

Main Idea: In the final chapter of the Bible we see something and hear something regarding the future that ought to give us tremendous encouragement in the present.

- I. We see a picture of what is coming (1-6).
  - A. The angel showed John a special river (1-5).
    1. Notice *what* John saw there: a river, a throne, and a tree (1-2).
    2. Notice *who* John saw there (3-5).
      - God and the Lamb will be there.
      - God's servants will be there.
  - B. The angel verified the certainty of his prediction (6).
- II. We hear a message from the One who is coming (7-21).
  - A. Jesus speaks (7).
    1. He gives a promise.
    2. He proclaims a beatitude.
  - B. The angel speaks (8-11).
    1. Don't worship me, but worship God (8-9)!
    2. Don't seal up the message, but live in light of it (10-11)!
  - C. Jesus speaks again (12-16).
    1. He repeats His promise (12-13).
    2. He emphasizes that cleanliness is next to godliness (14-15).
    3. He identifies who He is and who this message is for (16).
  - D. John speaks (17-19).
    1. He tells us what to do while we wait (17).
    2. He tells us what *not* to do while we wait (18-19).
  - E. Jesus speaks one final time (20-21).
    1. We have His promise.
    2. We have His grace.

Make It Personal: Am I living in light of the end of the story?

An unstable economy. Government bailout. Conflict in Israel. Truth under attack. Persecution of the followers of Christ. Blatant immorality in the world.

What am I describing? You say, “You’re describing what’s happening in our world today.” And you’re right. I have just described the world in which we live. But I’ve also just described what the Bible says is going to happen in the days just preceding the return of Jesus Christ to the earth. Yes, I’ve just described the world from the perspective of the final book of the Bible, the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

This morning we’re going to do something we ought to do often as Christians, something that will help us maintain a Christ-honoring perspective in a Christ-hating world. We’re going to go to a passage we should ponder regularly. We’re going to read and then ponder carefully *the final chapter* of the Bible!

There’s something quite significant about the final chapter of a book. Take away the final chapter and you’re left hanging. Typically, it’s in the final chapter that everything comes together. In the preceding chapters of a book you become engrossed in the plot and sub-plots. You wonder. But with the final chapter comes closure, a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment.

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup>Note: This sermon is the fruit of an earlier Wednesday evening Bible study series on the book of Revelation at WBC in 2000.

God took over 1,500 years and dozens of human authors to give us His Word. But because it is *His Word*, there is a unifying theme in the storyline of the Scriptures. The Bible is the story of what God is doing to form a people for His glory. The story begins with the description of a paradise that was lost (Genesis 1-2) and it ends with the prophecy of a paradise restored (Rev 21-22).

In Revelation 21, God allowed John to see a vision of the new heaven and earth. In Revelation 21 John attempted to put into words what he saw. The vision continues in the next chapter, the final chapter, not only of the book of Revelation, but of the entire Bible.

Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 22 are like symmetric book ends. As I read now the final chapter of the Bible, listen carefully for things that existed in the first garden of Eden, the one Adam forfeited, that will also exist in the coming paradise.

READ Revelation 22.

### *Things in Revelation 22 first mentioned in Genesis 1-2*

Did you catch the similarities between the first chapters and the final chapter of the Bible? In both places we find mentioned:

\*A river (1-2) -- see Gen 2:10

\*The tree of life (2, 14) -- see Gen 2:9

\*Fruit (2) -- see Gen 1:29 & 2:9

\*God's people will see God face to face (4) -- no specific text in Genesis, but see 3:8 for indication of the intimacy Adam and Eve once enjoyed with God

\*God's servants will serve Him (3) -- see Gen 2:15

\*God's servants will reign (5) -- see Gen 1:28

Now let's take a closer look at this all important final chapter of the Bible. In the final words of the Bible in Revelation 22, we see something and hear something regarding the future that ought to give us tremendous encouragement in the present. More specifically, as the final chapter unfolds we see a picture and then hear a message that ought to motivate us to live boldly now for our beloved Savior.

### I. We see a picture of what is coming (1-6).

Who gave John the 'picture'? In verse 1 John says "the angel" did, apparently the same angel mentioned in the preceding chapter (see 21:9). In chapter 21 John saw and recorded a vision of the *new heaven and earth*. Now in chapter 22...

**A. The angel showed John a special river (1-5).** Psalm 1 uses the scene of a river to illustrate the fruitfulness of the person of God who builds his or her life on God's Word. We've already mentioned the presence of a river in the first world. And now we see one in the future world. Specifically...

*1. Notice what John saw there: a river, a throne, and a tree (1-2).* "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

What an amazing scene! A river, a throne, and a tree. The river of the water of life. The throne of God and of the Lamb. And the tree of life. John mentions that the river flows "from" the throne of God. That indicates that God's throne is the source of this

river, and that illustrates the unchanging truth that *God*, and specifically the *Lamb of God*, is the source of *life*.

Commentator George Eldon Ladd explains, “This is a symbolic way of describing the reign of eternal life in the age to come... The presence of the river of life in the new Jerusalem is a picturesque way of saying that death with all its baleful accompaniments has been abolished and life reigns supreme.”<sup>2</sup>

Remember Jesus' claim in John 4:10? To the woman at the well He said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

In verse 2 John says the river was flowing down the middle of the great street in the city of the new Jerusalem. The imagery seems to indicate the centrality of eternal life there. Eternal life is what this place is all about.

That's quite a tree there, too, isn't it? John says the tree of life stood *on both sides* of the river. In today's world rivers are barriers. The Ohio River keeps us from Kentucky, unless you have a boat. But this river doesn't separate folks from the tree of life, for the fruit this tree offers is found on both sides of the river.

And notice something else about the fruit of this tree. Most trees in our day bear fruit once, maybe twice a year. But this amazing tree offers its luxurious fruit every month, twelve times a year. Again, the scene is meant to overwhelm us with the fact that life there is quite different from life here. There's no death there. The fruit of life keeps coming at you month after month!

And it's not just the fruit that's beneficial. Verse 2 says the *leaves* bring “healing to the nations.” In our age there's war between nations. There's famine and death in the nations. But that will end one day when Christ returns.

Lehman Strauss has this to say about this tree. “The tree of life, once in the garden of Eden, now flourishes in the streets of the New Jerusalem. This tree provided eternal life for the body. If you ask whether or not glorified saints will have need of food, I can only answer now that it will be available to us if we want it. Access to the tree of life was promised to the overcomers (2:7). We are not told whether the fruit will be a necessity or a luxury, but it will be there nonetheless.”<sup>3</sup>

We've considered *what* John saw. Now...

2. *Notice who John saw there (3-5)*. “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”

Who did John say will be in that city? He declares plainly that...

•**God and the Lamb will be there (3)**. Heaven is all about God and the Lamb. It's His throne that's center stage. It's His face that we will see. It's His name that will be on our foreheads. Thus, it's His identity, His reputation, His will, His purposes, His honor, His attention that will matter. The eternal world will be all about *Him*.

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<sup>2</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 286.

<sup>3</sup> Lehman Strauss, p. 360.

How does knowing that truth affect you? Does it thrill your soul? May I say that if it doesn't, you have reason to question whether you'll even be there. If Christ isn't precious to you now, if His reputation, His will, His name, and His honor aren't preeminent to you now, why do you think you'll be there? The only way to heaven is through *Him*. That's what He said, through believing in and cherishing *Him*.

This is our hope, beloved. God and the Lamb will be there. The One who designed our salvation and the One who shed His blood to accomplish it will be there. We're going to see the Lamb, brothers and sisters. We are going to see the Lamb! It's true...

•**God's servants will be there (4).** And what will God's servants be doing? Verse 3 says, "And His servants will *serve Him*." Why is that significant? If you'll recall, that's what God created Adam to do in the first place, to serve Him. And what Adam failed to do, we as the redeemed of God will do.

What kind of service will we render our God? We're not told here, nor do we need to know. As Warren Wiersbe puts it, "It is sufficient that we know what God wants us to do *today*. Our faithfulness in life prepares us for higher service in heaven. In fact, some students think that we shall have access to the vast universe and perhaps be sent on special missions to other places. But it is useless to speculate, because God has not seen fit to fill in the details."<sup>4</sup>

But there's more. What else do we learn here about what the eternal state will be like for God's people? Verse 5 says God's people will *reign forever and ever*. Over whom will they reign? It doesn't say. I see here yet another parallel from Genesis. What was Adam to do? To rule and reign as God's representative over the created realm. In Christ, that's what we will do, the very task that Adam forfeited. Remember, we are joint heirs with Christ, says Romans 8:17.

You say, "This sounds too good to be true!" Perhaps John wrestled with that thought, so notice what the angel did next...

**B. The angel verified the certainty of his prediction (6).** "The angel said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.'"

What's true of the angel's message? It's "trustworthy and true." Why? Because it came directly from the Lord Himself, and He sent it through His angel to show His *servants*—notice the plural; this revelation wasn't merely for John's benefit, but for all God's servants.

And what did the angel say about the timing of the future events? He specified that "the things that must *soon* take place." That's the very statement that we find at the beginning of the book in Revelation 1:1, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." And notice that the word "soon" appears over and over in this final chapter (in verses 7, 12, 20; translated "shortly" or "quickly" in the KJV), as well as "near" (verse 10, "at hand" in the KJV).

Two thousand years ago the Lord said He was coming *soon*. Why did He tell us that? You say, "Yes, why did He tell us that, especially since it's been nearly 2,000 years since He made the announcement?" Don't be alarmed. What's 2,000 years compared to eternity? Nothing but a speck of dust in the hour glass of time. But if He said *soon*, why

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<sup>4</sup> Warren Wiersbe, p. 624.

has He waited 2,000 years? It's because of His mercy. "He is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish," says 2 Peter 3:9, "but that all should come to repentance."

Beloved, if the final chapter tells us anything, it's that our Savior wanted us to know that He is coming, and He is coming *soon*. Again, why did He make that announcement? I think Wiersbe said it well, "Heaven is more than a destination; it is a motivation. Knowing that we shall dwell in the heavenly city ought to make a difference in our lives here and now."<sup>5</sup>

The question is, "Is it?" Is this heavenly scene we've just pondered and the fact that Christ is coming again making a difference in our lives in the here and now? Are we living like we really believe this is true? But there's more. In the final chapter of the Bible, after the picture we've just seen comes a message...

## II. We hear a message from the One who is coming (7-21).

The message actually comes in the form of a dialogue of sorts. It includes five parts.

**A. Jesus speaks (7).** "Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book." Notice that Jesus gives two things here...

1. *He gives a promise.* "I am coming soon." And...

2. *He proclaims a beatitude.* This is actually the sixth beatitude in the book of Revelation. A beatitude is a statement which identifies who has God's approval and blessing. And who does, according to this verse? The person who *keeps the words of this book*. Not simply the person who gives lip-service to them, but the one who *keeps* them, that is, who believes them, guards them, protects them from attack, and lives in light of them.

**B. The angel speaks (8-11).** The reason he spoke is because of John's response in verse 8, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me."

To which the angel spoke and delivered a twofold instruction to John.

1. *"Don't worship me (8-9)!"* Verse 9—"But he said to me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!'"

Beloved, as created beings we were made to worship. But due to our fallenness, we're prone to worship wrongly. If you'll think about it, Adam and Eve got in trouble in the beginning when they responded wrongly to the words of an angelic being, the fallen angel Lucifer, or Satan. Thankfully, this angel wants no part of leading Adam's descendants astray. "Don't worship me! Worship God!" Then came a second instruction to John...

2. *"Don't seal up the message (10-11)!"* Verse 10—"Then he told me, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.'"

That's interesting counsel. By contrast, when Daniel received his vision of the future, he was told to "seal up the words of the scroll until the time of the end" (Daniel 12:4). In fact, the angel emphasized in Daniel 12:9, "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end." But this angel told John, "Don't seal these words." Why not?

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<sup>5</sup> Wiersbe, p. 624.

In the first century you sealed a scroll to prevent unauthorized people from reading its contents. To open the scroll you had to cut the seals, and only the rightful person could do so. But an *unsealed* scroll was fair game for every set of eyes. And that's the point. What John was given, and what we are considering today is something the Lord wants everyone to know. And that's because the time is *near*. That's the very reason the angel gave John. "Don't seal up the words of this book...*because* the time is *near*."

However, there seems to be a sober indicator in verse 11 that there will come a time when it is too late for repentance. The angel declares in verse 11, "Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy."

H. B. Swete explains, "It is not only true that the troubles of the last days will tend to fix the character of each individual according to the habits which he has already formed, but there will come a time when change will be impossible—when no further opportunity will be given for repentance on the one hand or for apostasy on the other."<sup>6</sup>

What John recorded here is quite serious, my friend, as George Ladd ponders, "In view of his sense of the imminence of the end, John in imagination transports himself to the end when repentance will indeed be impossible—when the stand one has taken for Christ or Antichrist will be finally and irrevocably determinative."<sup>7</sup>

**C. Jesus speaks again (12-16).** His message is threefold...

1. *He repeats His promise (12-13).* "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

It's been said that some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. Sadly, due to preoccupation with the end times some people in the past have quit their jobs, abandoned their God-given responsibilities to family, church, and work, and simply "waited for Jesus to return." But notice what Jesus said in verse 12, "I will give to everyone *according to what he has done*." The fact that our Lord is returning is supposed to move us into action, not lure us into idle passivity. We've got a work to do for our Savior, and the time is short!<sup>8</sup>

But Jesus has more to say. After repeating His promise...

2. *He emphasizes that cleanliness is next to godliness (14-15).* I'm not talking about what your mother told you about washing your face. Notice who Jesus said will have access to the tree of life in verse 14. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city." Who will enjoy the tree of life? Those who wash their robes will. Cleanliness is next to godliness. To be near God you must be clean, and to be clean you must experience the cleansing power of the blood of the Lamb of God.

What about those who haven't been cleansed by Christ's atoning work? Verse 15—"Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

The book of Revelation uses more than one image to communicate the eternal destiny of the unregenerate. In our text we're told that the wicked will be outside the city gates,

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<sup>6</sup> H. B. Swete, taken from George Ladd, p. 292.

<sup>7</sup> George Ladd, p. 292.

<sup>8</sup> I'm indebted to Warren Wiersbe's reflections on this perspective. See p. 625.

cut off from the river of eternal life being enjoyed by God's people inside the city. But in actuality, the fate of the ungodly is even worse. It's not just that they don't get to live in the city of God. When we read Revelation 20:14 we're told that they will be cast into the lake of fire. Don't try to mix the metaphors, for both are true—they'll be *outside the gate* and *in the lake of fire*. And don't miss the horrendous, terrifying implications either. All who don't know Christ as Savior will be cut off from God and suffer torment that will never end.

Oh brothers and sisters, may we who are in Christ have bold compassion for those yet in their sins! Bold...so we'll share the gospel with them while there's still time. And compassion...so we'll look past their love of sin, the very love of sin that used to enslave us.

And then in the dialogue, Jesus speaks again. This time...

3. *He identifies who He is and who this message is for (16)*. "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

Jesus calls Himself the *root* of David. A root is something you can't see but which ultimately is responsible for the fruit you can see. Jesus also calls Himself the *bright morning star*. That's the star that announces by its presence that the dawn of the new day is near.

**D. John speaks (17-19)**. Actually, John records what someone else had to say, and in so doing...

1. *He tells us what to do while we wait (17)*. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." The Spirit—that's the Holy Spirit—and the bride—that's Christ's bride, the church. What are they saying? *Come!* To whom are they speaking? You can take their words in one of two ways. Are they speaking to the Lord Jesus? Are they saying, "Come, Lord Jesus!?" Perhaps, and that's what John will verbalize in verse 20. But it's also possible that they're offering this invitation to those mentioned in the latter part of this verse, to those who are thirsty for the water of life. *Come! If you are thirsty, come to Jesus!*

That's what we ought to be doing while we wait, beloved. Calling on Jesus to come, and calling on people to come to Jesus! But according to John, here's something we ought *not* do...

2. *He tells us what not to do while we wait (18-19)*. "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."

That's a severe warning, isn't it? Don't tamper with the book of the Revelation of Christ. Don't say, "It's too hard to understand," and start cutting pieces out of it. And don't add to it either. The Lord has told us what He wants us to know about the future, no more and no less.

**E. Jesus speaks one final time (20)**. What did He say? Listen to Him, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'" That's the third time He's said that in this chapter. He must want us not to miss it. To which John offers the fitting

response, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” And then John adds in what is the final verse of the Bible, verse 21, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”

Let the final words of the Bible sink in. John has an eye to the future—“Come, Lord Jesus,” he says. And John knows we have what it takes for the present—“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people.” Yes, the Lord has given us two very significant things. Don’t miss them.

1. *We have His promise.* He is coming soon.

2. *We have His grace.* His unmerited favor and help. Is it significant that the final words of the Bible emphasize that *God’s people* need and have available grace? Indeed, it is. We needed grace to be saved. We also need grace to live as saved people. And what we need we have in Christ!

That’s the end of the story, brothers and sisters. We’ve just read the final chapter. We’ve seen a picture of what is coming. We’ve heard a message from the One who is coming, and there’s no question now. We know where this world is heading. The only question is this, and it’s a question we each need to face today...

*Make It Personal: Am I living in light of the end of the story?*

Are you looking forward to seeing Christ? Are you ready to see Him?