, we must preach the gospel, defend the faith, and at the same time make sure that no one in this church goes without the essentials of life. We must love each other, even as Christ has loved us. This is not only the sign of a faithful church, it is powerful witness to a watching world.

We must also be on guard for the seductive ways of the harlot, who will attempt to draw us away from Jesus Christ through fame and celebrity, money and power, and political influence. We cannot worship Christ and at the same time flirt with the harlot. Our young people must be continually on their guard for those who will attempt to steal your virginity, your virtue, and your souls, by offering you pleasure, fame, power, money and thrill, in exchange for your allegiance to Jesus Christ. Although there are many wonderful benefits from living in a prosperous and advanced technological age and there is certainly much in the world that is good and true and beautiful, the Book of Revelation reminds us all that we are but pilgrims in this world while we are on our way to the heavenly city. At many points in our journey, we will encounter thieves and robbers who desire nothing more than to do us harm. John warns us that the degree to which we are naive to the ways of the world is the degree to which we risk being seduced by the harlot! There are many times when the smile of the city of man is really a disguise for something very sinister. If we think that we are immune to such seduction, we are setting ourselves up for a tragic fall. The person who most often gives in to temptation is the person who says, "it can never happen to me!"

**A** third point of application is that throughout the Book of Revelation, Jesus Christ speaks to us about his church's witness to the watching world.

In addition to the instructions given to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, the church is also described in Revelation 7 and 14 as the 144,000 clothed in white who are sealed with the name of Christ. While subject to the wrath of men, they are protected from the wrath of God. John repeatedly speaks of those who are called overcomers. These are the people who resist the seductive ways of the harlot, or the sword of the beast, and who persevere to the end in faith, even in the face of death. Then, in Revelation 11, we read of two witnesses, symbolic of the church, who preach the gospel to the nations throughout the entire interadvental period. God gives them the power of Elijah and Moses to confirm the truth of their message. But the beast will kill them, only to find that God raises up new witnesses to take their place. But Jesus has promised us: The gates of hell will not prevail against his church.

That the preaching of the gospel and the missionary enterprise is a great success despite the devil's efforts to stop it, is seen in Revelation 7:9, where John describes an amazing scene: "*I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*" The multitude was praising God. These are the people whom John says in Revelation 7:14, "*who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" While many of God's people suffer at the hands of the beast, Christ's kingdom spreads throughout the world. In fact, during the course of this age, the gospel extends to every corner of the earth, and so many will come to faith in Christ that John cannot count them all.

Again, the application for us is very straightforward. Christ's church must make every effort to take the

gospel to the ends of the earth. The missionary enterprise will be a great success, and we are called to support it. God will continue to bind the efforts of Satan to organize the nations against Christ through the preaching of the gospel. As a church, we should expect many non-Christians to come to faith in our midst, through the preaching of the gospel and through the equipping of the saints. We are to evangelize all those within our own sphere of influence. Each one of us should be very confident in terms of our own individual witness to unbelievers. When we share the gospel with those around us, the prospects of success are great, because all of those whose names are written in the Book of Life will come to faith, and as John has just told us, the number of the elect is not small! God has chosen to save a multitude so vast they cannot be counted.

**A** final point of application this morning is that the Book of Revelation is filled with comfort for God's suffering and persecuted people.

When Revelation was written at the end of the first century, Christ's church was already facing horrible persecution from both the Jews and the Romans. Christians who refused to take the mark of the beast and worship his image were frozen out of the local economy. Many suffered horrible economic hardship. Many Christians were arrested for refusing to worship Caesar or acknowledge him as Lord. We all know of the horrors which took place under Nero, and in the Roman Coliseum where Christians were killed for pure sport. And this has gone on in various times and places right up until the present age.

In the opening chapter of this book, John tells us that the Risen Christ holds in his hand the keys of death and of Hades. This means that Jesus is Lord over all things, including death. Because of sin, death is our greatest enemy but Jesus Christ has conquered it. Should the Satanically-empowered beast take the life of one of God's saints, John tells us that they come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. In Revelation 14:13, John speaks of blessedness of all those who die in the Lord, they will rest from their labors and their deeds will follow them. And what comfort this should give us should illness strike and our own death become inevitable. And what comfort this gives to those of us who have stood beside the grave of those we love most in life. All those who die are Christ are among those so blessed, and who now stand beside the crystal sea, worshiping and praising God and beholding with their eyes, those glories of God's throne that we can but imagine. And so while we all fear dying—the pain, the suffering—we need never fear death. For we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Our names are written in the Book of Life. Our white robes and palm branches await us when we die.

Not only is there comfort in death, there is comfort in life. Indeed, we read in Revelation 8 that the prayers of the saints ascend before the throne of heaven where the Risen Christ hears them and answers them according to his will. In fact, the trumpet judgments are sounded against the earth, because God hears the prayers of his suffering people and answers them. This is related to the fact that Jesus himself instructs us to pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Therefore, Christ's church must be a praying church, and we must be people devoted to the pattern of prayer Jesus has taught us and praying constantly with the expectation that God hears our prayers when we cry out to him, and that he acts to help us when we are in need.

**A**nd so as we conclude this series, let us reflect upon the fact that Revelation does indeed speak to the question of what the future holds, and for all of God's people that future is glorious!

We have seen that the Roman empire is a type of a Satanically-empowered world empire which will arise in those days immediately before the return of Jesus Christ, after the thousand years are over and Satan is released from the abyss. The beast will rule the world on behalf of the dragon, and the false prophet will

deceive the peoples of the earth into worshiping the beast and his image. Babylon the Great will be in full-flower, deceiving the nations into committing spiritual idolatry. Therefore, world conditions might actually improve and the nations might live in peace. But all the while, Satan will be waging war upon the church, and for God's people this will be the darkest hour in all of redemptive history.

But as darkness always precedes the dawn, the rise of this final world empire signals that the end of the age is at hand. Just when all seems to be lost, Jesus Christ will return in unspeakable glory and deliver his people from their hour of trial. Satan, the beast, the false prophet, the harlot, and all those who serve them will be judged once and for all, and cast into the Lake of Fire. But all of God's people will be raised from the dead and in our resurrected bodies we will see God in our own flesh. Then, we will stand before him in the judgment, and because of Christ's redemptive work on our behalf, we will hear words of blessing, not words of condemnation. And when this heaven and earth pass away and are recreated with a glory beyond our imagination, then we will receive our inheritance and dwell in God's presence for ever and ever!

This beloved, is what awaits all those who are Jesus Christ's and who long for his appearing at the end of the age. This is what we see when we read the last chapter of the book!

And so I leave you with John's words of praise to Jesus Christ, our soon coming king. May they be our heart-felt words of praise as well: *"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen."*