

# The Future Unveiled

By Brad Allison on 6/13/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 1:1-20*

I was talking to another pastor a couple of weeks ago about the passages on which each of us was planning to preach throughout the summer. When he heard that I was undertaking a series on the book of Revelation, he said that I was crazy. I must admit that there were times this week when I wondered if his judgment about my sanity just might be correct. Revelation is that book of the Bible that often leaves us puzzled at the bizarre imagery it contains—beasts with horns, locusts that look like horses, dragons and angels and elders. Many just give up out of confusion. It struck me recently that in 25 years of preaching, this is one of the few books of the New Testament I have never preached through. I've preached through the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, but never through the rest of the book. Throughout the next three months, this neglect will be remedied.

Before we get into chapter one itself, I want to call your attention to the theme of the entire book as given to us in verse 1. "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place." The word for "revelation" means an unveiling, and it is an unveiling about the future. The future is always veiled to humans. For example, in 1950 *Fortune* magazine asked eleven knowledgeable and distinguished Americans to predict what life would be like just thirty years later.

David Sarnoff, chairman of RCA, was sure that by 1980 ships, airplanes, locomotives, and even individual automobiles would be atomically fueled. He said that homes would have atomic generators and that guided missiles would transport mail and other freight over great distances. Henry R. Luce, editor in chief of *Time* magazine, predicted the end of poverty by 1980. Mathematician John von Neumann expected energy to be free thirty years later (*Dying for Change*, Anderson, p. 18).

More recently, on November 30, 2001, Arthur C. Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, offered his vision of the future. He said that 2002 would see the arrival of clean low-power fuel involving a new energy source, possibly based on cold fusion. Well, he missed that one. In 2003, he predicted the automobile industry would be given five years to replace fossil fuels. Well, he's 0 for 2 just two years out, the easiest predictions to make. In 2004, he says that we will read of the first human clone, and in 2006 the last coal mine will be closed.

This book that we will be studying throughout the summer is Jesus' vision of the future. Note that v. 1 says that Jesus unveils to us "the things that *must* soon take place." That word "must" indicates that Jesus is not just predicting the future; he is in control of it. He knows it perfectly because he causes it.

A word of caution is needed here. Even though this is a book about the future, it doesn't reveal the future with the kind of accuracy some would allege. For example, many are reading the *Left Behind* series of books, which are loosely connected to the book of Revelation. I think it's fine to read those books, as long as you don't make the mistake of thinking that they provide an accurate interpretation of this concluding book of the Bible. Revelation is not intended to provide us with the specifics of tomorrow's newspaper headlines. Rather, it introduces themes that are present throughout the entire period of time between the two comings of Jesus, and which develop throughout this period until they come to a crisis point at the end of time. This is indicated by the little word "soon" in verse 1. How can the Bible say that these things are soon to happen, when it's been over 1900 years since this was written, and these things have not yet happened? Because the book of Revelation is intended to unveil the entire future between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. So, to take one example,

this book says that the future will include a tribulation. What I'm saying is that there are two fulfillments of that. It is saying that one feature of this entire era between Jesus' two comings is that of tribulation for the followers of Christ. That's the sense in which this book can say that this will happen "soon." But there is a second sense in which tribulation will grow and increase, leading to something called "The Great Tribulation" (7:14).

So this is a book that unveils the future to God's children. Why does God think it important that we should know the future? This brings us to the point I want to make from our passage this morning. He doesn't tell us the future just to satisfy our curiosity, but to meet a practical need. The practical need that existed 1900 years ago when these words were first written was a situation of persecution. The Apostle John, who wrote down this vision for us, was himself the victim of such persecution at the time of writing. We read that he was exiled on the island of "Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (v. 9). Patmos was a small island off the coast of what is now Turkey, and it was used in this day as a Roman penal colony. Though there weren't prisons such as we have today, it was not unlike Alcatraz. John was put here as a result of persecution from the Roman Emperor Domitian. According to church historian Philip Schaff,

"He was the second Roman emperor who persecuted Christianity, and banishment was one of his favorite modes of punishment. . . . After a promising beginning he became as cruel and bloodthirsty as Nero, and surpassed him in hypocrisy and blasphemous self-deification. He began his letters: 'Our Lord and God commands,' and required his subjects to address him so. He ordered gold and silver statues of himself to be placed in the holiest place of the temples. When he seemed most friendly, he was most dangerous. . . . Many Christians suffered martyrdom under his reign, on the charge of atheism—among them his own cousin, Flavius Clemens." (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. I, pp. 427-28)

We know that John's first readers were experiencing the same kinds of trials as John, because in verse 9 he calls them "partners in the tribulation." This brings us to the real, practical purpose of this book. Jesus unveiled the future to us not to satisfy our curiosity, but to bring us real comfort in times of suffering. That's what he is referring to in verse 3 where he pronounces a blessing on the one who reads, hears and keeps these words. Remember that the word "blessed" means happy. So this book answers a very practical question for us. How can we be blessed and happy while in the midst of suffering? The answer is that we can be happy by reading, hearing and keeping these words. A man by the name of Tim Hansel once observed, "If you have to move even ten inches from where you are now in order to be happy, you never will be." Jesus' path to joy does not require a change of circumstances, but a change of focus. This chapter introduces two parts of this that we will be seeing throughout the book. If we would be happy right where we are, we need both to see Jesus and to hear Jesus. Let's look at those two points here in this passage.

## I. We Need to See Jesus – v. 12-16

John's first vision of Jesus is recorded for us in these verses. It's in the style that is typical for this kind of literature, which is called apocalyptic. Such literature makes heavy use of symbolism. So when we read this image of Jesus here, we are not to think that he really looks like this, with a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. We know it's not meant to be taken literally because right after saying that Jesus holds the seven stars in his right hand (v. 16), we read in the very next verse that he laid his right hand on John.

We don't have time to look in detail at John's vision of Jesus, but I do want to point out a few things about it. Notice first that Jesus is standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, which are identified in verse 20 as the seven churches of Asia. If you want to see

Jesus, the place to find him is in the midst of his church, because that's where he's chosen to place himself.

Notice too that Jesus is wearing a long robe, which is the clothing worn by the high priest. Jesus is the one who alone can take care of sin. What does a priest do? He stands before God on behalf of sinners and makes sacrifices for their sin. Jesus is both the priest and the sacrifice, and his efforts on our behalf really do take care of sin. That is especially good news in light of what is next revealed about Jesus.

There is a great deal of imagery here to describe Jesus as the King. Notice several things about his royalty. He is the wise king, with hair that is white like wool and like snow. This image of white hair is easy to grasp. It indicates advanced age, and the wisdom that comes with it. Jesus is older than the hills, the eternal one who is, who was, and who is to come. Think how much wiser you are now than just twenty years ago. If you could live the last twenty years over again, would you do anything differently? Probably all of us would, because we have learned some things over the years. If instead of twenty years of experience you had 20 billion, your wisdom would be immense. Such is the wisdom of Jesus. We live in a day when age is not respected, because we see it as bringing physical weakness. But in the case of Jesus, none of his power is diminished. He has power to judge. Notice the repeated images describing Jesus as judge. He has these eyes that are like fire, which suggests his anger and his penetrating sight. He has a type of x-ray vision that is able to penetrate into the heart of every man and woman. All lies exposed to him. And he is able to judge those who are revealed to be his enemies. That's what is meant by these feet of bronze, with which he can trample his enemies. It is also said of him that a sharp sword proceeds from his mouth. The sword is used to subdue and judge one's enemies. Jesus can do so merely by the word of his mouth.

No wonder John was filled with fear when he saw Jesus. Note that his response wasn't to go and hug Jesus, whom he hadn't seen in sixty years. Rather, he "fell at his feet as though dead." Jesus speaks up in order to deliver John from this fear. So let's look next at what Jesus says, and what we need to hear.

## II. We Need to Hear Jesus - v. 17-20

We're only going to have time to look at one thing Jesus says to John, and that is his simple command, "Fear not." I think that's the command Jesus gives more often than any other. It makes a great deal of difference that it is Jesus giving this command. He is the one with all power and authority whom John had just seen in this vision. When someone like that tells you not to be afraid, it means something.

Illustration: When I was in seminary in Philadelphia, I occasionally had to make trips back home to Memphis in one of several old, worn out cars. On one particular trip, the car developed problems, and I barely made it to Memphis. So before making my return trip, I took the car to my mechanic who repaired it and then assured me that I had nothing to fear. He had made the repair and thought my car would make it back to Philadelphia. I found his words reassuring. Now if my mom, who knows nothing about cars, had said the same thing, it would have meant nothing. That's not because the mechanic loved me and my mom didn't. Just the opposite was the case. But because of their differing qualifications, my mechanic's "Don't worry" and my mother's same words had a different effect on me.

In the same way, it is Jesus' qualifications that make his "Fear not" so powerful. He is the judge, the king and the high priest. If the judge tells you not to fear judgment, then you don't

need to fear. If the high priest tells you not to fear your sin, then it's because he has taken care of it. If the wise and all-powerful king tells you not to fear anything else in his kingdom, it's because he has authority over everything in that kingdom. We will never be delivered from our fears until we see who Jesus is, feel his touch on our shoulder, and hear him say to us, "Fear not."

We need to apply this. Notice that verse 3 pronounces this blessed happiness on the one who reads, hears and keeps what is written here. You've now read it and heard it, and it's time to keep it. What is it you fear today? Is there some future uncertainty that frightens you? Perhaps there's a threat of cancer or some other physical problem. Maybe you fear losing your job, or have already lost one and fear not getting another. Maybe it's some situation with your children or your marriage. What do you fear today? Jesus says "Fear not!" and he gives us a vision of himself that will cast out all our fears.

Illustration: There's an old story about a man who comes upon a frozen river that he must cross. He's not sure if the ice is thick enough, so he lies on his belly and gets as wide as he can and begins inching across the river. When he's in the middle of the frozen river, he hears the sound of a giant wagon approaching from the same side he has just been on. When it arrives at the icy river, the driver charges ahead with two large horses and a heavy wagon. He drives right past the fearful man and over to the other side. Though he feared falling through thin ice, it was many times thicker than his little weight required. That's also the case with Jesus. If we would only see his glory and his power, we would be delivered from all fears.

#### CONCLUSION:

In a hostile world like that of these early Christians and our own as well, there is only one thing that can deliver us from our fears. We must see Jesus as the mighty High Priest, the Judge and the King. Hudson Taylor saw Jesus like that. He was the founder of the China Inland Mission. When he arrived in China, he discovered that all the missionaries were staying in the bigger coastal cities, and none were venturing into the vast interior of China with its millions of people. So Taylor adopted the dress and lifestyle of the Chinese and went throughout the interior preaching the gospel. When Hudson Taylor became an old man, the Boxer Rebellion erupted in China, resulting in terrible persecution against the Christians. The local warlords tried to stamp out everything that was foreign, and they saw Christianity as a foreign religion. Many Christians became martyrs. After Taylor was informed of this tragedy, his friends were concerned for his response. One of his fellow workers went to check on him, and as he came up the walk to his house, he heard the old man singing to himself that well-known hymn. "Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art; I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart. Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee, and Thy beauty fills my soul, For by Thy transforming power, Thou hast made me whole." It is as we gaze on him in his glory that we are transformed and delivered from our fears. That's what we will be doing this summer. I invite you to take your fears to him right now.