

THE BEGINNING AND THE END **(Revelation 22:6-21 August 24, 2003)**

Last year I visited a church that had a large arch over the entrance. This arch had the name of the church on it that you looked at as you drove in. But what struck me is what you saw when you left the church, as you drove out – you noticed what was on the back of the arch. The last thing you saw as you left the church property was a huge sign that said:

REMEMBER – YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE MISSIONFIELD!

I really liked this – and have toyed from time to time suggesting we put it on the inside of our church wall for you to see as you leave.

So often we come to church, get carried to the heavenlies by the music, are convicted by the sermon and energised by the fellowship – but then as you leave you can almost feel the holy convictions and resolutions getting sucked out and the thoughts of lunch and Broncos and the coming week rushing in.

That's why I liked that sign. It forced me to remember that just coming to church was not enough. I had **not** finished my Christian duty for the week merely by going to church. My work was only just beginning.

Today we come to the final verses in the book of Revelation. And these verses act like that sign. These verses force us to pause and remember that our work is not done when we have read this book. Our work is just beginning.

We now have to apply all the truths and lessons and encouragements found in this wonderful book.

So in this sense, these verses are a beginning as well as the end.

These are great verses, but when I first sat down to think through these verses – one thing struck me. Why? Why add anything to the vision of the new Jerusalem.

At first blush I thought they were an incredible anticlimax. If I were writing this book, I would have ended it at verse 5:

And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.

What a fantastic way to end. End on a high. End on the highest high imaginable – us in union with God forever.

But the Lord created us – and He knows our hearts even better than we know our own hearts.

He knew that what we need is to be reminded that this is not an esoteric book about the future – this is a book that deals with how we live today. The message has to be rammed home.

So these sixteen verses are a parting sign from the Lord that He wants ringing in our ears. And that sign says:

REMEMBER – LIVE KNOWING THE REALITY OF CHRIST’S RETURN!

Look with me at Revelation 22:6:

And he said to me, “These words are faithful and true”; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place.

These words are **faithful and true**.

Notice that the Lord says the same thing in different ways. Verse 13 – I am the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end. These words will come to pass for God who knows all has decreed it.

Verse 16 – I Jesus ... testify to you these things.

Verse 18 and 19 – Here we find warnings for those who ignore these words.

There are tendencies when you read a book like this.

Some just write it off as mere fantasy.

Others just close the book and say – wow it will indeed be a very interesting time when Christ comes.

Christ does not give us that option.

Every word of this prophecy will come to pass because they come from the hand of the One who is faithful and true. From the persecution of the beasts to the suffering in hell. From the glory of Christ’s return to the wonder of heaven. Every word will come to pass.

And God who reveals what is to come to the spirits of His prophets revealed these visions to John through one of His holy angels.

And as we will see in verse 7 and in verses 18 and 19 – we ignore these words at our peril.

We then come to verses 7-17 – and what we have here is a summary of the main points of this book.

1. Christ is coming v. 7a.
2. Blessed are you who heed this. v. 7b.

3. The worship of God must be central vv. 8-9.
4. Heaven and hell are realities vv. 10-17.

Good sermons wrap up with a reminder of what you are supposed to take home from that message. In case you missed it, in case you have forgotten it, in case your four-year-old was whining and you couldn't listen – a good sermon ends with a crisp succinct summary.

This is John's summary.

First, ***Christ IS coming***. Verse 7a:

And behold, I am coming quickly.

During my high school years I was a voracious reader – but I only read science fiction. And one of my favourite books was Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight*. This book dealt with the world of Pern where every 200 years a red planet with an eccentric orbit would come near enough for devastating threads to rain down on Pern.

Their only defence was to breed giant fire-breathing dragons who would scorch the thread out of the air before it hit the ground.

When *Dragonflight* opens, it has been almost 400 years – not 200 years – since thread last came. By a quirk of the red planet's orbit – occasionally on its orbit it doesn't come close enough for thread to fall.

So because it has been so long since thread fell, most people now think that the danger of thread is just a myth. They have stopped tending the dragon weyrs, they have stopped tithing to support the dragons and they have stopped preparing for the fall of thread.

In a couple of generations – the danger was forgotten. And they were in grave danger.

But what if we aren't just talking about 400 years – what if we are talking about over 2000 years?

It has been nearly 2000 years since Christ left this word promising to return – and because I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet I don't know how many more years will pass before Christ returns.

And with the passing of years, there are many in our world, many in this city – who think that the return of Jesus Christ on the clouds to render judgment was a story invented to keep medieval folk in check and they are amazed, stunned that seemingly intelligent rational folk can believe that Christ will come again.

Yet while John and the other Apostles had no idea how long it would be until the Lord returned – God Himself knew. He who knows the beginning from the end knew that many years would pass. And He understood that we have a tendency to grow could in our love and hope, He knew would need this type of reassurance:

Behold, I am coming quickly.

Or the Lloyd expanded paraphrase:

One of the few certainties in life is that I, the Lord Jesus, **will** come again. No matter how long it takes, no matter how disheartened you grow – do not lose vigilance – do not cease to live in anticipation of My return – I **will** come.

Is this a reality in your life?

Brothers and sisters. There are times when I look at the church – and I think – you don't live as if Christ could come at any time. You don't discipline yourself, you don't tithe to support the kingdom, you aren't preaching the Gospel.

You live as if this world is the one that will go on forever.

But, John and Jesus and for that matter – me as well – we want you to know that Christ **will** come. It is certain. He will roll this world up like a scroll. He will punish those who opposed Him. He will reward His saints. He is coming.

And if you are in Christ, one way or another you and I will see the coming of the Lord.

We may live to hear the last trump sound and look up to see the sky part and Christ return.

Or if it is beyond our lifetimes, we will come with Him as He returns to this world.

One way or another, those in Christ **will** see Him come.

And He will come for judgment and blessing. Are you ready?

This leads us to the second part of John's summary – **Blessed are you who heed this**. v. 7b:

Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.

On August 18, 2002 – yes just over one year ago – I preached on the opening verses of Revelation 1.

In Revelation 1:3 we read this:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

John is vitally concerned with the message of this book. For Christians – it is a book of blessing. It tells us how to live in this world.

This is a book of blessing for those who heed its message. And in that very first sermon, I told you that this book had three basic messages that lead to blessing for those who heed them.

The *first* message is this:

The Lamb wins, so side with the Lamb.

If you want blessing – be on the Lamb’s side.

From Eden to the New Jerusalem, human history is a battle between the Lamb and the Beast. And regardless of the ebb and flow of the battle – this book tells us that the Lamb is *always* in total control and the Lamb **will** win. This Lamb is powerful beyond words – and the Lamb has rewards and punishment beyond words – so you want to be on His side.

The *second* message is this:

Those who belong to the Lamb testify to the triumph of the Lamb despite the consequences.

Again and again this book has told us that every man woman and child ever born falls into two groups.

The first group have various names. □□□□□□ - witnesses, overcomers, those with the mark of the Lamb, saints, the bride, the holy city, sons of God. We have seen them identified by many names.

And this book makes it clear that in this life we will face many trials. But the saints persevere to the end, refuse to bow to the temptations of the world and antichrist and testify to Christ even unto death – Why? Because they know the Lamb will finally win and reward those who are His.

The second group are all of those who are not in Christ. And by default they are witnesses of the beast. Those seduced by Babylon and antichrist. Those who do not belong to Christ. They will fall under the wrath of the Lamb.

The point is – if you want blessing – serve the Lamb faithfully.

The *third* message of this book is this:

Those who belong to the Lamb have a glorious future.
Those who belong to the Beast suffer eternally.

Heaven and hell.

The war between the Lamb and the Beast has very real, eternal consequences. If anything is clear in this book, it is this, you want to be on the side of the Lamb. And the ones who are faithful to the Lamb, who testify to the Lamb with their mouths *and* lives – these are the ones who heed the words of this prophecy and receive the blessing.

But here is the point that needs to be made.

We have reached the end of this book. We have seen many pictures of the saints in this life. But the pictures have been consistent – martyrs who testify faithfully even if it costs their lives – those who refuse to give in to the seduction of Babylon – those who fight the deception of antichrists.

The picture of the overcomers is one of militant saints. Saints fighting tooth and nail in this spiritual battle.

It struck me that the only picture of comfortable saints – saints not at war – was found in chapters 2 and 3. Saints like those in Laodicea. Saints who will be spewed from Christ's mouth if they don't repent.

If you actually heed the words of this prophecy – it **must** change your life. You will fight to move away from Babylon and antichrists. You will give all – money, time, career – to advance the kingdom of the Lamb.

You will not sit comfortably and wait for eternity.

So after working through this book – I ask – what has it cost you to belong to the Lamb?

What have you done to prepare yourself and this church for the spiritual battle with Satan?

Are you a militant saint – or a comfortable saint?

Have you heeded the words of this prophecy – or have they merely entered your ears?

This leads us to the third summary point that John wants to be ringing in our ears – **The worship of God must be central** vv. 8-9:

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. But he said to me, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God."

Let me remind you of a few things.

Throughout this book we have seen that the angels who serve Christ and do the will of Christ take on some of the characteristics of Christ Himself. It is almost as if time in the presence of the Lord leaves a Christlike mark upon them.

In chapter 10, the strong angel who stood with a foot in the sea and a foot on the land and announced that there would no longer be any delay. This angel is described in terms very similar to Christ.

The fact that angels can bear such similarities to Christ led to John becoming confused about whether he was speaking with an angel or Christ at least twice.

In Revelation 19 – John sees the angels worshipping the Lord on his throne. A voice from the throne directs him to write and then he fell down to worship the one speaking to him only to be told that he was an angel and John must not worship him.

And here in chapter 22, John again falls down in worship before the figure near him – but again finds he is worshipping an angel.

If you look at verse 7 – **Behold I am coming quickly** – this obviously refers to Christ. But in this case as verse 6 points out, this message of Christ is delivered by an angel.

However, when John saw this glorious being and heard him say – Behold I am coming quickly – he assumed it was Christ and he fell down to worship at his feet.

Why did John include this little aside? Why not leave it out? Why tell us that twice he fell down to worship an angel?

Because the worship of God and God alone is absolutely central.

The message of the angel was simple – Worship God and Him alone.

The worship of God is central to this book. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the true and false worship of the seven churches. In chapter 4 and 5 – every part of the created order is before the throne of God worshipping Him. Chapters 15 and 19 contain a wonderful picture of heavenly worship. And as we have seen in Revelation 21 and 22 – eternity consists of our unadulterated perfect worship of God.

We were created to worship God – now and eternally – this message booms out from every chapter.

So why not just say this? Why not just say – worship God? Why record the errors John made in worshipping this angel?

Because the true worship of the true God requires great effort and discernment.

If even John, an Apostle who walked with Christ – can be fooled into worshipping something that looks like Christ – how careful do we have to be?

In chapter 13 – we saw how deceptive and seductive antichrist is. We saw that the task of the false prophet was to get men to worship the antichrist. And often antichrist fools them into thinking they are actually worshipping Christ.

I am in the midst of reading a book called *God Under Fire – Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*. The introduction of that book is a great read.

It compares the way the media and society have portrayed God over the past forty years or so.

It points out that for most of the twentieth century the very notion of God was under fire. He was seen to be just another superstition to be shed as our society grew in its rationalism.

But towards the end of the twentieth century God made a comeback.

Once *Time* magazine declared God was dead. Now it carried stories about the resurgence in faith in God.

Television began airing series like *Touched By An Angel* and *Conversations With God*. When Bin Laden struck on 9/11 – politicians, musicians and editors all spoke of God.

But before we rejoice about this, listen to what Eric Johnson and Douglas Huffman say in this introduction:

The careful observer will note, however that God has come back from cultural exile quite different. This newer version is a kinder, gentler God – less threatening, more congenial, and more affirming. No longer the almighty, all-glorious centre of the universe, this God seems to be more centred on us, less interested in obedience, and more concerned with our happiness. This God is actually quite harmless, supportive of all religion, and on everyone's side. Since no one is alienated from this deity, no one needs salvation from sin; on the contrary, God seems to think quite a lot of us. Certain behaviours that used to bother God don't trouble this God anymore. Hell seems to have been largely done away with. ...

One wonders if this deity underwent psychotherapy while gone and came back more open and relaxed, having worked through whatever was bothering "him" back in those premodern days. ... By most reckonings, God is more acceptable than before being exiled. ... God is more popular than ever.

Not! Upon close inspection, it becomes obvious that this new, improved deity is not the same God as was vanquished earlier in the twentieth century. This God is an impostor. While he bears a superficial resemblance to the historic Judeo-Christian God in some important respects, other features are distorted, and still others are absent.¹

They go on to talk about the way God has changed. In Bible Colleges and churches in this city – God has become bound by time, He no longer knows the future, He is not totally sovereign, He changes, He has decided to get rid of hell and He is now male **and** female – He is more like us.

We have recreated Him in our image.

And I tell you – right now, this morning – in churches across this city men and women are bowing down at the feet of this very impostor.

¹ Eric Johnson and Douglas Huffman, *God Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) pp. 12-13.

Brothers and sisters – the only God you can worship is the One presented in the pages of Scripture.

He is sovereign even over a world filled with evil and pain.

He sends our favourite aunt to hell if she refuses to repent.

He elects men and women as He will – even if we can't reconcile that with our notion of free will and justice.

He will punish those who refuse to persevere to the end – even if they seemed to serve Him for a time.

And you may not like this God. He may seem too severe. It may not be the way you would like God to act.

I have to admit that there are aspects of the holiness and justice and election and sovereignty of God I found hard to come to grips with for a time – until I grew in my understanding of God.

If you don't like this God – there are plenty of user-friendly version out there for you to fall down and worship.

But, I tell you – there is no other true God. You can walk into Koorong and you will find scholars who have made God far more palatable – and you might sleep far easier with a kinder gentler God running this world.

But not me! The sovereignty and majesty and holiness and justice and glory of God demand that the God of Scripture is the only way an almighty being can be.

There is only one true God. Worship Him, Serve Him and Love Him.

Anything else – and the God you worship is antichrist.

And if you worship this false God, when the true God – Jesus Christ – returns – He we declare – I never knew you – depart from Me – and you will find yourself in the lake of fire with the beasts – and then you find that they were not the kinder, gentler God you thought.

Brethren, I don't know how to say this more clearly – know the true God of the Word and accept no substitutes. It is hard work. At times we can struggle to understand why God says, does and allows such things. Worshipping the true God has never been popular.

But worship Him – and know the greatest of blessings in this life and the life to come.

This brings us to the fourth and final summary point that John knows must be imprinted on our hearts – **Heaven and hell are realities** vv. 10-17.

The book of Revelation contains the most graphic descriptions of hell in chapter 14 and the most glorious descriptions of heaven in chapters 21 and 22.

Throughout this book – heaven and hell are shown as concrete realities.

But because we live on earth – because this place is our reality – it is hard for us to live knowing that heaven and hell are real.

So not only do we have a book that repeatedly stresses the reality of heaven and hell – but this becomes a major focus of John’s summary. In different ways in these verses – John stresses the reality of these futures.

Verse 10:

And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.”

In Daniel 12:9, the prophet was told:

For these words are concealed and sealed up until the end time.

The full revelation of what would happen was not going to be manifest until the end times. There are some things that God reveals and some things that He does not reveal.

But here in this book – the glory of heaven and the horrors of hell – the reality of Christ’s return for reward and judgment – these are now revealed in the clearest and most graphic terms.

Verse 11:

Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and the one who is holy, still keep himself holy.

This is on any account a difficult verse. But it comes in the context of a prophetic fulfillment of heaven and hell. So perhaps a paraphrase of this verse might be:

Those who have rejected Christ and chosen to sin – will continue in their sin eternally.

Those who have followed Christ in holiness – will continue holy forever.

This is almost a prophetic pronouncement that the choices of this life become inviolate eternally.

There are no second chances for those who reject Christ. They will be lost in their sins forever. Not only is there is no opportunity to repent – but they wouldn’t do so anyway.

There is no grace in hell. You remove grace and the sin continues. They remain sinful, unrepentant and immoral.

Hell is not filled with those who now love the Lamb and want to repent of their ways. There is no Holy Spirit in hell to lead men to repentance.

The point of this verse is that now is the time for men to repent. Now is the time for us to proclaim the gospel. Now is the day of salvation.

Verse 12:

Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.

This is the fourth time in this book that Christ has said that He will render to every man according to his deeds in this life.

For the saints – for those in Christ – the judgment is on the basis of our deeds done in this life.

When Christ returns, He will judge us and then recompense us eternally for our deeds in the body.

This is not talking about salvation. But it is saying that somehow in a manner beyond my understanding – there is reward eternally based on our obedience and faithfulness and good deeds in the body.

It is not good enough for us to just hang on for heaven. We have to live as if heaven is a reality. It must change our lives and our deeds.

But this also has relevance for unbelievers – for those who dare stand before Christ based on their works – His reward for them is eternal punishment. All fall short of the glory of God. No man is righteous of Himself.

If you stand on your works done in this life as a basis for entry to heaven – you will fail.

Verse 13:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

This statement is used again and again in this book to show the certainty of what is revealed.

Heaven and hell are real. They might be yet future to us – but they are before God even now.

Verses 14-15:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs and

the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

Again a description of heaven and hell and those who enter these places.

Heaven is for those who trust Christ and wash their robes in His blood and eat of the tree of life and enter the gates – the pearl of great price – to get into heaven.

And hell is filled with those who died in their sin and immorality – those who refused to trust Christ and accept His righteousness.

Verses 16 and 17:

I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

Jesus, the Son of God, the Davidic King – He testifies that any who accept His offer of eternal life – any who drink of the water of life – will enter glory.

You cannot earn heaven, buy heaven, merit heaven. You can only receive it as a free gift.

It is not our works or deeds – it is a gift given without cost – to those who ask in faith – to those who trusted that God would save them.

But notice this – *let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.*

Heaven and hell are real – but they are future realities. Any who wish can come – trust Christ, drink of the spring of life and never thirst again. He gives eternal life – heaven itself – to all who ask.

If you don't know Christ – now is the time to accept His free offer of life.

The point of these verses, this montage, is that every picture says the same thing – **heaven and hell are real.**

As you finish Revelation – John wants this truth seared into your heart – for both believers and unbelievers.

This week I thought much about this – how does the reality of heaven and hell affect the way I live?

How does it affect the way I spend my time?

How does it affect the way I spend my money?

How does it affect the way I pray?

How does it affect the way I share with those who don't know Christ?

Heaven is real – and our reward in heaven for the deeds we do in this life are real.

Hell is real. Our loved ones who don't know Christ are going to hell.

Do we believe this?

Does this book – this revelation – this vision actually affect the way we live?

This is life and death. There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be lost.

We cannot live without it affecting us to the core of our being.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." Are you living as those desiring the return of Christ and all it entails?

John then ends his vision with a couple of final exhortations. Verses 18-19:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

Adding to this book or taking away from this book – is watering down, altering, adapting or ignoring the prophecies and warnings of this book.

Examples of this would be denying the reality of hell; denying the return of Christ; teaching salvation by works; accepting the lies of antichrist.

If you change the emphasis, the thrust, the impact of this book – then you have apostatised from the faith – you are not Christ's, you will not eat of the tree of life or enter the holy city.

The truths in this book are too vital to ignore.

John has poured out his heart in visions of life and death. But the Lord knows how unpalatable they are – how confronting they are. He knows that men will water them down, take off the rough edges, explain them away or ignore them.

And this cannot be allowed. This is heaven and hell. This is life and death. This is salvation and damnation.

So John warns – miss the point of this book at your peril.

Verses 20-21:

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

Jesus is coming. And every true child of God longs for that day. The day the wrongs will be set right. The day the world will glorify its creator. The day when the new order dawns.

Until then, it is the grace of God that sustains us.

With these words – the book of Revelation is ended.

In a few minutes you will walk out that door.

You can walk out and let the truths of this book ebb from you. You can ignore the reality of heaven and hell, beasts and Christ, saints and sinners. But you do so at your peril. Read verses 18 and 19 again and again. Take away from the words of this book – ignore them – at your peril.

Or you can walk out that door knowing that every word is true – that Christ will return and heaven and hell are real.

If you don't know Christ – then let me appeal to you. You may not believe a word of this book. But that doesn't change the reality. God Himself has said every word is true. Without Christ you are lost. Hell might sound like a fairytale for children – it is not – it is a reality. And I beg you to consider Christ.

You can know the reality of heaven if you trust Christ. Talk to me and let me tell you of Christ.

If you do know Christ – then live as if heaven and hell are real. Let the reality of Revelation live in your hearts until the day the last trump sounds and the end becomes the beginning.