

This morning I plan to begin a series of sermons on the biblical book called simply “Revelation” – the last book of the Bible. I will usually refer to it as the book of Revelation. The text refers to it as “The revelation of Jesus Christ” and “this prophecy.” In verse 11 of chapter 1, the risen Jesus tells John “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches....” The term “seven churches” refers to seven particular churches, but since the number seven stands for completeness, Jesus’ intention is that the book be read by all the churches – by the whole church.

One of the key things about this book to help us to understand it and to see how it applies to our lives is the fact that it was written to be understood and responded to by its original recipients – Christians living in John’s day. That is important for at least two reasons. First it means that the book of Revelation is not a timetable for future events which would have been irrelevant for the first readers. The book does refer to the second coming of Christ and the new heavens and the new earth, but for the rest it referred to the times in which John and the early Christians lived or their near future. It is more about understanding the present and overall meaning of history than it is about describing the distant future except that it does have a lot to say about the end of the world.

The second reason that it is important to remember that this book was meant to be understood by its original recipients is that that reminds us that it was intended to be understood by ordinary Christians. Of course, like the rest of the Bible, God intends the church to be helped in its understanding and application of Revelation by preachers and teachers, but Revelation is not a book that God has given to keep scholars occupied. It is given as a message to the church – to be understood, applied and obeyed by the church. It seems difficult to us because there is so much strange symbolism, but once the key symbols are explained, the message is actually quite simple and easy to understand. There are details that give the scholars lots to do, but the main message is not at all hard to understand. As usual, understanding is not the hard part; obedience is.

Another helpful thought as we approach the book of Revelation is that one of the reasons for the strange symbolism is that it is dealing with the relationship between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm. It is true that the rest of the Bible does this as well, and it does not always use such graphic symbolism, but symbols are one of the methods that God uses to speak to us of the whole sphere of reality that is beyond our earthly experience. The realm beyond our earthly experience is very real, but, at this point at least, the heavenly realm is beyond our direct experience and so one of the ways that God has revealed truth about the heavenly realm to us is through the use of symbols. This is important to keep in mind.

We do not have direct access to aspects of reality beyond our 5 senses. God has chosen to bridge the gap from his side by means of revelation and, in the book of Revelation especially, he often uses symbols to convey to us truths that are most clearly conveyed symbolically. In this case, these symbols that seem so strange to us are the best tools for the job – to describe the relationship between heaven and earth – between God and everything else.

Along with this we must also think of a distinction between this earthly physical realm of our experience and the spiritual realm. Not all of reality beyond our experience is heavenly realm. There is also a spiritual realm of evil and that figures prominently in the symbolism of this book as well. My main point at this point is simply that there is more to reality than what we can perceive with our five senses and the book of Revelation uses a lot of symbolism to teach us about that reality.

Finally by way of introduction, I want to say that Revelation assumes that its original readers are or soon will be persecuted. What Revelation does not address in any detail, at least, are the times when God's people are not being persecuted. The book of Revelation was originally written to address a specific situation in which some Christians were being persecuted and it was a time when it looked like that persecution would get worse. It does not really address times when Christians are not being persecuted, except, of course, when they are taken out of this earthly life. In John's own day, not all Christians were being persecuted, and in the history of the church that followed, all the way to our day, some Christians have been persecuted and others have not. Some time-periods are worse than others. Some places are worse than others. The book of Revelation is not intended to teach that all Christians in all times will suffer persecution in the same way.

So the book of Revelation has a lot to say about persecution, but it does not deal with all of Christian experience and so while what Revelation teaches us is always relevant, it does not teach that all that Christians will ever know is persecution. Many Christians have and do experience persecution. Many Christians have not and do not experience persecution at least in its extreme forms. But we are all hated by the devil and by the world and whatever our situation, the book of Revelation has a lot to say to us.

Now in our time, many Christians in the world are being persecuted. We do not experience the extreme forms of persecution, but we certainly are hated by the world and we are experiencing increasing hostility from the world. We do not know what the future holds for us. But we are certainly in spiritual warfare and the book of Revelation has much to say to us in our situation at the present as well as what we might face in the future.

As we have seen the book is called "The revelation of Jesus Christ." The text tells us that God gave this revelation to Jesus Christ "to show to his servants the things that must soon take place." Jesus makes it known by sending his angel to John who wrote it down for the church. So it comes from God to Jesus to Jesus' angel, to John to the church.

And it is about "the things that must soon take place." So it is about the future, but it is not a detailed timetable about the future. People who look to the book of Revelation today to give them guidance about what is going to happen when in world history are using the book in a way that it was never intended to be used. It is first of all about things that would happen in the near future for the original recipients and it describes principles that apply to the whole history between the first and second comings of Christ and it has quite a bit to say about very end of the world when Jesus returns.

Verse 3 gives us an incentive to read it and respond to it appropriately. “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.” This book was intended to be read aloud in the churches as were all of the books and letters of the NT. In the earliest years of the church, no one had personal copies of the Bible. The books and letters that became the NT were read aloud in the church services. And in this case we are assured that those who hear and keep what is written will be blessed.

To be blessed is to experience well-being in relationship with God. If you are blessed you are in a good place and the heart of being in a good place in the book of Revelation is in relationship with God. The book of Revelation will have a lot to say about suffering and even martyrdom for God’s people. And yet they are blessed if they read and keep what is written in this book no matter how difficult things may be for them in this life.

I’m anxious that we keep the biblical balance in mind as we go through this book. The Bible has a lot to say about the enjoyment of this life to the glory of God for the people of God. One of the foundational themes of the Bible is the fact that the creation is good and that this earthly created life is good, and that this earthly creational life can be rich and wonderful when it is lived in fellowship with God. But at the same time, the Bible has a lot to say about suffering in the post fall situation. Being a child of God does not guarantee a life without suffering. And the book of Revelation was written largely to comfort Christians who were suffering. And the great hope and comfort in suffering that Revelation gives is the sovereignty of God over all things, the victory he has won in Christ and glorious future that God has instore for his people after this earthly life. There is no comfort in the book of Revelation that has to do with a trouble free life in the here and now. The comfort has to do with God, his victory in Christ, his preservation of his people and the joys that await after death or after Jesus returns.

We have to keep the biblical balance in mind as we go along. On the one hand this this-worldly-life can be wonderful when God is at the center. One the other hand, God does not promise a life without suffering and in many cases there can be a lot of suffering and the hope in that suffering is God himself and the relief of all suffering when believers enter the special presence of God beyond this earthly life.

The fact that the heart of comfort and hope is God himself is seen in the rest of chapter 1 in that it is mostly about God with a focus on Jesus Christ. In verse 4, John addresses the seven churches. As we have seen these are seven specific churches, but the number seven is a symbol for fullness or completeness and so the book is addressed to the whole church. This means that the book is addressed both to a specific historical situation in John’s day but also to the church of Jesus Christ throughout the rest of history. In this it is similar to the rest of the Bible.

He begins, “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first born of the dead, and the

ruler of kings on earth.” God is addressing his church. The message is coming from the triune God. The Father is “him who is and who was and who is to come.” The Spirit is referred to as “the seven spirits who are before his throne.” And Jesus is referred to as “Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first born of the dead and the ruler of the kings on earth.”

God is spoken of in very exalted language. God’s greatness is seen in his relationship to time. He is. He was. He is to come. He has always been. He is now. He will always be. There is never a point where God is absent. Jesus is mentioned as the faithful witness. The book is a call to Christians to be faithful witnesses in the face of opposition and Jesus is the example and the inspiration. He was a faithful witness unto death. He is mentioned as the firstborn of the dead. The resurrection of Jesus was his victory over death and Jesus’ victory is the key to the whole book of Revelation and to the comfort it gives. And Jesus’ victory led to his exaltation. The book of Revelation has written to people who were being harassed and persecuted by the kings on earth – by the rulers, by the authorities. And the book of Revelation makes it clear throughout that Jesus is the ruler of kings on earth.

Then comes a doxology in 5b-7, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

These are the things that matter most. These are the truths that God’s people exult in even in the midst of suffering. There is nothing in all the world that is more precious than being loved by God and having been freed from our sins by the blood of Christ. The biblical teaching is that it is possible for Christians to rejoice in suffering because we are loved by God and because we are no longer in bondage to our sins. These are the things that we need and if we have the love of God and the deliverance from sin we have what is most important in life and it is possible to endure suffering with joy if we have the love of God and freedom from sin.

And the result of God’s love and being freed from our sins by his blood is that Jesus has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father....” There are two main kingdoms in the Bible, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The story of the Bible is about God delivering his people “from the domain of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13). To be saved is to be delivered from Satan’s kingdom brought into God’s kingdom. And in that kingdom we serve the Lord as priests. The language of God’s people as priests comes from Exodus 19 where God refers to the people he had delivered from Egypt as a kingdom of priests. It is echoed in 1 Peter 2:9 where the church is called a “royal priesthood.”

The priests of the OT served in the temple. The priestly role of the church suggests that the church mediates the blessings of salvation in Christ to the world. The priestly role suggests that the church offers itself as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God in response to the mercy of God in Christ. Romans 12:1 says that we are to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual worship.” That is priestly language.

But all this is part of a doxology: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” This sentence has a lot to say about how blessed it is to belong to the people of God, but the focus is not on us, but on Jesus. The blessings for us are mentioned as part of worship. Jesus’ love for us and the freedom that we have by his blood lead to praise and doxology – “to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

There is a lot of doxology in the book of Revelation. The praise of God is the meaning of life. It is the purpose of salvation. It is the joy of the saved. It is the comfort of the suffering. The peeks that we get into the heavenly realm show us the inhabitants of heaven praising God. The insights that we get into the new heavens and new earth show the inhabitants of that place praising God. God is worthy of praise. Jesus is worthy of praise. And praise is the great purpose and satisfaction of those who have been saved by Jesus’ blood.

So we have a few words telling us where this book comes from and how important it is to read, hear and obey it. We have had a word of greeting from God. We have had a word of doxology. Verse 7 is the first word from God. “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”

This verse is the first thing that God says to his people after greeting them and after they respond in worship. Remember the people are suffering. They are being persecuted. This is the first thing that God wants them to hear. “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him....”

Every eye does not see him now. From the perspective of what is seen, the kingdom of God is was not much to look at. A few small churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was big and powerful and impressive and very visible. The church was small and weak and unimpressive and unwelcome. It was easy for the followers of Jesus to be discouraged. Life was hard. They were not being affirmed by the world. They were looked upon as weird at best and subversive at worst. And this is the first word God says to his suffering and discouraged people. “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him....”

The church is called to live in the light of this hope. “[H]e is coming with the clouds.” This is a key part of the Christian way of being in the world. This is a key part of how God teaches us to think of our lives. Life will not continue on as it is forever. The future does not stretch out before us and fade into uncertainty or oblivion. History is heading toward a definite goal – a telos – a conclusion. That goal is the coming of Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven.

And it is going to be dramatic. “Every eye will see him....” How that will be we do not know. What we do know is that the return of Christ will be seen by every single person in the world and ultimately by every single person who has ever lived.

It is very significant that the verse specifies the enemies of Jesus and his kingdom. “[E]very eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.” The book of

Revelation has an awful lot in it about the enemies of God and his people, and it has an awful lot about God's judgment upon his enemies. This is the beginning of that theme in this book. God's people are suffering at the hands of their enemies and the first word of comfort is that Jesus is coming, and your enemies will see him, and they will wail on account of him. "Even so. Amen."

This teaches us the biblical way of being in the world. We are to be facing the future. We are to be future oriented. We are to live in the light of the end. And the end is to be what we hope for. This is the first thing that God mentions after he receives the worship of his people in the opening verses of the book of Revelation. The first word of comfort is "Behold he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him...."

And then God identifies himself. Verse 8. "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'" The Alpha and the Omega are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. Here is a nice explanation of what this means written by a scholar named Brain Tabb, "'The Alpha and the Omega' is 'a rhetorical merism' that expresses totality. The God who controls the beginning and the end is by implication supreme over all things. He is before all rival sovereigns – including the dragon and the beast – and will outlast them all. He alone is the divine Creator who rules over his created realm and will bring it to its appointed telos, when he announces 'it is done' and makes all things new (21:5–6)" (loc. 788).

This is a wonderful way to understand the greatness of God. God is speaking about the beginning and the end of all things. He is the beginning and the end. He controls it all. Everything and everyone else is under his divine sovereignty. There is no power on earth or in heaven which even comes close to rivaling his power.

And he announces himself to his suffering people in those majestic words. "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'" It is very significant that Jesus uses the same language to refer to himself near the end of the book. Revelation 22:12-13, "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

In the book of Revelation God and Jesus are equal in power and glory and their greatness is a huge part of the message of the book. It is a book written to the little churches in John's day who were suffering because of the hatred of the world. It is a book written to the church of all ages whether or not they are suffering persecution. And a huge part of the purpose of the book is to remind us of the greatness of God. In every age of the church, there is opposition. In most times the church seems weak compared to the visible might of the powers arrayed against God and his people.

The purpose of Revelation is to show us aspects of reality that we can only know by means of revelation from God. It shows us that things are not as they appear. There is a whole realm of reality that is known by faith and not by sight and at the heart of that unseen realm is the God who sits on the throne and his Son Jesus Christ and they are working out their plan for the coming of the kingdom of God. That plan often involves the

suffering of the people of God. They are followers of the One who won the victory over sin and death and Satan by giving his life and then rising from the dead and that is the paradigm for the Christian life.

The book of Revelation was written to encourage the people of God to persevere even unto death. The great encouragement is that they are loved by the God who has won the victory and who will consummate that victory in due time. In the end all will be made new. God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of his people and they will live and reign with him forever.

It is the nature of the Christian life to “look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen” as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:18. The book of Revelation gives us a way to see what is unseen by means of its symbols and to endure in the spiritual battle fortified by what is invisible, but what is very real – a whole realm of heavenly reality which gives the true perspective on what is going on around us on this earth as we await the return of Christ on the clouds of heaven.