

7 - A MESSAGE FOR TROUBLED CHURCHES FROM THE GLORIFIED REVEALER

Prologue — 1:1-20

1. Jesus and his authorized messengers pull no punches concerning the cost of discipleship.
 - a. There is Jesus in Luke 9:23-27; 57-62; and again in Luke 14:25ff.
 - b. And there is Paul in 2 Timothy 3:1-17, of which verse 12 is the pivotal statement: **[12]And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**
2. No matter what age, or what circumstances, there is a need for reassurance that God is in control and all will work for good for those who love him and respond to his purpose. It may be terrorism (our missionaries have lived in such climates for awhile now), or a teen or young adult trying to keep his faith in a school where the sub-culture is viciously anti-Christian, or a person whose career subjects him to special temptations.
3. As an *apokalupsis*, Revelation is designed to address such concerns.
 - a. G. B. Caird reminds us that apocalypse was written "to encourage Jewish resistance to the encroachments of paganism, by showing that the national suffering was foreseen and provided for in the cosmic purpose of God and would issue in ultimate vindication" (*The Revelation of St. John*, 9).
 - b. Facing a crisis of their own (see lesson 6), the Christians of John's time needed comfort in persecution, exhortation to bear their trials with endurance and hope, and the knowledge that the church's enemies would one day receive divine vengeance (cf. Rom. 12:19).
 - c. Revelation was written for just such a circumstance, not to obstruct this knowledge, but, in the nature of being apocalyptic, to uncover and reveal the truth of God (see the meaning of *apokaluptō* in Arndt-Gingrich, Second Edition).
4. What is fascinating is how this comforting exhortation begins even in the prologue to the book (1:1-20), the first sections of which we will examine here.

John's Title (1:1-3)

5. Notice first that this is "**the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, . . .** "
 - a. Like all of the New Testament, this book centers on Jesus, "the glorious one who appears to John in chapter one, who moves among the churches in chapters two and three, who is the

object of all heaven's adoration in chapter four, and so on through the book" (Rubel Shelly, *The Lamb and His Enemies*, 15). Any approach which sets Christ aside will miss the true significance of this writing.

- b. Notice too that this revelation was to be shown (*deixai*, 1 aor. act. infin.).
 - 1) Caird (10) notes that a crucial difference between this apocalypse and others which have survived is that those pseudonymous writings generally contained the instruction that they be sealed up until the time contemporary with the actual author. "But John writes openly in his own name for his own contemporaries, and is explicitly told not to seal his book" (cf. 1:11).
 - 2) Indeed, reassurance is of little value if it is not shared.
6. This suggests the next point, vital to keep in mind in interpreting the book: it was about **"the things which must shortly take place"**. There are two issues here.
 - a. First, the things will take place **"shortly"** (*tachos*).
 - 1) Along with its cognates *tachu*, *tachus*, *tachista*, *tachinos*, *tacheos*, and *tacheion*, this is a term used frequently in the NT (37 times in all).¹ Insight is gained from examining its use.²
 - 2) Some have suggested that the alternative meaning of "suddenly" should be used here. This fits the view that the events John describes are completely in the future, that when they do occur, they will occur suddenly, without warning.
 - 3) But the whole tenor of the book is to say something to these seven churches. Other than to support the idea that Revelation is wholly futuristic, there is no reason to not use the term in its customary sense of "soon", "imminent" or "quickly". As Shelly (12) asks, "Of what possible value would it have been to write a letter to agonizing saints of the first century to tell them about the papacy, Mohammed, Adolf Hitler, nuclear weapons,

¹ Some form of this term is used eight times in Revelation: 1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6, 7, 12, 20.

² Note just these examples of *tachos* (used 8 times in all; in Rev. at 1:1 and 22:6): **"And I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me'"** (Acts 22:18). **"Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly"** (Acts 25:4). **"And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you"** (Rom. 16:20). **"I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long"** (1 Tim. 3:14).

Examples of the cognates include: **"But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet'"** (Luke 15:22). **"And when she heard it, she arose quickly, and was coming to Him"** (John 11:29). **"This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger"** (James 1:19). **"Now those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed"** (Acts 17:15). **"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves (2 Pet. 2:1). "Make every effort to come to me soon"** (2 Tim. 4:9). **"And after the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Jesus therefore* said to him, 'What you do, do quickly'"** (John 13:27).

modern Israel and the like? Finding these things in the book makes it meaningless to the people who were its original recipients and leads to fanciful and absurd interpretations."³

b. Second, there is a connection with Daniel 2:28, considered the model for Jewish apocalyptic.⁴

- 1) The phrase, "**the things which must shortly take place**" translates *ha dei genesai en tachei*. In the LXX of Daniel 2:28, the phrase is *ha dei genesai ep' eschaton ton hemeron* ("**what will take place in the latter days**" -- literally, "what must be is the latter days").
- 2) In context, "this phrase comes from Daniel's prediction of the end of the four tyrannical world empires and the establishment of a new empire under the sovereignty of God, and this prophecy is to play a substantive part in John's later visions. Thus, by this allusion John is indicating that his prophecy gathers up all the threads of Old Testament hope; the crisis is sure to come, not for any merely political reason, but because it has been written by God in the scroll of the world's destiny and prefigured in the scriptures (cf. iv. 1, where the phrase is repeated)" (Caird, 11).⁵

³ Caird (12) adds: "We cannot, however, do justice to his very plain opening statement (cf. i.3; iv.1; xxii. 10) by saying that he foresaw a long series of events covering centuries, which could be described as imminent because they were to *begin* shortly."

⁴ At this point, we do well to pause and consider the value of the Old Testament for this study (and for study of the New Testament generally). In the Introduction to his *Jewish New Testament* translation, David Stern notes, within his brief summary of the message of Revelation: "Containing over five hundred quotations from and allusions to the [Old Testament], more than any other New Testament book, it resembles and draws on the visions of such writers as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel" (xvii).

If God's people have not undertaken Bible study generally as much as they once did, they certainly have not spent much time in the Old Testament. And this is detrimental to any attempt to plumb the depths of God's mind (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9ff.), for as Stern notes, the New Testament is the consummation of the Old, its ideas and themes build on those developed in its predecessor, not just in a book like Hebrews, but throughout. Indeed, Stern could not have said it better, nor more forcefully, when he wrote that "the New Testament apart from the Old is heretical, and the Old Testament apart from the New is incomplete" (xiv).

Romans 15:4 reminds us that, "**whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**" Notice carefully that this it is not just the first part of this passage which should receive emphasis -- it is not only that the Old Testament instructs us -- it has a very practical application for our lives as well -- "**that we might have hope.**"

We will do what we can as we study Revelation to pause for occasional side trips which seek to bring us up to speed relative to the Old Testament, to briefly give us the background we need to understand the rich doctrines of the Hebrew Scriptures (and not just the stories we read in children's Sunday school). But, even as we make the effort, we know it will not be ultimately successful unless and until we set aside the time to dig into our heritage of faith (and we would especially recommend the prophets) more fully.

⁵ The idea of the "last days" has been sorely mistreated by many modern believers, owing to a failure to understand its meaning in the Scriptures. It is a phrase which was used often in the Old Testament to designate the final period of history (cf. Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1). During the intertestamental period, such hopes came to be associated with the expectation (sometimes political, sometimes spiritual) of a Messiah(s) who would deliver Israel from persecution; "at this time there emerged the intense anticipation of a 'day of the Lord,' when an ideal kingship (reflecting God's) would be realized on earth, Yahweh's cause established and Israel vindicated (cf. *Pss. Sol.* 17, 18; and see earlier Isa. 11:1-11 and Mal. 4:1, 5-6" (Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 95). "At Qumran 'in the last days' was used for still-future events of which the signs were already present in the history of the Community" (Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 331).

- 3) John is telling his readers that they are currently living in the ultimate period of history when the final tyranny will be overcome by the reign of God which will last forever (cf. Dan. 2:44).
7. The next phrase of v 1 tells us much about the nature and purpose of the book: **"And He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John."**
- a. The phrase is rendered better (though not as precise as we would like) in the NKJV: **"And he sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John"** (see the footnote in the NASB).
- 1) The main verb is **"signified"** (*esemeanen* - 3PS 1 aor. act. ind.), suggesting a once-for-all communication.
 - a) This is the verbal form of *semēion*, the word used in John's Gospel to refer to the supernatural works which demonstrate Jesus' deity - cf. Jn. 20:30-31.
 - b) This is no normal communication; the word involves that which points beyond itself to something else. It was used of telling something in the future (see Arndt-Gingrich, 747). Using this word hints at the supernatural character of the revelation, a point the rest of the phrase clarifies.
 - 2) **"Sent"** is an aorist active participle, expressing the manner of the signification. (It is the same word from which we get "apostle".)
- b. There is an intermediary in the revelation -- by (*dia*) the angel.
- c. It is a message sent **"to his servant John"**.
- 1) The word is *doulos*, the same word used to describe the recipients of the writing earlier in the verse.
 - 2) John identifies with them, in more ways than just their shared faith -- remember, he too has been victimized by persecution (cf. 1:9).
 - 3) At the same time, by virtue of having received this revelation, he is in a position of authority over them -- he is the conduit for the revelation of God and so must be heard, as verses 2-3 make plain (see below on his witness and prophecy).

In the New Testament, the expression "in the last days" occurs five times. Twice the reference is to what has already happened in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2). Three times, the reference is to periods of distress and judgment (2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jas. 5:3). In addition, there are parallel expressions used, including "the last times" (1 Pet. 1:5, 20; Jude 18 = 2 Pet. 3:3), and the "latter times" (1 Tim. 4:1).

By way of summary, the phrases should be interpreted as the original readers of the New Testament would have interpreted them, not as moderns do. One of the key ideas to remember in interpreting them is that, although they can refer to "a short period or point of time, [they] can refer to a period of some length" (I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 148).

Now, what we must see is that the expressions in the NT generally do not refer to the end of time, but to the age of the Messiah, beginning at Pentecost and extending to his coming. Acts 2:17 is crucial for our understanding, for it shows how the phrase was used in Judaism and the early church; it is the messianic age which is "the last days." This helps us comprehend such texts as 2 Tim. 3:1ff., a passage which would have been meaningless to Timothy if "the last days" refers exclusively to the end of the age (unless we want to take the position of some scholars who think Paul and others were mistaken in predicting the coming of Christ during their lifetimes, a possibility they certainly entertained, but not a prediction they ever made).