

Things are not what they seem

Glimpses from Revelation

Overview of Chapters 1—11

After 11 chapters of this book, what do we now know? Christ has been given a revelation for us all, a revelation of what must soon (Gr. *taxos* = quickly) take place (1:1). Because the same phrase is used at the end of the book (22:6), all of Revelation is to be seen as immediate and relevant. In fact, it is a revelation of how things are and what will come next (1:19), that is, what we are to expect. So every church age can and should read and profit from reading the Revelation given to John.

The action suggests what we may call scenes in what is revealed. In the first of these we see the glorified Christ among seven churches and read the instructions he sends to them (1:12ff). In the second, we see Christ being worthy to take and open a book that is in God's hands and the events to which this leads (4:1ff). Then, this scene develops into a third one, with trumpets blowing and another series of events happening on earth (8:1ff). Taking the scenes together, four themes recur.

Christ is central to all that is happening.

In the first scene, Christ stands among the churches and sends instructions to them. To each, he identifies something about himself that is significant to their wellbeing. Christ is what we need, not a new approach, more money or popular approval.

In the second scene, the Lamb breaks seals on a book and implements God's promises and plan. Rivals to God and the appointment of his Christ seek to conquer, and the outcome is the break up of society that follows when human authority is not regulated by the world's true leader and saviour. But then, people of all stations in life become desperate to avoid the wrath of the Lamb. The apostles often make reference to Psalm 2 showing that this is the view of Christ that sustains the church. He is actually Lord.

The third scene arises from the breaking of the last seal and so is still the work of Christ bringing about God's plan and rule. And it concludes with Christ sharing the reign of God over all things.

The kingdom, or reign of Christ is already inaugurated.

In the first scene, Christ's letters all conclude with a promise—I will give... Will not be hurt... I will confess his name... I will make him... And finally, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne. The churches are being called to live their present life in the light of what Christ is bringing about and will certainly accomplish. One writer, George Eldon Ladd, calls the kingdom of God 'the presence of the future.'

In the second scene, the breaking of the first four seals leads to a cry of 'Come'—to four horsemen. What 'comes' is human ambition and a descent into wholesale social breakdown and tragedy. Christians are targeted especially—as though they are the ones responsible for the trouble. But all this is God's plan, implemented by Christ. God gives the world up to these things to awaken it to what is real and eternal. The cry of 'Come!' suggests the final 'Come—Lord Jesus' at the end of the book (22:20; cf. Luke 21:28). The saints must rest for a while in heaven.

In the third scene, trumpets announce a bleak future because they are addressed to the world in warning. But they are heralding the coming of God's kingdom and their immediate purpose is to destroy the destroyers of the earth (11:18). Then, the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of God and his Christ.

Christians represent the Father as his priests to the world (1:6)

Saints are not spectators in all this action. They, indeed, have been 'made a kingdom' or an agent of God's reign.

In the first scene of the Lamb among his churches, every church, and person in that church, is called to 'conquer'. They have something to do that can only be done in the circumstances in which they are placed.

In the second scene, the saints suffer and those who arrive in heaven find out that more martyrs are to follow. But their prayers are remembered. And they now lead the angels in worship.

In the third, the entire action of God's coming victory, with all the terror this means on the earth, arises because God hears the mediated prayers of the saints. A solemn matter indeed!

God's servants worship him and his Christ because they are loved and have been freed from sin and death

The introduction to Revelation reveals the dynamic behind true worship (1:5). The church has been moved to thankfulness, joy and praise, not because people have been converted, or churches have doubled in size, or because the world is becoming a better place. Rather, they say, 'Christ has loved us and freed us from our sins'.

It is this that has brought us into the service of God as sharers in his victory. The world is locked into its sins—as the opening of the seals and the blowing of the trumpets shows. They cannot recognise that the troubles on earth arise because of their horizontal view of the world. How great a victory is Christ's victory over sin and death!

On the other hand, those who have no hounding of conscience, no dread of death, no 'back-log' of debts, no moral pollution, but rather, have peace with God, access to grace and joy of hope and know the love of God, they enjoy God, love their neighbor and are continually renewed even as the world wears itself out.

The worship in scene two describes elders offering up our prayers to God and saying that Christ is worthy to have authority over everything. Why such submission? Because he purchased us, for God, with his blood, and set us up to be God's priests to the world (5:9-10). We were in bondage, not free to serve God or man, manipulated by Satan and the world. Jesus put himself 'on the line'. He 'took us on'. He wore our problem and forged a new future for us by laying down his life—and taking it up again. He is the reason for our liberty and joy, and so, our submission.

In the interlude that follows scene two, we see a great company from all nations who have come through great tribulation. But they have washed their clothes in the blood of the Lamb. Christ is their Shepherd and they have no regrets. So great is the power of Christ's victory through the cross.