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Revelation 21:1-5

Fourth Message

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THE END OF THE BEGINNING

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

Our offertory today was *The Prayer of St Gregory* by the contemporary American composer Alan Hovhaness. You may not think of prayer and the book of Revelation as having anything to do with one another, but prayer has a significant place in this book.

In just twenty days we will enter the new year, the new century, and the new millennium. Even if you point out that the new millennium really arrives with 2001, or that the calendar is off by four years, or that this is the new millennium only in the Gregorian calendar, nevertheless millennium fever abounds. Not for a thousand years has there been an occasion like this. And just like a thousand years ago, apocalyptic fervor is in the air. You may not be able to give a precise definition for that term, “apocalyptic,” but the word is thrown around enough that most people have a general idea that it concerns the end times. We sense that T.S. Eliot has it wrong in his poem *The Hollow Men*, where he concludes, “This is the way the world ends: not with a bang but with a whimper.” The very word “Armageddon” is enough to strike terror into people. At times of apocalyptic fervor, people turn to Revelation in search of a timetable. Witness the tremendous popularity of the *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

How to Read Revelation

No book of the Bible has been interpreted in more different ways than the book of Revelation. At the outset, let me give you three guidelines to help you understand the book.

First, we need to recognize what type of literature Revelation is. We automatically change the way we read and interpret a piece of writing according to our recognition of its genre, that is, of the literary category into which it fits. We don't open a phone book and start reading as if it were a love letter. Revelation claims to be three different types of literature. In the first place, it is an *apocalypse*, the Greek word for revelation:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John. (REV 1:1 NIV)

God revealed to John matters that would otherwise have remained unknown, and he did it through a chain of intermediaries: God to Jesus Christ to his angel and finally to John. (There was a further link in the chain as John passed the revelation on to the seven churches.) This is nothing new for us, for we all know this book as Revelation, or The Apocalypse. But the most important events that were revealed to John were not events that would happen in the future, but events that were happening right then and there, in the otherwise unseen realm of heaven. It is these glimpses into heaven that make sense of all that happens

on earth, not only in the future, but, just as importantly, in the present.

This book is, secondly, a *prophecy*:

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. (1:3)

Contrary to popular opinion, prophecy is not foretelling the future, but “forthtelling” the word of God in the present. God had revealed his word to his prophet John, who would normally proclaim it aloud to its intended audience, the seven churches. But John could not be present to proclaim that word in person. He therefore committed it to writing, instructing that it be read aloud—the reading here is not private reading, but reading aloud in a corporate setting. That corporate setting was the church service. As the community gathered for worship, this book was read aloud, the words carrying the full authority of the prophet John, and of God, whose mouthpiece John was. Perhaps we should have a worship service like that, where Revelation is read and we pause to sing the seventeen hymns that this book contains. That would be a profound worship experience. It would also profoundly affect how we understand the book.

Revelation is, thirdly, a *letter*:

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4-5)

John could not be present with the churches among whom he normally exercised a prophetic ministry. So he cast his prophecy in the form of a letter. Most people know that this book contains the seven letters to the churches. But the whole book is one letter addressed to all seven churches. Within this one letter are seven messages, addressed one to each church (chapters 2–3).

Recognizing Revelation as a letter has some profound implications. A letter differs from a book in that a letter is directed at a specific group of people whom the author usually knows well (junk mail excepted!). John knew the seven churches to whom he wrote; he knew their struggles, their successes and failures. In the seven messages of chapters 2–3 he addresses some of these specific issues, but the whole book is directly addressed to these churches at the end of the first century.

This may surprise you to know that this book was not written primarily for us at the turn of the second millennium. It is commonplace nowadays to interpret the book in the light of cur-

rent geopolitical events and military hardware; to assume that the primary audience of the book is Western Christians sitting in their comfortable armchairs with *Time Magazine* and *Jane's Defense Weekly* open on their lap. Actually, the book does have a tremendous amount to say to just such people, but you'll only appreciate that message if you first wrestle through what this book meant to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

My other two guidelines for reading Revelation are briefer. This book is the most carefully structured book of the NT. As I've said before, correct interpretation of Scripture requires recognition of its literary structure. Finally, Revelation is filled with the language and imagery of the OT. Though there is not a single quote directly from the OT, there are some 350 allusions to the OT. So, to understand the language and imagery we would be better putting away *Newsweek*, and having instead the OT open on our lap. To give one example, the blowing of the fifth trumpet in chapter 9 unleashes upon the earth some fiercesome beasts: locusts that are said to be like both scorpions and horses. To understand this imagery don't turn to a handbook of late twentieth century military hardware to identify which type of helicopter gunship these beasts represent. Instead, turn to the OT and its imagery of locusts as instruments of devastating judgment.

"I am making everything new"

With this groundwork laid, let's turn to our text for this morning, Rev 21:1-5:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev 21:1-5)

Let me remind you that today we come to the last of our series of four messages looking at the history of redemption. I have entitled this series, "The Good, The Bad, The New, and the Perfect," to reflect the four main acts of this drama. In the first act, God created a world that was very good. In the second act, man and woman rebelled against God, acting in moral autonomy and setting themselves up as God by deciding what was good in their own eyes. God responded by expelling mankind from his presence. But God also embarked on a path of redemption to restore creation to the state of the very good, nay, to take it beyond that state into the perfect. Act Three describes the drama of redemption, whereby God called out a people for himself and dealt with the problem of sin and death through the Lord Jesus Christ. The final act, an act without end, is the entrance into the state of the perfect. Hints of this act are scattered throughout Scripture, for example in Isaiah 65:17-25 that was read for us earlier. But our primary source of information is the last two chapters of Revela-

tion. Here this act is introduced with the ringing cry from God himself, "I am making everything new."

New Creation

The first thing that John describes is a new heaven and a new earth. The drama of Revelation unfolds on three stages: heaven, earth, and the Abyss. Heaven is the home of God; it was also the original home of Satan. But in chapter 12 we read of rebellion in heaven:

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (12:7-9)

After this expulsion from heaven, the true home of Satan—also known as the dragon, the serpent, the devil—is the Abyss, which we might think of as the underworld. The earth is in the middle between these two realms, between heaven and earth. Earth is the war zone between God and Satan. Revelation is full of verbs of vertical motion describing what goes up and down between heaven and earth, and between earth and the Abyss.

Up from the Abyss come Satan and his cohorts. The most famous of these is the "beast coming out of the sea" (13:1), described also as "the beast that comes up from the Abyss" (11:7). In Biblical symbolism these are the same places, for the sea is that which is chaotic and opposed to God. These creatures lay claim to the earth, and lay claim to the allegiance and worship of the residents of earth. For example,

The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" (13:3-4)

To the believers in the seven churches, this beast from the sea was Rome. Declaring itself "the eternal city," Rome spread its tentacles throughout the world. Rome was personified in Caesar, who claimed divine status. The first few Caesars were exalted to divine status only upon their death, but by the middle of the first century AD, the Caesars claimed the divine title while yet living. Throughout the Empire, the people were called to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. This arrogation of imperial and divine might was, in the view of Revelation, Satanic.

This was the world that the members of the seven churches knew only too well. Daily they were faced with the challenge of acknowledging Caesar as Lord and Rome as sovereign. Failure to do so was costly. John knew this from personal experience. The reason he could not be present with these churches was that he had been sent into exile on Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea not far from Ephesus. He was sent there "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9), a phrase that occurs repeatedly throughout the book. To hold to "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" meant to acknowledge Jesus not Caesar as Lord. Doing so brought one into conflict with the imperial might of Rome, for it was an act of treason. Such behavior cost many Christians their lives.

Revelation is about worship. Were the seven churches going to succumb to pressure and worship Caesar, or were they going to hold firm and worship God and Christ? We all worship, whether such worship is conscious or not. The question is not whether we worship, but whom we worship. Do we worship the dragon from the Abyss and his earthly representatives, or do we worship the God of heaven and Jesus Christ? Is your allegiance pulled up to heaven or down to the Abyss? Rome and Caesar are long gone, but Satan from the Abyss still lays claim to the allegiance of the inhabitants of earth. Calvin was only too right when he described the human heart as an efficient manufacturer of idols. What are your idols?

How were these seven churches in Asia Minor to be encouraged to hold firm to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” to continue to proclaim Jesus, not Caesar, as Lord? The encouragement comes from showing them not what would happen at some distant time in the future, but what was going on right then in heaven. Throughout the book John is given visions into heaven. Central to these visions is the heavenly throne and its occupant. Throughout Revelation God is usually described as “the one who sits upon the throne.” Beside him is Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain. Gathered around the throne is a great company which worships God and the Lamb. Included among these heavenly worshipers are not only the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders, but also God’s people drawn from every tribe, language, people and tongue. Their worship is captured for us in seventeen hymns.

Since the church is a colony of heaven on earth, we join in the heavenly chorus and sing those same hymns, such as this one which closes Handel’s Messiah:

**Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!
To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever! (5:12-13)**

Seen against the backdrop of Roman imperial power, singing those hymns on earth as in heaven would be a treasonable act. There are plenty of places today where it is still an act of treason.

In addition to the worship in heaven, John also sees the vertical movement between heaven and earth. Up to heaven go the souls of the saints martyred for holding to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Rome thinks it has won a victory in killing these saints, but the victory is theirs for they join the heavenly choir gathered around the throne. Up to heaven also go the prayers of the saints on earth:

**When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven
for about half an hour.**

**And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to
them were given seven trumpets.**

**Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at
the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers
of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The
smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints,
went up before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel
took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled**

**it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings,
flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (8:1-5)**

In this remarkable passage there is silence in heaven so that God can hear the prayers of his people on earth. The suffering of the beleaguered Christians on earth did not go unnoticed in heaven.

Down from heaven come God’s judgments upon Satan and his earthly representatives. John is given a vision of the day when these judgments bring the war on earth to an end. Chapter 20 presents the final removal of the residents of the Abyss: Satan, the two beasts, and death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. Never again can they rise up to exert any influence on earth. God places an impermeable barrier between earth and the Abyss. It is only when this barrier is in place that there can be a new heaven and a new earth. Furthermore, with the removal of sin and death from the earth, heaven and earth will be joined together into one realm.

Within this conjoined heaven and earth there is no room for the sea, which is the same as saying there will be no more Abyss. The sea has always been symbolic of that which is chaotic. Genesis 1:2 describes the earth as covered with sea and darkness. It had been neither formed nor filled. In forming the earth, God drove back both the darkness and the sea. That process of bringing order is not complete until these last two chapters of Revelation where the sea and the darkness (22:5) are completely eliminated.

New Jerusalem

The second thing that John sees is “the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Revelation is a “tale of two cities,” a tale that is embedded into the very structure of the book as shown by a comparison of 17:1-3 and 22:9-10.

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and
said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the
great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings
of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the
earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.” Then
the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There
I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered
with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.
(17:1-3)**

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the
seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show
you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away
in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me
the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from
God. (21:9-10)**

Each city is personified as a woman, but Babylon is a prostitute who sits on the waters, while Jerusalem is a bride from heaven. The seven churches would have recognized Babylon as Rome, but Babylon is more than just Rome. Throughout the Bible, Babylon is the people of this world set against God. This has been so ever since mankind gathered together to build the tower of Babel. Babylon views itself as autonomous, but Revelation views it as the puppet of Satan. Rome may be dead, but Babylon is alive and well, not least here in Silicon Valley. Wherever God’s creatures are living out their lives in autonomy from him, there is Babylon.

Revelation assures us that Babylon will ultimately be destroyed. This Fall of Babylon, described in chapter 18, precipitates a response from the heavenly choir gathered around the throne, the Hallelujah Chorus that we all know from Handel's Messiah:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns” (19:6)

The removal of Babylon clears the stage for the entrance of the other woman, the new Jerusalem. Instead of a prostitute we have a bride, instead of an orgy a wedding. Jerusalem, or Zion, has always been the community of God's people.

Note that there are only two cities, Babylon and the new Jerusalem. If you are not a resident of the one you are a resident of the other. There is no sitting on the fence. This is just another way of saying you either worship the beast or the Lamb, you bear on your forehead either the mark of the beast or the seal and name of God. Again, it comes down to worship.

John describes the new Jerusalem in considerable detail. The dimensions of this new Jerusalem are given in 21:16. It is a cube, of equal length, width and height. The only other thing in Scripture that is cubic is the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple. The new Jerusalem is the new Holy of Holies. Jerusalem is the city of God's people, but the Holy of Holies is the earthly dwelling place of God. So, in this new cosmos the dwelling place of God and the dwelling place of mankind are equated, one of numerous ways we are told that heaven and earth will be joined. This new Holy of Holies is of immense size: 1500 miles (NASB) or 12,000 stadia (NIV) on a side. Physically those are identical dimensions, but symbolically they are far different. The number 12,000 is symbolic, as is every other number in the book. Twelve represents the people of God, as in the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. One thousand is representative of the infinite. So I'm not looking for a giant cube, 1500 miles on each side, to descend on the earth like a spaceship; instead, I'm looking for a city that will be of infinite size. Since this city is the Holy of Holies, it means that the Temple fills the city, which fills the whole cosmos.

Within this city, John sees the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:2). Beside the river is the tree of life. This is the imagery of Eden. The new Jerusalem is paradise restored.

Garden, temple, city, land are all distinct symbols in the OT. In the new cosmos they are all co-extensive. This has two implications: God's dwelling place and man's dwelling place are equated, and all is rendered holy. But that's just another way of saying that there will be no more sea or no more darkness. It is because all is holy that there will be no temple. The whole cosmos will be God's Temple, as it was always intended to be. And all God's people will dwell with him.

New Covenant

After seeing the new cosmos, and the new Jerusalem, John hears a voice which essentially explains the implications of the two things that he has seen. It is a voice which announces the fulfillment of the covenant.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (21:3-4)

As I have said before, at the heart of the covenant between God and man lies the promise of God, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” The more I study Scripture the more convinced I am that the story of creation and redemption is driven by this determination on the part of God to dwell with his people. From every tribe, language, people, and nation, God is calling out a people for himself, a people with whom to dwell. God redeems us in order to have communion with us. This is beautifully pictured as God wiping away every tear from our eyes. And we shall see his face (22:4).

The End of the Beginning

The last few chapters of Revelation describe not the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning. With the removal of sin and death, God finally restores his cosmos to its pre-Fall state. But he does far more than that. He goes far beyond the first creation. In that first creation, heaven and earth are distinct realms. The earth is a mixture of land and sea, of light and darkness. Though good it was never perfect—using “perfect” to mean its finished state. With the removal of sea and of darkness, with the conjoining of heaven and earth, God moves creation into a state far better than that described in Genesis 1–2. We began with an undifferentiated world of sea and darkness. We end with an undifferentiated world of land and light. It's in that new heavens and new earth where all is holy that life will really begin, the way that God intended it finally to be.

Psychologists know that a sense of purpose is essential to emotional and psychological health. We look for a meta-narrative, an overarching story that makes sense of all of the little stories of our lives. Fragmented by the loose strands of our lives, we yearn for a sense of ending that ties everything together. Revelation is the most important book for making sense of your life, for in it we get not only a vision of the ending, but a vision of heaven today. Central to both visions is the heavenly throne. Now we see the throne by faith; in the new Jerusalem we shall see the throne by sight. This double vision of Revelation is well-captured by the final verse of the hymn, *This is my Father's World*:

This is my Father's world
 O let me ne'er forget
 That though the wrong seem oft so strong
 God is the Ruler yet.
 This is my Father's world:
 The battle is not done
 Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
 And earth and heaven be one.

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