

1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show to His servants the things which must quickly take place. And he sent and signified *it* by his angel to his servant John, 2 who testified *concerning* the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ, and everything that he saw. 3 Blessed *is* he who reads the words of this prophecy, and those who hear it and keep those things which are written in it; for the time *is* at hand.

4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be to you, and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits which are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness *and* the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, 6 and made us kings and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

7 Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, and those also who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. Even so, Amen.

8 "I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

The book of the Revelation is a gift of God to His people, a very splendid gift. In some versions it is entitled "The Revelation of St John the Divine", because John recorded it. Actually, of course, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and its source is God Himself. The Greek word translated Revelation is *apokalupsis* and the Revelation is sometimes known as the Apocalypse. The Word means disclosure, unveiling, manifestation. So the book is a special disclosure which God the Father gave to Christ and which He in turn revealed to His servant John. The strange symbols, the vivid pictures were not borrowed by John from other literature; they were shown to him by Jesus Christ. And they are recorded for our reverent study and great profit.

If we believe these opening verses of the Revelation we can have no doubt about its great importance for every believer.

The Revelation is called "prophecy" in verse three. This is repeated four more times in the book (22:7,10,18,19). And we are not left to speculate what the word may mean as used here (whatever it may mean in some other context). In verse one the same Revelation called "prophecy" in verse three is said to be given to show the servants of God things which must quickly take place. This is a very clear and specific definition. The Revelation deals with future events that must have their fulfillment sometime after John wrote. It does not merely give spiritual principles that were already at work before he wrote (as some interpreters would have us think).

Of course, this does not mean that there is no instruction in righteousness, no spiritual principles revealed in it. No doubt one of the chief aims of all Bible prophecy is moral and ethical. In it all there are principles of righteousness which are meant to profoundly affect the lives of those who come to know it. That this is true of the Revelation is indicated in verse three — blessed are those who keep those things which are written in it.

But the Revelation does more than give principles. It is an unveiling of things future to John's day by the foreknowledge of God. It is a prophecy unsealed (22:10), a book open for all of God's servants to read and, in a measure at least, to understand. This is what the Revelation says about itself, and it is very important for us to see this. And why should it be thought a thing incredible that God should reveal the future in the Revelation? Scores of prophecies in the Old Testament have already been fulfilled in a plain manner. And we have strong reasons to believe that these prophecies here that relate to the future will be fulfilled in the same manner.

It is not to the world in general that God reveals His secrets. In the opening verse the word "servant" appears twice. It is to his servants that God reveals the future, and it was to His servant John that the Revelation was given. The word also means bond-slave and is used of all true Christians in Romans 6:18. Not for the learned or curious has God made His revelation, but to His bond-slaves, to those whose main business in life is serving their master Christ. Only if our whole loyalty and faithfulness are to Him can we hope to have good success in understanding what is revealed.

It follows, then, that the best preparation for the study of this great book is a heart that yields loving obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. And the first question we should ask ourselves is not, what does this or that mean? But, are we true servants of Jesus Christ? Is He enthroned in our hearts? Have we taken His yoke upon us? Only such ones are wise, and only the wise will understand (Daniel 12:10). "The secret of the Lord is with those who fear him" (Psalm 25:14).

We see this in the case of Abraham. He stood on the plains of Mamre with three men and one of them was the Lord. He had come to confirm to Abraham the promise concerning a son, an heir. As they stood there they looked toward Sodom, for it was in the mind of the Lord to destroy it. Then the Lord, as though speaking to Himself, said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am going to do, seeing that Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him and so they will keep the way of the LORD, practicing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has told him" (Genesis 18:16-19).

That revelation concerned the destruction of Sodom. The revelation the Lord gives to His servants in these days concerns the destruction of the world's future ungodly powers.

Who was the John to whom the Revelation was committed? I am convinced he was the same John who was one of the original disciples of our Lord and the author of the fourth Gospel and the three epistles which are ascribed to him. This was the common opinion of the early Church fathers who have left us any information at all about the matter. Who but the apostle John could designate himself as simply John and hope to have the Church as a whole understand who he was? John gives us his name in this book five times — a thing striking and unusual in itself. In three of these occurrences he speaks emphatically, "I John". As the last living apostle he was doubtless the best known Christian on earth, and did not need to identify himself beyond a simple giving of his name. He declares in the opening chapter that he "testifies to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to everything that he saw"; and in the closing chapter he repeats, "I John saw these things and heard them" (22:8).

So the book of Revelation comes to us with full apostolic authority. We might add here that it comes with a good deal more than apostolic authority. This book, more than any other in the Bible, comes to us with the seal of heaven upon it. In verse eight we see God breaking in, as it were, to vouch for this book in a way He did not use in any other New Testament book. The heavenly origin of the Revelation is again emphasized in 22:6, "These words are trustworthy and true, and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show to his servants the things which must quickly

take place". In verse 16 of that last chapter the Lord Jesus himself speaks, "I Jesus have sent my angel to testify these things to you in the churches". In keeping with the divine testimony to this book Jesus Christ is called the "the faithful and true Witness" (1:5; 3:14); and the solemn phrase "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" is seven times repeated.

In no other book of the Bible do we have so strict and powerful a warning as the one with which this book closes (22:18,19). Jesus Christ Himself testifies of the danger involved in either adding to or taking away from the words of the prophecy of this book.

So God from beginning to end impresses us solemnly with the vast importance of this book of the Revelation. We are to understand clearly that this is not a book either to ignore or to trifle with. The only proper attitude toward it is one of childlike faith and deep reverence. Then let us humbly, prayerfully, yes, with awe and godly fear, examine this wonderful handiwork of the Almighty.

The time is at hand

There are two other phrases in these opening verses which we must closely observe: "quickly take place", and "the time is at hand". I have expressed my conviction that the large part of the Revelation still awaits future fulfillment. Then how can it be said that the time of its fulfillment was "at hand" in John's own day? And how can it be said of predictions whose final fulfillment is many centuries removed from the time of John's writing that they must "quickly" take place? Some writers have expressed the thought that these questions cannot be answered. Therefore, they say, the futurist system of interpretation cannot be the true one. I believe the very opposite of this. The futurist position does not rest upon a foundation so easily destroyed.

(1) Some think that the Greek word translated "quickly" can mean soon.¹ Now two thousand years from our point of view is not soon. However, from the point of view of Him with whom a thousand years is but a day (2 Peter 3:8), it is only two days. "God's time seems long, because we are short" (Trapp). It is very significant that Christ speaks of His own coming in similar words — "Look, I am coming quickly" (22:7). The word "quickly" is from the same Greek root as "quickly" in 1:1. Now Christ will come

¹ But James M. Stifler in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans in discussing this word used in Rom 16:20 (translated there "shortly") says that the Greek word is used in seven places in the New Testament, and that "in no instance of the seven in the New Testament does the word mean 'soon.'"