

I. Today, in the final week of our series on the Life of Christ, we jump from 2,000 years ago to some point in the future. We move from looking backwards to the first days of the church to forward to the celebration of Christ that awaits us – a celebration that started with his Ascension but will move to a whole new level following his return and the events that unfold after that.

A. The Apostle John is the conduit for most of what we know here. He is the author of the Book of Revelation, or The Revelation of Jesus Christ – the last book of the Bible. This is an important book – some people’s favorite – which is made up of two big parts:

1. First, a series of seven letters - dictated by Jesus - to seven different churches in Asia Minor. These are assessments of how they are doing, encouragement to press on to the end and promises of reward if they do.

2. And second a series of fantastic visions that are at times dark and horrific and at times wonderful and sublime. In them Christians are martyred, everyone tastes God’s wrath, and all the beauties of the new heaven and new earth are outlined.

3. It is a deeply devotional book that is at once disturbing, encouraging and difficult to understand. Or, what I should say is, difficult to understand in detail. The grand themes are very clear. We are at point A. We travel through B to get to C. C is clear. God wins. Jesus wins and those who stand with him return to a world very much like what is described in the very beginning of the book – back in Genesis 2. A place that works. A place where God’s will is done and where we enjoy the relationship with him that we were created for. We live in the unfiltered presence of his love and joy and grace.

B. Exactly how we get there – the sequence of events, their timing, the specifics of how this unfolds – well, that’s the topic of a lot of discussion and debate. The Book of Revelation – and other parts of Scripture that are looking ahead – provide us with some unique challenges.

1. First of all, it's written in the genre that we know the least about. The Bible is written in a number of different styles or genres. We have: narrative, discourse, parable, poetry, proverb and the like. Each is interpreted differently – something we do quite effortlessly with genres we are familiar with. When you pick up today's newspaper you know to read the comics differently than the editorials, and advertisements differently than news stories. We know that we do not interpret a poem the same way we interpret straight discourse. We know that when the Isaiah talks about the trees of the field "clapping their hands," that this is symbolic – that the trees will not grow hands.

a) We move pretty effortlessly between a variety of genres. But, we do not have any experience with the kind of prophetic literature we find in the Book of Revelation and we are not entirely certain how to understand parts of it.

2. A second challenge we face with this book is that it's not clear when it was written. Some say in the 60s and others in the 90s. This is an important question because we would interpret parts of it differently based on when it was written. Those who date it early see some of the prophecies as having been fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Those who date it later – after Jerusalem was already destroyed – have more that yet remains to be fulfilled.

3. And then there is a third challenge as well – some of it is obtuse by design. God does not intend to tell us some of the things people want to know. You might remember a few weeks back, I noted that a number of the Messianic prophecies we have make perfect sense once they've been completed, but not until then. From where we sit today it's easy to see that Genesis 3:15 – the promise about the "seed of woman" was fulfilled by Mary's virgin conception of Christ. But it wasn't easy for anyone living before Christ to figure out what "seed of woman" meant. This isn't because God couldn't be clearer. It's because he does not intend for us to have the kind of exact time table many want.

a) In Mark 13:32 Jesus says: No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"

4. God is on record stating that we do not know when these things are going to unfold. This does not mean that we shouldn't study and learn what we can about the future. Of course we should. But it does mean that we should have a bit more humility around "B." "B" should not be our focus. Christ should be our focus and "C" should bring us hope and inform how we live. But some folks could probably profit by spending a bit less time around B.

a) Our assignment isn't to figure out when and how the future will unfold. Our assignment is to proclaim the Good News and engage in good works. It's to embrace the example and values of Christ and do what we can to live as if they are true – because they are.

5. I say this first of all because this is the advice we get from Scripture. But also because I think this is the message we learn from those who have gone before us.

6. As I noted in the last chapter of the book, there are several big schools of thought out there. For instance, Christians have fallen into three camps about the millennium – the thousand year reign of Christ that is discussed in Revelation 20.

a) Some believe that Christ would return to earth after the Gospel spreads throughout the entire world and fundamentally changes things. This is called Post-millennialism. It was more popular early on. There are not many around today.¹

b) A second group reads the Revelation passage as being more symbolic. It refers to Christ's reign in heaven – which began with his Ascension. This is called amillennialism.

c) A third group – which is the more popular in Evangelical circles – is looking for Christ's return first and then a peaceful reign of Christ on earth to follow. This is called pre-millennialism. It is further divided into three different understandings of Christ's return – called Pre-, mid-, and post-tribulation.

7. Many are sure they have got the middle stuff figured out. And they make very persuasive arguments that persuade many people. They lay the Bible down next to the newspaper and start connecting the dots and make predictions. I have a shelf full of these kind of books. The dates have come and gone.

8. By way of analogy let me suggest that there are many out there who sell market timing strategies. Who have investment tools – computer programs or models of some sort – that allow them to make predictions about where the Dow is going to be in the next two minutes or 2 days.

a) Some of these strategies are impressive and seem to work – at least for a while. Other advisors say, “don’t think you can figure this out in the short run. Invest your money. Keep an eye on it every few months or so, but don’t keep jumping in and out of the market.”

b) What we get with the Book of Revelation is a buy and hold strategy – with a promise that if we do that we’ll be in the market when the Dow goes to 1,000,000.

c) The advice is, invest yourself fully in the Kingdom of God and then you don’t have to worry about what is happening at this very moment. Is the market up or down? Should I be in or out? How does this fit into the scheme of things? No! Our assignment isn’t to figure this out, it’s to follow Christ and focus on the things he has instructed us to focus on: loving God and loving others.

II. So, what can we know for sure? What can we say? What can we say about “C”? Well, let me start by reading a few passages.

A. First, from Revelation 11:

1. The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small – and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

B. The second is from Revelation 19:6

1. Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.”

C. Some of you may recognize these passages from Handel’s Messiah. Others would have had I read them in the King James translation.

1. The key verse in Revelation 11 is vs 15: The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.

2. The key section in chapter 19 is the last part of vs. 6: For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

D. Handel’s Messiah is associated with Christmas for many people, although it was not written to be that.

1. Handel, who didn’t write or rather select the lyrics. The lyrics are all Scripture, but they were selected by Charles Jenson.

2. Handel wrote the piece for a fund raising event held in Dublin in June 1742 that was focused on helping people get out of debtor’s prison.

3. There are plenty of stories about the Messiah in general or the Halleluiah Chorus in particular.

a) He wrote the entire musical score in three weeks

b) He received lots of criticism for it: Jenson assumed it wasn’t very good because he wrote it so quickly; those in the church thought it was too theatrical; those in the theater thought it was too preachy.

c) But in spite of the controversy it quickly became a hit. In fact, there is really nothing like it. The Messiah has been sung by choirs as large as 10,000; it is viewed by some as the first piece of classical music ever – because it is viewed as being timeless; it has been played every year since 1740s.

E. There is a lot that might be said about The Messiah. We are going to close this service with the Halleluiah Chorus, which we will also sing at Lessons and Carols in six weeks or so.

F. I simply want to leverage these passages to drive home the point that Christ will reign, forever and ever. And this changes everything.

III. Let me suggest that there are seven things that we need to know about the future.

A. One: History is headed somewhere specific. We are not caught in some big loop that keeps repeating itself. Time is not circular, it is linear. And the events that are unfolding are not random. God's ultimate plans will be realized. His will will be done.

B. Two: That the one who came as a child, died in our place, rose from the dead and then ascended into heaven, will return as King. The one who came in weakness will return in power. This is a big theme in the Book. Christ's return is mentioned in almost every letter. It needs to shape how we live. Jesus is going to return in glory.

C. Three: When He returns, he will put things in order. For starters, the opposition will be silenced. Satan has already been defeated. There is no question about how things will end. When Christ was willing to die in our place that changed everything. Jesus wins. Right now, however, our adversary has not yet been bound and rendered impotent. He remains active. A battle rages. That will stop with Christ's return.

D. Four: The dead will rise. There will be a future resurrection at which point we get new bodies. At the time of our death our bodies go into the ground but our spirit goes to be with Christ. But we do not live as spirits forever. Christ rose physically from the grave and we are promised a physical resurrection. Indeed, that is part of what we affirm when we say the Apostle's Creed – as we will next week when we say communion:

1. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

2. The resurrection of the body is not referring to Christ's body but to ours. We are restored – given a body that will last. One that is not infected with sin.

E. Five: We will all be judged. We will all stand before God to offer an account of our life. Contemporary life suggests that this is all there is and it has no lasting meaning. The Bible teaches that there is meaning. You have meaning. You matter to God. You were made in the image of God. Consequently, everything about you matters. And we are responsible for how we live. And one day we will offer an account of our life to God, and He will judge us.

1. Scripture tells us to live wisely. Amos 4:12 says: Prepare to meet your God.

2. Daniel Webster – of dictionary fame – said: "The greatest thought that has ever entered my mind is that one day I will . . . stand before a holy God and give an account of my life."

3. John Wesley said: I desire to have both heaven and hell ever in my eye, while I stand on this isthmus of life, between these two boundless oceans; and I (truly) think the daily consideration of both highly becomes all men of reason and religion."

4. The Bible describes two judgments – the Bema Seat of Christ, where those of us who have put on the righteousness of Christ and have secured eternal life on that basis are judged according to our works and rewarded. We are allowed to enter into heaven – which is described by John in language that so lofty it becomes nonsensical. (Streets of gold that is clear like glass; mansions; no shadows). The second judgment is the Great White Throne Judgment, where those who have not been forgiven stand before a holy God accountable for their life as well, including their sin.

F. Six: Judgment is followed by a party – a banquet, a wedding feast – held in celebration of the groom, Jesus Christ. This is described in various places throughout the Book of Revelation and it is actually foreshadowed in The Lord's Supper.

1. As you may remember, the Last Supper – the final meal that Christ had with his disciples in the Upper Room – was a transition between the Passover Meal (that the Jews had celebrated for over a thousand years) and the Lord's Supper, which we celebrate every month.

2. On the night that he was betrayed, Christ took bread and went off the script. For over a thousand years there was a liturgy around the meal. Christ changed it and said, in essence, this was all pointing ahead to me. I am the Passover Lamb. This bread is my body which is given for you.

3. Well, on that night he said, I have desired to eat this meal with you. We read in Luke 22:15 that at the Last Supper: When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

4. And in the I Corinthian passage that we read, we add Paul's words, "For as often as you eat of this bread or drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he returns."

5. At that point the Lord's Supper is over and we move to the wedding celebration. In fact, we need to see communion not simply as reaching back to the Passover, but as advertising the wedding feast that awaits us.

6. Weddings at the time of Christ had several phases.

a) They started when a pledge made between the families of the bride and groom. The parents of the bride would pay a dowry to the bridegroom or his parents. At that point they are betrothed. (We would say engaged, although this pledging was a bit more binding than an engagement.) This was the status of Mary and Joseph when she turned up pregnant.

b) A year later the groom, along with his friends, would parade to the bride's home at midnight (she knows he's coming), pick her up and parade her back to his home where a celebration begins: a big multi-day wedding feast, a banquet.

7. We are invited to this party. The engagement has already been made – with the groom paying the dowry! What happens next is that he comes for those he loves and he takes us to the place he has prepared for us. And the party begins.

G. Seven: The next step could happen at any time. There is disagreement over exactly what the next step is. It depends on your interpretive framework. For most people the next step is death – which could come at any time. But we are marching towards the day when Christ sets in motion the final events that lead us to "C." And we head to the wedding feast where the groom will be honored, and everything will be what it should be. Where every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And... this changes everything.

IV. Men and women – we know two things that should change everything.

A. First, we know how the story ends. We do not have perfect understanding of how we are moving from A to C, but we know C. And C is wonderful for those who are in Christ. And C changes everything.

B. And, we know that Jesus loves us. His return has been described as that of a groom for his bride.

C. In this series I have described Jesus in a handful of ways:

1. He is the most amazing person to ever live. He's had the biggest and best impact of any one whose walked on this planet.

2. And he has given us the greatest ethical system of all time.

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3. And he has demonstrated powers – over sickness, death, evil and nature that no one else has
4. And he has perfectly fulfilled the prophecies around the Messiah
5. He is God. Fully God and fully Man.

D. Well, here is something else. He is for you. He loves you. He is more powerful, awesome and majestic than anyone else. And he is more loving, gracious, kind and concerned than anyone else. And he is concerned for you.

E. He is looking forward to the party to be with you.

F. So, look forward to being with him. And let that hope guide and shape you. And may it motivate us – as we struggle in this broken world – to do the right thing. To love God and others. To share the story. To proclaim the Good News and engage in good works.

G. May the certain hope of Christ's return and victory shape your life.

¹ It is generally found among those who have a high view of humanity – who believe that we are fundamentally good. Liberal Christianity pushed this idea. Indeed, *The Christian Century* magazine, which was founded in 1884 as *The Christian Oracle*, was renamed in 1900 by those who thought that the 20th century would be wonderful. It was the ugliest on record.