

## Series Revelation

### Scripture #34 Revelation 22:6-21

This is our wrap-up session on the book of Revelation. I want to remind you of some important features of the book, and then we will think about the final 16 verses.

I think it has been easy to follow the theme of this book: “The Victory of Jesus and His Followers Over Satan and His Helpers.” At the present time, given the conditions in our world, it does not seem that things are going the way of victory, but we must never have doubts about the ultimate outcome. God initially announced what the outcome would be immediately after the disobedience of Adam and Eve. He said to the creature who deceived them, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel” (*Genesis 3:15*). It has been many many centuries since God made that promise but we have learned from the book of Revelation that it will be fulfilled.

Next I want to remind you of the structure of the book. The Apostle John was given a number of visions which he was to put in writing and pass on to several church fellowships. These visions were presented to John in a series of “sweeps” or groups of “overviews.” Each “sweep” presented a different aspect of the activity of Jesus during the interval between His first and second advents.

The first sweep described Jesus in the midst of seven churches which were representative of fellowships in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century as well as fellowships throughout this entire Church Age. Jesus understood the circumstances of His followers. He warned them about their spiritual deficiencies and encouraged them to be strong in their faith. Jesus expected His followers to be faithful to Him even if it cost them their lives.

In the second “sweep” we learned about the authority granted to Jesus. We learned that He took the scroll of human history from the hand of the Father and opened the seven seals of judgment. He was “worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because ... with His blood He had purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people group and nation” (*Revelation 5:9*). After the sixth seal, just before the end of the age, the inhabitants of the earth “called on the mountains and the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb” (*Revelation 6:16*).

The next “sweep” described seven trumpet judgments. The purpose of these judgments was to get earthdwellers to repent. Included in the sequence of these judgments were demonic hordes who were permitted to torment and torture the inhabitants of earth and kill a third of mankind, but they were not permitted to harm the people who had the seal of God on their foreheads. After the sixth trumpet judgment, John observed that “the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent” (*Revelation 11:20-21*).

The fourth sweep provided a history of the efforts of the devil to stamp out the Church. This series of visions began with the attempt of the dragon, Satan, to stop the incarnation of Jesus. He was not only unsuccessful in that endeavor, but, after the atoning death of Jesus, “He was hurled to earth, and his angels with him.” Because the devil realized that his time was short, he “made war against ... those who obey God’s commandments and hold fast to the testimony of Jesus” (*Revelation 12:17*). We learned that Satan raised up two helpers in the pursuit of his efforts, the Antichrist and the False Prophet (*Revelation 13*). In the sixth scene in this sequence, the earth was harvested. Believers were gathered to the One “like a son of man,” and non-believers were thrown into “the great winepress of God’s wrath” (*Revelation 14:14-20*).

The next “sweep” described the outpouring of the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the evil inhabitants of earth. The last scene in this “sweep” was the gathering of the people “for battle on the great day of God Almighty” (*Revelation 16:14*), followed by a brief description of the end of the age.

In the sixth “sweep,” all the forces of evil which were contaminating creation were destroyed. The world system, represented by the city of Babylon, was destroyed (*Revelation 17*). Next, the kings, mighty men, and armies of the earth were defeated. The Antichrist, the False Prophet, and Satan were all condemned to the lake of fire. All the people who had ever lived were gathered at the great white throne judgment seat of God. Those individuals whose names were not found in the Lamb’s book of life were thrown into the lake of fire.

In each of these overview scenarios, Jesus was victorious over the evil powers. His followers were the targets of hatred and persecution throughout the Church Age, but their ultimate destiny was never in question. Believers were sealed and protected by God, assuring them that they would be with Him for eternity. Evildoers succeeded in physically killing many of Jesus’ followers, but this was actually a step of spiritual victory for believers.

Back in chapters 2 and 3, Jesus made many promises about those who would be “overcomers,” that is, those who would be faithful to Him unto death. He promised that they would “eat from the tree of life,” and be given a “crown of life.” He promised to “give them ... hidden manna” and “a white stone on which was written a new name.” He promised to “give them authority over the nations,” and that those who are overcomers “will be dressed in white” and have their names preserved in “the book of life.” Faithful believers would have “the right to sit with Jesus on His throne.” These promises were given by Jesus to encourage believers of this present age, including us. The Apostle Paul summed up the thinking of true believers when he wrote, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (*Romans 8:18*).

The most important point to understand about the structure of this book is that each of these “sweeps” leads up to the return of Jesus to earth at the end of the age. The outcome of each “sweep” is when “the accuser of the people of God is cast down and the salvation and power and the authority of God is revealed.” For example, when “the seventh angel sounded his trumpet” there were loud voices in heaven which said, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” That’s when twenty-four Elders could say, “You have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding the saints, and for destroying those who destroy the earth” (*Revelation 11:15-18*).

Last week we thought about the 7<sup>th</sup> and final overview picture in the book. John was given a vision of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. God’s undisguised and fully displayed presence on earth was possible because all the effects and influences of evil were removed from the earth. The old order of creation was gone, and our holy God was once again able to dwell with people. The new city was an unimaginably magnificent and awesome place, prepared by God to be the eternal home for His people.

For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the book of Revelation is a look back at the spiritual dynamics which are behind the physical history of the human race. The book is also a look ahead, a pre-recorded history of what God will do to reestablish His spiritual authority over all things physical and material. Believers can have confidence that God will achieve His purpose of cleansing the earth of evil and restoring His relationship with humanity.

Today we have just 16 more verses to think about. These 16 verses are the epilogue of the book. They are an assortment of warnings and exhortations for the readers.

### **Read Revelation 22:6-21**

There are three main themes which stand out in these verses. The first theme concerns the authenticity of the visions given to John. In verse 6, the angel who had been showing to John the new Jerusalem declared that the words which had been revealed to John were trustworthy and true.

There are two reasons that John could have assurance about the information he had been given. First, it was the Lord who had sent the angel to give him knowledge about events which would soon take place (*cf Revelation 1:1*). Second, the angel declared that the source of the information was none other than the Lord.

The Lord is described here as “the God of the spirits of the prophets.” In other words, He is the One who tells the prophets what to say. (*See Revelation 19:10*). The Apostle Peter explained this truth when he wrote, “Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (*II Peter 1:21*). The angel wanted John to know that the sights and sounds of the visions were from God and were “trustworthy and true.” In verse 8 John attests that he had actually heard and seen all the things which he recorded in the book.

The second main theme concerns the instructions, appeals and warnings which urge the readers of the book to be faithful about how they handle the words of God and how they conduct their lives. In verse 10, the angel commanded John to “Not seal up the words of the prophecy of the book.” The visions were to be proclaimed among the churches “because the time is near.”

There were a few occasions in Old Testament times when prophets received information which did not apply to their own times but to some distant future time. On those occasions, the prophets were told to seal up their writings. For example, Daniel was instructed three times to seal up the information he was given “until the time of the end” (*Daniel 8:26; 12:4, 9*).

The information in the book of Revelation is different. The visions given to John were not intended for some distant future generation but for the Church of this entire present age, beginning with John's own generation. God wants all believers to know the information in this book. There was a sense of urgency in the angel's instructions. John was to distribute his writings to the church fellowships as quickly as possible.

Verse 11 is especially interesting. The angel recognized that not everyone who reads the prophecy of the book will want to change his or her ways. The verse is both a warning to evildoers and an encouragement to faithful believers. Both groups must think carefully about the choices they make.

Unfortunately, there will be those who, after reading this book, will be unaffected by the information. They will continue to do what is wrong and unacceptable to God. Continued rejection of God's truth will so hardened their hearts that they will not be able to change. On the other hand, there will be individuals who make a genuine commitment to Jesus. These individuals will want to continue to do what is right and acceptable to God.

The point is that an individual's character and behavior is determined by the rejection or acceptance of God's word. If the truth of God's word is rejected, there is nothing more that God will do or say to change the direction of a person's life. Choices made in this present age establish a person's character and behavior, and this results in the person's eternal destination. The truth of this book both encourages the hearts of those who want to do what is right and hardens the hearts of those who want to do what is displeasing to God.

This thought leads into the next verse. When Jesus returns, He will "reward ... everyone according to what he has done." Depending on the character and behavior of each individual the rewards of Jesus will be either spiritual blessedness or eternal punishment.

The distribution of rewards on the basis of works is taught in Scripture. The key word here is "rewards." Verse 12 is not referring to salvation. Salvation is offered on the basis of faith, not works. The word "reward" simply means that God will "repay" people for what they have done, whether good or bad.

Back in chapter 20 we read about the great white throne judgment. That's when "the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books" of God (*Revelation 20:12, 13*). Concerning rewards, the Apostle Paul wrote these words, "God will give to each person according to what he has done. For those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger" (*Romans 2:6-8*).

In verses 14 and 15 Jesus contrasts those who do what is right with those who do wrong. Those who do what is right "are "blessed." They are "those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter the new Jerusalem." There are two kinds of "washing" mentioned in the book of Revelation. In chapter 7, the word "wash" refers to the one-time-for-all-time cleansing when sinners wash their robes in the Lamb's blood (*Revelation 7:14*). This is a picture of conversion and commitment. It's when the Holy Spirit comes into the person as the guarantee of salvation. The verb "wash" here in verse 14 is in present tense, indicating continual action. Verse 14 concerns the need of believers to "wash their robes" on a continuing basis in order to remove spots of sinful contamination and to maintain pure holy lives before God.

There is a verse in the First Epistle written by John which describes this second kind of "washing" behavior: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (*1 John 1:9*). John was describing the need of believers to keep daily sins from affecting their relationship with God. Those who do right want to continue to do right; and those who have been made holy by the blood of Jesus want to continue to be holy. According to verse 14, only those who wash their robes regularly are worthy of the tree of life. (*Note: this truth was explained by Jesus in John 13:8-10.*) In contrast, those who are outside the fellowship with God, who do not follow the teaching of God's word, are described in verse 15.

There is one more important warning. It concerns the changes that people might want to make in the words of this book. Verse 18 has two strict warnings: "If anyone adds anything to the words of the prophecy of this book" and "If anyone takes words away from the book" there will be serious consequences. The warnings emphasize the seriousness of tampering with the truth of God's Word. Deliberate distortions and perversions of God's message will bring judgment and prevent people from entering the holy city.

The third main theme in the epilogue concerns the “soon” coming of Jesus. Jesus proclaimed three times in this epilogue that He would be “coming soon” (*verses 7, 12, and 20*). There is a sense of urgency and immediacy in Jesus’ statements, yet the book of Revelation was written more than two thousand years ago, so how should we interpret His use of the word “soon?”

We need to keep in mind the primary message of this book: the struggles between the forces of good and evil, between Christ and Satan, between the members of the Church and the evildoers of the world. These struggles began immediately after Pentecost and they have existed every day since then. Jesus said to His disciples, “In this world you will have trouble” (*John 16:33*), and “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (*John 14:18, 20*). For the followers of Jesus, the time to resist the influence of evil is always near.

When Jesus was with His apostles He stated that He did not know the time of His return to earth (*see Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7*) — that only the Father knew. The difficulty for believers is that we do not understand time in the same way as God the Father. The Apostle Peter has given us a clue to how God measures time. Peter reminded his readers, “Do not forget this one thing: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day” (*II Peter 3:8*). God can announce “soon-ness” and “immanency,” yet it can seem to us as a very long time.

The prophet Daniel was told to “close up and seal the words of his visions until the time of the end.” He was told “You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your inheritance” (*Daniel 12:4, 13*). However, there is no such waiting period in the book of Revelation. John was specifically instructed to “not seal up the words of Revelation because the time is near.”

Compared to Daniel’s sense of time, we are at the threshold of the coming of Jesus. The events predicted by Daniel and foreseen by Jesus now stand in readiness to be fulfilled. Revelation can speak of them as imminent, but earlier prophets could not. The fact is that there is no major event on God’s calendar before the end of this age. We are living in the age which will lead up to the return of Jesus. Considered in terms of the completion of God’s eternal purposes, the return of Jesus is the next event. In that sense it is near and “at hand.” Since the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost believers have been told to live in expectation of Jesus’ “soon” return.

Those words of Jesus, "I am coming soon," provide motivation and hope for us. There is a glorious eternal future for us. Already our citizenship is in heaven, and we are eager to experience the reality of it. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (*Romans 8:18*). We can join with John who wrote, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." The phrase, "Come, Lord Jesus," was frequently spoken by members of the early churches because it expressed their desires. We can use the same words today.

The prophecies of this book were written so that the Church might be strong in the face of the evil influences of the world. They were not written to satisfy intellectual curiosity about the future. The believers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, along with the believers of the last generation before Jesus returns, as well as those of every age in between, have been, will be, and are caught up in the struggle between Jesus and Satan. This prophecy was included in our Bibles to encourage us to steadfast and unswerving loyalty to Jesus Christ. That's why this book ends with a benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."