

Blessed is... the one who studies Revelation
Acts 2:14-21, Rev 22:7-10

Friends, I wonder... what pops into your mind when you hear about the book of Revelation?

Phrases like: 666; the number of the beast; the mark of the beast; the rapture; the end times; the great tribulation; the Antichrist; the four horsemen of the apocalypse?"

Or perhaps you associate the book of Revelation with political developments in the middle-east and the destiny of Jerusalem?

Or maybe it makes you think about Tim Lahaye's novel and movies series "Left Behind?" or other artists who have illustrated the visions described in this book of the bible (they've even been depicted in Lego).

And what emotions does the name of this book stir up in you... confusion; apprehension; caution; irritation; fascination?

Well friends – as we begin this new series on Revelation, it's best that we acknowledge all our feelings, our reactions, our preconceived notions and assumptions about this book right of the bat – so that we can make a conscious effort to let them go.

So they will not interfere with the good news, encouragement and comfort which Christ intended these visions to communicate to his church.

The other thing that we need to be up front about as we start this series is that the book of Revelation requires that you approach it with some sort of framework in mind.

You can't just simply sit down and read about these visions in a verse by verse, chapter by chapter manner and expect to make sense out of it and understand it like you would the story of Jonah...

let alone figure out what you're supposed to take away from it and how it applies to your life.

You need to have some sort of road map, some sort of guiding principle to navigate through and organize what you read in Revelation.

Whether it be a familiarity of Old Testament images and references, or a particular approach to the overall structure bible, or how the old and new testaments relate to each other... or a specific approach to study Revelation!

Because the material is too random and vague and seemingly unrelated to make sense of it otherwise, and if you've ever attempted to read through Revelation you probably have experienced what I'm talking about.

Now there are a number of different approaches you can take to studying Revelation...

So, I'm going to put my cards on the table here this morning and let you know that as someone who is trained to study the bible, the framework that I find most helpful in approaching the book of Revelation is called "progressive parallelism."

And I share this because I want you to understand where I'm coming from as we study this together, because you might find that what I'm presenting is a little different from you may have heard about Revelation elsewhere.

And indeed – much of what you have probably come across in terms of Revelation in popular Christian culture is based on a "Dispensationalist" approach to scripture – and as you can guess this is not an approach that I promote or recommend.

Instead I find "Progressive Parallelism" to be the most helpful because it is connected to the Covenant understanding and approach to the scriptures; and most importantly it highlights the encouragement, hope and comfort we are to receive from the book of Revelation.

And it's safe to assume friends – that Jesus gave us this Revelation in order to bless us as we wait for his return...

He did not give us this Revelation to confuse us, to terrify us, or to turn us into conspiracy theorists who are obsessed with trying to figure out which new technological advances might be the mark of the beast, or which political leader will turn out to be the Antichrist... but to bless us!

And we can assume this friends... because Jesus says this in Rev. 22:7 – *“Behold I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”*

And in fact it’s also how the book starts off *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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.”* (Rev 1:3)

So friends – whatever hesitations we may have about studying Revelation, we should put them aside and relax – because Jesus himself assures us that there is great benefit to living according to the understanding which He gives to us in this book – you will be blessed!

So, your first blessing will be to discover that Revelation is in fact not nearly as mysterious and difficult to grasp as you might think.

The book is composed of a series of seven parallel visions – they are as follows;

1st vision: Christ among the Lampstands (1-3),

2nd vision: The heavenly Throne Room and the Seals (4-7)

3rd vision: The Seven Trumpets (8-11)

4th vision: The Dragon and his helpers (12-14)

5th vision: The Seven Bowls (15-16)

6th vision: The Fall of Babylon (17-19)

7th vision: The great Consummation (20-22)

And these visions are parallel because they all deal with the same time period: from the first coming of Christ to the second coming of Christ.

And as the book moves from one vision to the next, the manner in which this time period is dealt with “progresses” –

both in terms of the angle from which the period is viewed and in terms of the depth of understanding we are given about it.

So what we're going to do in our series over the next two months is take an overview of these seven parallel visions, and look at each one and how they cover the time between times, how they progress into one another and how they progress in perspective, and discover what Christ wants us as his church to receive from this.

But, before we start it would be helpful, and necessary to have a little bit more understanding about why the encouragement and comfort and information of Revelation was given to the church through "visions." Why did Jesus choose to speak to John in this way?

Because visions aren't standard experiences for us, it's not how we're normally used hearing from God, and its not even the normative type of communication recorded in the bible.

Why didn't Jesus just dictate some a simple letter for John to write down and send around to the churches, something like...

Dear Church;

It's so great to be back in Heaven and see my Father, but I miss you all dearly and I can't wait to see you again. Until I come to you, make sure you stay busy telling everyone about me, making disciples of all nations and baptizing them! Anyways – love you all and hope to see you soon.

Jesus.

P.s. Did you get the Holy Spirit that I sent you?

Why didn't Jesus just send a letter like this? Why did He have to give John "visions" instead?

Well friends, the church in John's day had an issue with credibility. Christians were viewed as a deluded sect within Judaism that claimed Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

Furthermore they believed that Jesus had ushered in a new era between God and his people, where Christ had fulfilled all the requirements of the Covenant with Abraham and Moses rendering circumcision, temple worship, sacrifices and dietary restrictions obsolete.

But their credibility was in question here – by whose authority did they claim this? Was this of God? Was God indeed bringing about the fulfillment that had long been promised through Israel's prophets?

The answer was "Yes" – and to help assure people that it truly was the God of Israel who was bringing about this change, the apostle John receives "visions" just as the prophets of old had.

This was how Yahweh – the God of Israel had always revealed his word, his will, to his people. In Numbers 12:6 He says

“When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams.”

So, when Jesus reveals his word and his will for the Church in the same manner as Yahweh did for Israel in the past – through visions; it verifies that Jesus is Yahweh and His Church has divine sanction and indeed a new era has begun.

And... these visions instruct Christians about what they can expect in this new era - in this time between times, between the time of his first coming and the time of his second coming.

So - these visions gave the early church divine credibility.

Now the other thing about Visions – is that they help us see what we can't see... they help us see beyond what we can see...

and this is very important for Christians, especially in this time between times.

Because the expectation was that when the Messiah came He would destroy the enemies of Israel and establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth through the nation of Israel.

The Old Testament cycle was – God chooses his people, they are unfaithful, God lets their enemies oppress them, they turn back to God, God bless them, the people are unfaithful again...

And the cycle continues – until God decides one day to send the Messiah who will destroy all the enemies and lead Israel and set-up an everlasting kingdom.

And we can see - from the scripture passage we read this morning where Peter is quoting the Prophet Joel in Acts 2 - how easy it would be to develop that kind of timeline can develop when God says:

“I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the

coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.”

This is why the disciples were still asking Jesus, just before He ascended into heaven... *“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6)

They were thinking “ok we’ve followed you, we thought it was all over when you unexpectedly got yourself crucified, but now you’re back from the dead – and we’re back on track... So Jesus - you are going to bring down the hammer down now, aren’t you?”

Instead Jesus ascends into heaven – and at the end of our last series we looked at how important and significant Christ’s ascension was – because it installs Jesus into the office of the supreme ruler of the entire universe. He becomes King of kings and Lord of lords – Amen!

So – in light of the fact that Jesus has delayed the expected judgment, and has now ascended to heaven instead... and won’t bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth until He returns...

How should the followers of the King of kings relate to those kings until that return? And how should they expect those kings to relate to them?

And if the resurrected Christ has defeated death and Satan and evil – what sorts of things can Christians expect to happen in their lives and in the world around them?

Because friends quite frankly – from what we can see not a whole lot appeared to change in this world and in the lives of Jesus followers after Christ's first coming.

The Romans were still in power – in fact they eventually got fed up with God's people and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem! The church was persecuted, Christians paid with their lives for giving their allegiance to Christ instead of the empire

People still got sick, people still died, people still struggled with sin...

And friends two thousand years later its not much different – in spite of the all the progress that has been made in civilization and society, evil still shows its ugly face, we still struggle with sin, we still face death, and the church is still persecuted.

So what we see around us - would in fact seem to suggest that Christ is not with us, that He is not the King of kings, that He has not defeated death and evil, and that the enemies of the church can persecute us with impunity!

The danger is friends – both back and now, that what we can see would cause us to give up our faith in Christ, or that our faith is reduced to a personal private matter.

But the good news is that Jesus gave His Church the Visions of Revelation – and they will help reveal to what we can't see, they will enable us to see beyond what we *can* see.

These Visions reveal to us that Jesus has not abandoned his Church – in fact we see the Ascended Lord Jesus appearing in

the midst of His Church, speaking to His Church, guiding, encouraging, and exhorting His Church.

These Visions show us that those who persecute Christ's Church will not get away with it, that they are warned – they are given opportunity to repent and become part of the Church – but... eventually God will respond to the persecution of His people and punish those who are unrepentant of it.

And these Visions also show us that all powers in this world, whether they are economic, political, or spiritual are all under Christ's control.

They can do nothing without Christ's permission – as Paul says in Romans *“God works through all things – evil, the devil and his demons, sickness, empires and kingdoms – for the good of those who love him...”*

That's what is revealed to us in these visions – so that we can see beyond what we can see and we can stay faithful and loyal to Christ no matter what occurs in our lives and in this world.

And finally friends, Jesus gives us these visions because there are some things that are better “shown” than “told”

For instance when I tell people about our church building I can say that it's located on the west side of Calgary and that we have a spectacular view of the mountains from our foyer.

I can tell them about it – but it's far more impactful to show them, to let them see it and then say: we have a spectacular view of the mountains!

In the same way there are things in our faith life that are better shown than told.

For instance, when a childless Abraham needs reassurance that God's promise to bless him with many descendants would come true...

God comes to Abraham in a vision and says *“Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”* (Gen 15:5)

There are things that are better shown than told

So... when we need reassurance that this world will not end up going to hell in a hand basket, or when we need a reminder that a Kingdom so much greater and grander than all of Western civilization is yet to come...

some things are better shown than told

And Revelation shows us a vision of God's Kingdom being established here on earth – a glimpse, a teaser of what we can anticipate - of what will one day become reality.

Of when our Lord's Prayer will eventually be answered – when it will be on earth as it is in Heaven.

Seven parallel visions, progressing in depth and understanding to bless us!

The Book of Revelation - the gift of Christ to his church, so that our faith and loyalty to Him will remain strong while we wait in this time between times...

Let's pray