

The End Game

Revelation 22:6-21

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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."

"Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book."

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 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!"

Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. 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."

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will 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.

"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. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

"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."

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.

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.

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

These are the last words of the last book of the Bible! And what memorable words they are! "Behold, I am coming soon...Behold, I am coming soon...Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:7, 12, 20).

The final chapter of the Bible begins with a continuation of the theme begun in the previous chapter. Chapter 21 has introduced us to a vision of the new Jerusalem in all its beauty and splendor. Having glimpsed something of the unfathomable grandeur of its structure, the description continues by going back to the opening chapters of the Bible. What is heaven like? Chapter 21 and the opening verses of chapter 22 have unfolded a description in which several images coalesce: a city, a temple, a bride, a garden, a new heaven and a new earth.

Now that the book has run its course, John wants us to know that however strange the visions may have been, he has been faithfully recording what he had been shown; the words are "trustworthy and true" (22:6), just as he had said right at the very start of the book (1:2). The book of Revelation *can* be judged by its covers!

It is enormously interesting that in this final chapter of the Bible we have recorded for us in triplicate the parting words of Jesus Christ "I am coming soon" (22:7, 12, 20). It is an echo of the opening sentence of the book: it speaks of things "which must soon take place" (1:1, and repeated in 22:6). At both ends of the book, like a tolling bell, we are warned, "the time is near" (1:3; 22:10).

But, what do the words, "near" and "soon" mean? That the second coming, two thousand years later, has still to occur, places not a little stress on the commonly accepted meaning of these words. So much so, that schools of biblical criticism have abounded over the last century and a half suggesting that the Bible, the New Testament in particular, is hopelessly ambivalent on eschatological matters. Some have suggested that New Testament writers, were torn, expecting Jesus to return quickly, but having to adjust their writings as years went by and no return had occurred. Some have even suggested that even Jesus himself changed his

mind as to his own second coming! What we have in the New Testament then, according to this view, is a mixture of "primitive" and (let's call it) "mature" understandings of the way history will develop.

In response to this errant conclusion, some evangelical and reformed Bible scholars have suggested a thorough reappraisal of passages in the New Testament which *seem* to speak about the second coming. Some have adopted a "moderate preterist" view (K. Gentry, J. Adams and R. C. Sproul for example), suggesting that passages such as the ones mentioned above are to be understood as referring to the nearness of Christ's coming in judgment upon Jerusalem in the years 67-70 a.d. Whilst this does have the advantage of dispelling some tensions, it has not been the view adopted in the course of this study of Revelation. There are too many indications to suggest that the Book of Revelation was written *after* 70 A.D. In that case, when these visions came to John, Jerusalem had already been destroyed!

What then, are we to make of these pronouncements as to the nearness of Christ's coming, and of the shortness of the time? Evidently, "soon" and "near" have to take on a different significance after so lengthy a time period. The words were meant to be encouraging. Imprisoned on the island of Patmos, John, as well as the Christian church, needed encouragement. That encouragement comes to them in the form of a promise of Jesus near-coming. How then can we understand these words, especially after two millennia?

The answer seems to lie along these lines. The New Testament teaches that the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus ushered in 'the last days'. This, of course, is signaled to us in the New Testament, by the emphatic assertion that we are living in "the last days" (cf. Heb 1:1-2). The "end of the ages" has already dawned (Heb 9:26). The last days began at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). We are on the last lap of human history. And however long that lasts on our perspective, on Christ's calendar it is soon. Since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, only one significant (redemptive) event remains: the second coming of Jesus Christ.

From this perspective, the return of Christ is always *near*. Paul seemed open to the possibility that the return of Christ *could* take place within his own lifetime (1 Thess. 4:13-18). These words of Jesus in Revelation are to be measured, not by human chronology, but by events in the time-table of God's pattern of redemption in history. In the particular time-table of the God's purposes in history, the next great event to take place is the second coming of Jesus Christ! In that sense, he is coming *soon*. And it has been precisely this that the church has so often failed to appreciate, focusing instead on this or that supposed fulfillment of prophecy in the future rather than on the event of the second coming itself.

Something interesting happens in verse 10 which adds weight to the interpretation given above. John is told: "Do not seal up the words of the

prophecy of this book" (22:10). This is the very opposite of that which Daniel was told! (Dan 12:4). Only after the prophecies of Daniel were fulfilled could the seal be broken. John, on the other hand, is living in a time when these prophecies of Daniel have been fulfilled. The divine "yes" in Jesus Christ has been uttered (2 Cor. 1:20). All the promises of God's deliverance have come to their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Now, only the second coming remains. The next great event marked on the calendar of God's redemptive plan in history is the second coming.

Three sections are discernible, each of which contain an allusion to the 'nearness' of Christ's return.

Obedience (22:7-11)

"Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book" (22:7). This statement is full of echoes of the Old Testament. It is reminiscent of something Moses says repeatedly in the Book of Deuteronomy as the Israelites prepared to move into the Canaan: "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you, in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands" (Deut 8:2, and some twenty other references!). In fact, the books of Deuteronomy and Revelation are specifically *covenantal*: they promise blessing to the obedience of *faith* and curses to the disobedience of *unbelief*. This is God's covenantal pattern. To those who respond to the words of Jesus near-coming there is held out the promise of rich blessing. And what blessing it is! John had *seen* it in these last twenty-one chapters. John has glimpsed *heaven*. He has been allowed to peak over the wall of this world and glimpse the realities of the age to come. He has been shown how God will lead his faithful ones to the very fountain of the water of life that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:1).

John's instinctive response to this blessing is to fall down and offer worship to the angel who had served as his guide in this vision, in much the same way as he had done in chapter 19 (22:8; cf. 19:10). What John discovers as a consequence is that the angels are staunch defenders of the regulative principle of worship! They are utterly intolerant of false worship, of worship that is offered in any other way than that which the Bible has sanctioned and commanded. "Do not do it..." they say (22:9; cf. 19:10). Besides the prohibition of the third commandment, idolatry generally was a major problem in the churches of Asia Minor as some of the letters of chapters 2 and 3 show (2:14-15, 20-21).

There is also another side. There is what C. S. Lewis calls, the shadow-side. "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." (22:11). These words need to be understood within the parameters of covenant theology. Those who respond in faith are given this promise: that the

blessings will continue for ever; but, those who respond in antagonism, will continue in that condition for ever and ever. There is a sense in which the consequences of unbelief are the product of one's own choice. As C S Lewis remarked, "A man can't be *taken* to hell, or *sent* to hell: you can only get there on your own steam." Or, as he puts it elsewhere: "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*."

Eden Restored

The second assertion of the near-return of Jesus-Christ is found in verse 12. Again, the practical conclusion is appended: "My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (22:12; cf. Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10). This, of course, is not a bald statement of justification by works, thereby contradicting everything that has been said thus far in the book of Revelation. He is speaking here of the response of faith that they have made. There is a pattern of good works that invariably follows a profession of faith. And this is a pattern that will be looked for and 'rewarded' on the Day of Judgment. Some think the reward spoken of is to a special class of Christians, those who perhaps have 'done' the outstanding and superlative. But it is doubtful if that can be sustained here. The reward promised seems to be mentioned in the following verses and includes: "the right to the tree of life" and entrance "through the gates into the city" (22:14). This is surely something which every believer will enjoy!

But there is a dark side: "Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (22:15). The ugliness of the "outside" is in stark contrast to the beauty of the "inside." The outside is undesirable and ugly. It is offensive and destructive. There is no grace of any kind. Everything about the outside is contrary to grace and to God. There is no possibility of change. There is no help offered. This is hell. Lewis again helps: "We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment."

These are serious words, but they come from One who is serious. As 22:13 describes him: the Alpha and the Omega (cf. 1:8; 21:6), the Beginning and the End (cf. 21:6), the First and the Last (cf. 1:17; 2:8). Or as 22:16 puts it: "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." Isaiah 60:1-3 may well be in the background here, "Arise shine for your light has come... nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn." That which God had promised to Abraham, that those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed (Gen 12:1-3), now seems to have reached its glorious culmination. No earthly Zion, no earthly Jerusalem could contain what God intends to do. What Isaiah glimpses in Isaiah 60 is brought to a glorious

climax in the new city, the earth which God intends to populate with his won people.

The Holy Spirit and the bride now respond by shouting words of invitation to come to Jesus Christ (22:17)! The bride is adorned in all her beauty and is now desirous that Jesus come and wrap up the progress of redemptive history and bring in its fulfillment. Every obstacle has been removed. The consummation is here.

It is fitting that the Bible should close with words of invitation: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take of the free gift of the water of life" (22:17). This side of death and the Day of Judgment, there is still room for repentance. Mission continues until the Last Day, but then it expires. The worship of God continues for ever.

A Completed Canon

The final assertion of Christ near-coming comes at the close of the chapter (22:20). Words of warning are added: "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" (22:18). These are solemn words that have often gone unheeded. God will not tolerate any tampering with that which he has revealed. The canon has been given.

There is a history to this warning. Moses, the first major writer of the Bible, uses the expression on several occasions (Deut. 4:2; 5:22; 12:32; 18:18; Numb. 11:25). John, as the final Bible writer, has given us the final Word about God. The book of Revelation tells of the closure to the *giving* of revelation. The canon is closed. There is no more revelation of this kind again. Nothing is to be added or taken away (22:19). That has always been the churches temptation: to add or take away. As the covenant book of the covenant Lord, it is fitting that it should close (as all covenants of the Ancient Near East did) with a blessing and a curse.

All that is left is a prayer: "Come Lord Jesus" (22:20, and rendered in the Aramaic as *Marana tha* at the close of the first epistle to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 16:22). John may well be rendering the Greek equivalent here, of a prayer that had long since been used in the early church as an expression of deepest piety and longing. The *Didache*, the earliest known manual of liturgy, indicates that this prayer formed a part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper in the early church.

When John Wesley was once asked what he might do the following day if he knew Jesus was to return, he apparently looked at his diary and said, "I would do precisely as I have planned." Living in preparation of the Lord's coming is the way of wisdom.

Can you say "Amen...".?

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