

All Things New: Repentance and Reward
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 62; 2 Corinthians 2:12-16; Revelation 22:8-12

Our final Scripture reading today is from Revelation 22:8-12. May God bless the reading of His perfect, holy, and sacred Word. "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."

If you ever watch courtroom dramas on TV, you know that the closing statements are the "gotcha" moment in the show. It's not nearly as dramatic in real life, but on TV, the closing statement is the place where the prosecution and the defense get their final chance to win over the jury. They sum up the whole of their case and make a compelling argument why you should believe them. It's where the prosecutor comes at you asking for justice and the defender plants their final seeds of doubt. The facts have already been presented, but sometimes those closing arguments make all the difference.

We have reached the closing statements, the epilogue, of Revelation. We'll be hearing those closing statements this week and next week. We're going to hear the last words from Jesus on the subject as He relays them to John...and these are the final words of Jesus to the church until we meet Him in glory. As we close the book and finish our study, there are still some surprises and curiosities to deal with. If you're like me, a couple of things in this passage are striking, maybe even uncomfortable. We'll deal with those as we begin to wrap up this gift God has given to His people to have comfort and assurance about the future.

Let's start with the key turning point that prepares us that the book is concluding. We have this phrase: "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things." If we were to read this like any other book, this would be absurd. In the first chapter of Revelation, John notifies us that he is the author three different times. It's kinda like, "We saw the opening of the book, John, we got it, you wrote it!"

What John is doing here at the end of the book is establishing himself first and foremost as a witness. He is in the line of the prophets. He isn't writing a letter of his thoughts about the end of the world; he's recording what he's experienced, and at times what he's been told specifically to write down. In a sense, John is staking his reputation here. This book was just as hard to understand, just as hard to take, in the first century as it is in the twenty-first. An anonymous prophet could not be held to account. A prophet with a legitimate message would sign his name to his prophecies as a sign of authenticity. It's also not a sign of John's perfection, as he'll show us in just a moment, but a way for him to say, "This vision really happened," like a witness in a court case.

But what John does next sounds to us like a terrible mistake: he falls down at the feet of the angel in charge of the vision to worship him. John is a Jewish man well aware of the ten commandments and the mandate not to worship anyone or anything but the LORD. Why would he even contemplate doing what would be a wicked thing? And why would he do it **again**? This isn't the first time he's done this – it happened before in Revelation 19:10.

He may be repeating the same incident to emphasize how the vision came to him through an angelic messenger, or how the message was so glorious that he could have easily worshipped the messenger. Maybe it is to show us that true angelic beings are pure and holy and will not accept worship only meant for God – the difference between a demon and an angel, really, is the acceptance of worship. Maybe it was to show that the message he was giving was truly from God and not from an evil or sinister source meant to deceive people. There may be any number of reasons why this happens more than once.

Last time, I used the incident to talk about how we have to be careful not to idolize those who bring us the word of God. Pastors, Bible teachers, gifted people in the church, it's easy to put us on a pedestal, and we shouldn't do that. But this time around, I want us to focus on a different application, the first one perhaps to write in your notes for the fridge. It's this: *friends, guard your hearts about where you place your faith.*

The great theologian John Calvin wrote that the human heart is an idol factory. We constantly create things to worship other than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We may not bow down to them and offer incense and sacrifices to them like we might have as ancient pagans, but we put our trust in our idols. We think they will save us from the things we fear. And we fear a lot these days. So we place our trust in a lot of different things.

The other day, I saw an article from a major secular magazine using the language of hope – and hope is a synonym word for faith, so it got my attention. What was it about? The hope they have in their political candidate. Go on Facebook and everybody's debating which guidelines to follow – the CDC, the WHO, some other set of initials. Mask, no mask, how much spacing, how many people, how many kids in school – do you know what it's all about? Faith. Who do you trust? What's going to keep you safe? Not only do we live in a world of idols, we live in a world of idols competing for your affections.

Our faith and allegiance belongs solely to God. We take precautions, we do not live foolishly, but we know that God is our protector. The holy city Jerusalem had gates and walls to keep out invaders, but only God could save the Israelites from their enemies. I put on my seat belt and make sure my airbags are in working order, but I pray before our road trips. In our pandemic, we're trying various things to stay safe, but ultimately, only God can save us from disease and harm. We use the wisdom God gave us to choose wisely, to work and play wisely, to vote wisely, but only God is our true provider and the One we should worship, the One we should trust. Even when someone comes speaking the truth of God as this angel did for John, we must make certain our eyes remained focused on God and not the messenger.

Let's move on to what the angel says after his bold command to stop John. He says, "I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book." We have such limited information about angels that sometimes we make stuff up that's not in the Bible. But I love this statement because it gives us insight into an angel's point of view. Because the angel does two things here. First, he puts John among the prophets. He confirms that this vision puts him in line with Moses and Elijah and Isaiah and all the rest.

But the second thing the angel does is state his status: a fellow servant. The angels are a different class of being from us; we can never become angels just like squirrels can never become humans. But angels are like believers in one very particular way: *they are in this with us and alongside us.*

They see themselves as the companions and compatriots of every human who follows Jesus as Lord. They are not to be worshiped or adored because, while they are very different from us as spiritual beings, they are still created by God just like we were, and they serve Him just like we do. They are unique, amazing creatures in their own way, awesome in terms of the abilities and glory God has given them, but as created beings they are closer to being our brothers, and they seem to see themselves that way. Rather than worrying about what we don't know, we can be awed by what we do know – angels serve God and, in serving God, often serve our needs as God desires.

The angel goes on to speak, passing on what the Father and Son have told him to say. First, he commands John, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near." Faithful readers of Scripture would know that this is a reference back to the great prophet Daniel. Of all the Old Testament prophets, God chose Daniel and revealed much about the end of this world to him, in a very similar way to how John saw it. But Daniel admitted that the vision he had was greatly disturbing and that he did not understand it. God commanded Daniel to seal up much of what he had seen because it was so far distant in the future. God's people weren't to have the whole of this vision five hundred years before the Messiah came. It doesn't make sense without Jesus.

But now John is free to spread the word of the prophetic vision. But one thing is very confusing. How is the time of Revelation near? It's important, because not only does the angel say it, it seems that Jesus interjects and says it Himself too.

There are a few ways to look at this. First, as we've discussed throughout our sermon series, Revelation is a book of cycles. Some cycles of judgment came immediately following the writing of the book, especially if it was written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Cycles of judgment have continued throughout human history.

Another way to look at it is this: it is near in God's timing. As the apostle Peter wrote, a thousand years is like a day to God. Human time means very little to God. The judgment of Revelation is now very near in the grand scheme of things. This leads to a final way to understand that the events in Revelation are near: these are not only way the last events to occur before the Kingdom of God comes, they are the next events we can know about.

There isn't going to be an additional revelation from God like the Mormons believe occurred; God isn't sending another Messiah or further instructions or anything else. We live in the final era of human history. However we understand it, the key is this: be prepared and worshipful in every season, waiting with hope for the Lord to come and carrying out His ways until He arrives.

Now the next phrase is hard to understand, especially considering all we've read. It comes in the form of a command: "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." This seems to fly in the face of what we hear over and over again in Scripture – the call to repent and turn away from our sins. Why would God say that everyone should stay where they are spiritually?

Once again, the prophet Daniel is in view. During his vision, it was said that many will be purified and made spotless, but the wicked would continue in their wickedness and would not understand the call to repentance. The gospel – the good news that Christ has come to save all who repent and put their trust in Him from the penalty of their sin – changes people, but it also reveals the true hearts of people. The righteous hear the gospel and become actually, truly righteous: they change their ways to follow in the footsteps of their Savior. The wicked hear the gospel and disbelieve it; they wallow in their wickedness rather than turning. How people respond to Jesus shows their true nature.

Our verse today from Paul in 2 Corinthians 2 illustrates this in a different way. He says that we who are Christians spread the aroma of Christ everywhere we go. The aroma itself never changes. But different people perceive it different ways. It is the smell of death to those who are perishing; they hate it and want it to be gone, because it convicts them of their sins and tells them of their punishment to come. But it is the sweetest smell imaginable to those who are being saved, who put their hope in Jesus. They hear the good news and their hearts and minds and actions change.

The message isn't changing; God isn't telling us not to turn away from sin and towards Him. It's the simple truth that the gospel, the message that John has proclaimed throughout Revelation, is revealing hearts for what they truly are. If someone hears the message of Revelation and does not change, no amount of pleading or begging is going to convince them. On the other hand, if someone hears the message of Revelation and starts to follow, the gospel will continue to work in them so that they become more and more righteous.

Now, we come to the last part of this week's passage, words now from Jesus: "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done." The word *reward* here in the Greek is the same word typically used for wages or compensation. It's not a special award so much as the rightful due to someone for their work.

This is the start of Jesus' closing statement. This is a key summary of what we've heard is coming. Jesus' role as judge is to set everything right. All of us will receive our due on judgment day, whether for our works in Christ or the evil we've done in the world. If we are truly Christians, our place in God's Kingdom is secure. Our salvation does not come by works.

At the same time, our works will be tested. Paul writes about the judgment of Christians and our works in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. He says this: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

This gives us our second important action point of the morning, the thing that Christians should aspire to: *let us build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ*. As believers, we enjoy the warmth of knowing our salvation is assured. We are soothed in times of trouble by the promises of Christ. We are comforted in our sorrows and given strength in our weaknesses. We are given hope of a day when all will be made right. These are the promises of God that we stand upon.

But they aren't just for our benefit. We are meant to spread the joys of God's Kingdom to the world around us, to build upon the rock of Jesus Christ in this world. We who believe have the privilege of serving God right now through the things we do – by building up the church, by giving to those in need, by striving to make God's words and ways known, by living in ways that mirror Christ. When we love our neighbors, when we help them to see God's grace and they believe, we are building the Kingdom of God. God uses us to be His presence in the world. We are building on Christ Himself and the work of countless faithful people before us.

How do we do that? As we finish our study on Revelation, we'll move into the letter of James. James was the half-brother of Jesus. His letter is a no-nonsense, practical guide for living righteously in hard times. I'm looking forward to studying its message with you. Because we really need to see the practical side of our faith. Simply, if we aren't working out our faith in righteous deeds, we may not have the faith we think we have. Right now, it's difficult to be reaching out in the midst of COVID land. The best way to take care of our neighbor may be to stay home and avoid giving them an illness. But despite how this may feel, it isn't going to last forever, and a lot of people are going to come out of this crisis worse for wear. We need to be ready to reach out with the love of Christ, to build upon His foundation.

Building upon Jesus' foundation looks different for each person because each person has different spiritual gifts, different talents and abilities God has given them to use to expand His Kingdom. For one person, it's working at a food pantry. For another, it's tutoring local kids or babysitting. It might be volunteering at Salvation Army or Compassion Pregnancy Center or Meals on Wheels. It might mean making hard choices about what we do with our lives so we have the time to spend building the Kingdom. But all of us have the calling to build God's Kingdom upon the foundation of Jesus, letting others know about the salvation Jesus offers. We can do this. We need to do it. And our rewards for all eternity will be in part based on our service for the Kingdom now.

Next week, we'll reach the end of the closing arguments and the end of Revelation as a whole. I hope you'll join me. In the meantime, this week, guard your heart against any idols this world may set in your path. Pray how you can be a part of building the Kingdom of God. And know that our Jesus, our judge, is also our friend leading the way for us into His glorious future.