

# Behold, I am Coming Soon

The summary chapter of *Tapestry – the book of Revelation*.

For me, studying the Book of Revelation has been a Red Pill experience of discovering that my world is not what I thought it was. For years, I have tried to define the visions of this book. Everything changed when I realized that its visions define me.

I had thought that the images John saw were cryptic puzzles concerning the future. But they aren't. They are how God sees the very bizarre world we have made. The visions only require understanding what the images meant to John. The cavalry charge is a good example. John may have associated a cavalry charge with the story of the Exodus or the childhood memory of a military parade. But the vision was not about those things, and certainly not a code hinting at the details of Christ's return. That vision effectively expressed swift and crushing victory. That's all. It gives no information about where or how or when. The same is true when it comes to visions of Daniel's beasts or the Four Horsemen. It is fruitful to weigh the impact of those images in John's mind, but fruitless to pretend we can interpret them literally. The cavalry charge motif will tell us important things about Christ's return (sudden, decisive, overwhelming), so long as we don't waste our time trying to figure out where the horses are kept in heaven, or where would be the best terrain for him to launch a ground attack.

The Bible links together the notions of visions and dreams (Acts 2:14-21, see Joel 2:28-32). A natural dream uses images of what we have experienced or learned. We can dream up new combinations of these images, but dreams only have the vocabulary of our memory to work with. A divine dream or waking vision is similar, except that the flow of images is purposefully guided by God's Spirit. Interpreting Revelation requires careful study of the Old Testament and John's own cultural experience so we can grasp the graphic vocabulary of John's mind. Sometimes John himself interprets an image, like the stars in Christ's hand. Otherwise, we do our best to understand what the image meant to John. And for the most part, we can get the picture.

The greatest challenge of Revelation, however, is not understanding what the images mean. The true challenge of Revelation is accepting that these pictures describe the age in which we live. John saw our age from the perspective of God's throne.

Let that sink in.

## **The Book of Revelation is how God sees our world**

Most of us simply cannot accept this. We can play with these ideas, but we resist seeing reality the way Revelation depicts it. That's because we see something very different when we look at our world day after day. We don't see beasts or hear trumpets at work, at home or in the news.

In John White's 1978 classic children's book, *The Tower of Geburah*, several children tumble into a fantasy world of high adventure designed to illustrate Christian truths. Lisa chances upon something she later learns is the magical Mashal Stone fashioned as a necklace. When worn, "it has the power to bring hidden things to light." Lisa later interacted with a magical creature which she perceived as a harmless yellow cat. (White borrows the term "Jinn" to name it.) But when Lisa put on the Mashal Stone, she suddenly saw the Jinn as a huge, oily, venomous snake. The Jinn looked like an innocent pet but had the character of a predatory reptile. Lisa needed the insight of the Mashal Stone to see what the Jinn really was.

Revelation does something very similar. It reveals the true nature of the world—my world as God sees it. And God sees a world very different from the one I thought I knew. It has left me pondering several things.

I must choose how to live in a world more thoroughly devastated than I imagined

What I naturally see around me is a world of great potential. I am one of the comparatively few who have grown up well-fed, well-medicated and well-educated. I have the luxury of options and disposable income. A flood of entertainment, material distractions and political platitudes daily lull me into a vague expectation that health, convenience and fulfillment are my personal right. All that matters is that I be happy. Obstacles to my happiness seem unfair, and I tend to obsess over eliminating them.

But God doesn't see this world, my world, that way at all. Revelation reveals that I wade in a toxic chaos of suffering and oppression. If I don't see the Horsemen, it's because I keep the shades down and look outside as little as possible. Misery is the status quo here. Misery on a desperately large scale in a great many places. Misery also on a desperately intimate scale, a chill that seeps into the most insulated home.

The chaos Revelation reveals will not end until Christ returns. It will not end. No charity, no government plan, no feel-good film, no personal effort, no war to end all wars, not even genuine revival can change that.

I am called to do good in this world. Christians are called to make disciples, whether they be many or few. Christians are called to work for a common infrastructure of justice and mercy, whether we gain ground or lose it. We do these things because they are part of our new identity, and God is pleased and

glorified by our efforts. But in spite of all this, God sees a world that cannot be fixed—only judged.

And what is worse, I cannot escape this chaos. Revelation sees Christians suffering along with everyone else. God indeed answers prayer and gives good gifts to his children. But only in a larger context that does not spare his children the same challenges, grief and pain that wound everyone around them. He does not blame us for longing that things were different, but until the return of his Son his answer to our cries is always the same. Wait a little longer.

When disaster hits a town, we call them heroes: common, ordinary people who look beyond their own loss to help others who are hurting. They search for the trapped, comfort the overwhelmed, let the bereft know that they are not utterly alone and help people get on track toward a new life.

Revelation shows that God sees this entire age as a disaster. The whole earth is a refugee camp amidst the rubble of terrorism and civil war, cancer and divorce, mental illness and child abuse.

And by means of angels and a people marked as his, the tapestry displays a hero amidst this disaster. Even while chaos still reigns, even through aftershocks and falling debris and looting gangs, Jesus still searches for the trapped. He still comforts the overwhelmed. He still shows people they are not utterly alone. He still works with those ready to rebuild new lives. God the Father wrote out a plan for this redemption immediately after disaster struck humanity, but no one was found worthy to unroll that scroll ... until he came! And now his disciples get to work alongside him to unroll it. We are his crew in this disaster. Why idly play games in a relief shelter, when we could be out with him on an epic rescue?

The debris won't fall forever. Eventually, gangs will be rounded up. One day, everything will be rebuilt and we can invent some truly fantastic games to play. But the way God sees it, suffering defines this time, and therefore defines my choice of how to live. Jesus calls me to join his crew of ordinary heroes.

This is not the world I naturally see. But it is the world Revelation reveals.

### **Suffering is God's context for evangelism**

The world I naturally see is obsessed with calamity at a distance. Every day, millions of things happen, but the ones reported, scrutinized and talked about are the prime selection of worst things. The murders, the celebrity divorces and suicides, the missing children, the discovered bodies. The fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods and epic snow storms. The latest car bomb, military casualties, terrorist arrest, crashed airplane. The faces and wails of new orphans, widows, anguished parents. Corruption in government, in business, in sports, in the church. Today's high school shooting, movie theater shooting, domestic shooting, college shooting, military base shooting, mall shooting, police shooting.

Our culture has devised socially-acceptable ways to respond. We come together to express solidarity. We express moral superiority over evildoers. We satisfy our mourning with candles and makeshift public shrines and moments of silence. We focus on celebrating life and achieving bucket lists. We raise money for something life-affirming. We vow that we will not be deterred from living happy, fulfilled lives. The emphasis is on the glory of surviving. Some survivors truly do heroic things, but most survivors are called heroes for no other reason than that they survive.

In other words, Christian responses to grief and pain have been replaced by a quasi-spiritual litany that exalts temporary survival and pretends there is lasting meaning in an existence that can ever only end in death. The gospel proclamation of eternal redemption is ignored, considered distasteful and intolerant in today's culture. Instead, the President takes the role of Pastor-in-Chief to espouse "faith" and "hope" with no real substance behind either notion.

From my perspective, all this seems to dry up opportunities for evangelism. The false prophet, the prostitute and even the beast all conspire to insist on substitutes for gospel hope.

But Revelation's perspective shows that God sees things so very differently. While the media saturates us with celebrations of life and survival, the Lord is using each and every tragedy as a gracious warning. Each disaster is the symptom of a deadly condition—alienation from God—which can still be successfully addressed.

Just think, God is warning people every day that they are far from him. He doesn't tell *us* to warn people—he is already doing that! If God intentionally uses the suffering of our age to warn people, shouldn't that be how we focus gospel ministry? Of course, the beast and prostitute do not want us to go there. The false prophet prefers a "gospel" of health, wealth and positive thinking. But if God himself is actively warning people through personal and corporate disaster, half the work of evangelism is already done.

The point, of course, is not that hard times automatically bring people to faith. They don't. Neither can personal misery ever be reduced to nothing more than a heavenly caution. The God who captures every tear does not callously ignore pain just to make an argument.

The point is that God is determined to use the pain we have brought on ourselves. Finding God through cancer does not make the cancer any less tragic. But the value of finding God through it cannot be measured.

As Paul said,

This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Paul's own "momentary affliction" was crushing by our standards. Yet he discovered that although the gospel does not lighten affliction, it can direct us toward Christ and an eternal blessing out of all proportion to the temporary pain.

Revelation tells us that God, right now, is using the horrible consequences of human sin as warnings to point people toward his redemption. That is how God is working in these horrible situations, right now. It's true that many, perhaps most, are not interested in his warnings. But some are. Some always are. And if we know that God is already there giving a warning, we can expect him to be there to empower the good news.

The challenge for the church is to properly respond to the calamities woven on Revelation's tapestry. First, we've got to stop believing that "those people" are being singled out for judgment because they suffer in ways we don't. It's true that wickedness sometimes triggers natural consequences, but in this age, suffering is not God's judgment; it is a warning of God's judgment. And it's not just that my suffering is a warning to me. Rather, all suffering is a warning to everyone—a warning that things are not right between us and God, and we need to deal with that fact. There is no inherent correlation between what people experience in this life, and what they deserve (Psalms 73:1-14). That is part of this world's maddening brokenness. Evangelism requires that Christians stop despising groups of people who suffer the ravages of sin more than we do.

Second, we need to go where the hurt is. Every day, a new batch of people hurt terribly. Through us, Christ desires to come alongside them right now to show that God cares and invites them back into his family. Some will prefer to keep us at arm's length, but others will heed God's warning and allow themselves to be embraced. Opportunities to apply the gospel with compassion abound. Evangelism must go where the hurt is.

A world filled with opportunities for evangelism is not the world I naturally see. But it is the world Revelation reveals.

### **The enemy targets our infrastructure**

Biblically-grounded Christians believe in spiritual warfare. We usually interpret Satan's attacks in terms of our struggles with lust or pride or some other personal sin. Revelation shows us, however, that such a notion gives Satan both too much and too little credit.

Too much credit because it assumes Satan is virtually omnipotent. While Scripture does associate the devil with personal temptations (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:5), the Bible never implies that he can be everywhere at once. Actually, our temptations arise from our own inner passions (James 1:14-15). It follows, therefore, that Satan's role in tempting us is indirect. He exerts outside influence to stimulate our natural temptations, and do it on a large scale.

This leads to the other flaw with common notions of spiritual warfare: they give Satan too little credit. The devil does not aimlessly jump around from person to person. Rather, Revelation associates the determined work of the devil with the ravenous beast of government, the persuasive deceit of false Christian doctrine and the seductive impact of human culture. Satan is not only out to get me. He is out to get everybody. And his strategy is to corrupt our institutions.

Revelation teaches me not to look for Satan's pressure on me directly, so much as on the people who influence the society in which I am totally immersed. Leaders in Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court, my State Capital, government agencies, school systems, youth organizations, non-profits, civic groups, sports teams, consumer advertising, and of course, churches.

Do not misunderstand. Human institutions are not evil. Not at all. We were made to work together, and the Lord raises up cooperative institutions for our welfare (Romans 13:1-7). Human institutions bake ideas and values into our culture. They are meant to protect society, and Christians must help each one do that.

Satan, however, uses that same infrastructure to spread moral, mental, economic, physical and spiritual corruption. We thoughtfully design sprinkler systems in buildings in order to fight fire. Given a chance, Satan fills the sprinklers we designed with gasoline. He provides the evil; we unwittingly provide the distribution system.

Satan cannot individually tempt each of us to waste our resources on things we don't need, or indulge normal sexual desires in sinful ways, or justify the wholesale oppression or slaughter of other human beings. But he can work very hard to influence institutional decision makers who create the standards, the policies, the ideologies, the sermons, the laws and the media slant that magnify temptation in entire populations.

Our natural weaknesses take care of the rest. Between the beasts and false prophets and prostitutes, it is by corrupting our institutional leaders that Satan corrupts us all.

The visions of Revelation teach me to pray for those who lead and influence our great institutions. Not to condemn and call down God's judgment (appropriate judgment will come soon enough). But rather to ask God to frustrate and deflect Satan's schemes to subtly, or not so subtly, corrupt these people. These folks are not my enemy. Satan is my enemy who holds successful targets in deluded captivity (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

To turn a phrase, Revelation encourages me to pray for Satan's prey—our leaders. This especially includes Christian leaders: pastors, board members, professional staff, large donors. Believers who steer institutions are the ones most likely to be personally targeted by the Evil One because their corruption is

especially effective. They may be particularly vulnerable to noble-sounding half-truths that will inadvertently make society even more toxic.

Seeing Satan attacking me so indirectly and so effectively is not the world I naturally see. But it is the world Revelation reveals.

### **God's remaining promises are crucial**

The false prophet leads the church to abandon its past, deemphasize Christ's work on the cross, and study him only as a "great moral teacher." I knew that. But Revelation has taught me that the false prophet has been even more effective in cutting off contemporary Christianity's ties to the future. This is a major problem, because Christianity is fundamentally eschatological. That means what holds it together hasn't happened yet. It awaits God's remaining promises.

"Eschatology" means the study of final things. It has to do with Christ's return, God's judgment, Heaven and Hell. A great many Christians, however, have regrettably narrowed that study almost exclusively to speculation about world events just preceding Christ's return. Intelligent Christian discussion of Hell is rare. Talk of Heaven only occurs at funerals, having become an afterthought of the Christian life.

As noted earlier, our society has teamed up with much of the church to provide an alternative to how we deal with final things. The alternative is to only celebrate the deceased's past and avoid uncomfortable questions about his or her current situation. Hell is ignored. Even when Heaven is invoked, it's pretty much a non-issue, since, as R. C. Sproul once noted, many believe that the only requirement to enter Heaven is to die.

Our eternal future provides very little motivation for contemporary Christians. We tend to pick up the topic of the "afterlife" as a casual curiosity, and lay it down a moment later so we can get back to "real" life. And when we do study such themes in church, most time is spent on Heaven. God's judgment gets very little emphasis. Popular evangelism skirts and sugar coats the subject as much as possible, preferring to speak of faith mainly in terms of our happiness here and now. We think that the gospel will sound more like good news if we soft-pedal the part about God's wrathful renewal of all things.

But that's not the way Revelation's panels are woven. Revelation is jam-packed with God's judgment—the horrible, horrible impact of its current suspension, and the glorious result when God finally pours it out. In Revelation, God's judgment is not the big problem; it's the big solution.

Ignoring God's big solution makes our gospel unintelligible. Evangelism is often stymied by the simple question of how a good God can allow so much obvious evil and pain. That's not a strange question to ask. But many Christian responses are strange indeed, describing a God who comes across as either weak,

or incompetent, or uninvolved, or just clueless. Offering grace from a God who cannot or will not control pain and evil is just not convincing. Nor is it biblical.

It is God's judgment that makes sense out of it all. First, that God promises judgment. That at least establishes that God knows the difference between right and wrong, and cares about it. Second, that God's promised judgment is purposefully suspended as long as it takes to offer a pardon to every kind of person on earth. That establishes that it is not a lack of will or power that keeps God from fixing things. Rather, he endures our brokenness along with us so he can gather a multitude back to himself before judgment falls.

By ignoring final judgment, suffering and wickedness argues against any gospel we offer. We may try to limit the scope of the gospel to happiness, health and well-being in this life. But Revelation shows us that God will not exempt believers from the horrors of this life. Not much good news there. Even if we claim that the gospel promises a bright eternal future, we still leave unanswered why there is so much anguish in the here and now. It just doesn't make sense.

Final judgment is a fundamental pillar of the gospel—the whole thing falls apart without it. Grace would have no context and God's goodness no meaning.

What non-Christians need is a gospel that lifts up a God who is truly, awesomely good. Not only powerful, but good. A God who cares about the horrors of this world at least as much as they do. The non-Christian needs to see that God's lack of action has a benevolent and magnificent motive—to save a vast multitude before he takes action to judge each of us according to our own compromised conscience, tying up every loose end justly and righteously.

When non-Christians ask, "how can a good God allow bad things?" we should say, "That's a great question!" and tell them of God's promised but suspended judgment. If they don't like that answer, we should ask our dear neighbors how they answer that question. How do they account for all the pain and wickedness around us? They either will have no clue, or their answer will betray their lack of any rational hope.

Without the knowledge of God's promised and suspended judgment, this world has no hope. No hope that things will ever change. No hope of understanding the random and unjust distribution of misery we see everywhere. No rational hope that the grave will not obliterate every aspect of our existence. It sounds crazy to modern ears, but God's promised-but-suspended judgment points to the only hope this world has.

The coming day of God's wrath is also central for believers. It directs our prayers toward perseverance. It helps us discard the idols of this world by giving our life a huge future perspective. It gives each day a sense of urgency, since we only have a limited time to serve Christ in ways that matter forever. The hope of Christ's return should fill Christian prayers as much as confession, praise and supplication. None of those things are worth a dime to us without his return.

The Evil One mocks a Christianity rooted in the past (Christ's work) and in the future (Christ's return). He laughs that such faith has nothing to offer today. But the reverse is true. Only a faith deeply rooted in Christ's work and intensely focused on his return has anything worthwhile to offer. Jesus clearly taught that our work for him in this life will determine the scope of our opportunities when he returns (Luke 19:10-26). For Christians who believe that, there is no greater motivation to use our whole life in his service today.

I do not normally see a world that only makes sense in light of the return of Jesus Christ in glory. But it is the world Revelation reveals.

### **Being faithful to Christ is the most important thing**

After his resurrection, after appearing to more than 500, after completing his final training before Pentecost and after rounding out his band of Apostles, Jesus ascended into heaven. The next time we expected to see him was the day he returned in glory. But he came back one more time. He came back to arrange one final Apostolic letter to his people, his Bride, his church whom he loves. This letter was so important that it would be unlike any other. He would use it to burn images into our soul. He would make it impossible to forget or ignore. He knew what was coming and what we would face. So he gave us the great Tapestry of Revelation.

In every way that the Son of God could think of, he communicated one single message above all. Be faithful. Do not let anything keep you from being faithful. Being faithful is more important than anything else. Really ... more important than anything.

The beast will get in your face and tell you otherwise. It will command you to serve its interests and give your country or party or ideology first place. The false prophet will tell you otherwise. It will preach that Christ demands nothing but that you be happy and self-satisfied. The prostitute will tell you otherwise. It will seduce you with a dozen paths to success, none of which involves the kingdom of God. And if you raise your head to object, there are always four horsemen close by to run you down.

This age will end once the church is complete. Satan does not want that to happen. He does not want to relinquish his bizarre and terrible pretense to rightful rule. But as powerful as he is, he cannot stop it. There is simply nothing he can do to stop the progress of the gospel.

But sadly, what Satan cannot accomplish, Christ's church can. What I mean is that the only ones who can hinder the progress of the gospel and extend human misery are Christians themselves.

Do you remember what Jesus warned the seven churches about?

1. The seduction of civil religion—the exchange of our spiritual distinctives for social acceptance or political power.
2. The seduction of false teaching—diluting our faith with popular notions that are not biblical.
3. Intimidation against our faith—slander, abuse and loss of freedom.
4. The discouragements of a truly fallen world—we must face the same common trials that the world at large experiences.
5. Complacency in sound doctrine—as if knowledge is faithfulness.
6. Complacency in past glories—as if heritage is faithfulness.
7. Complacency in financial well being—as if success is faithfulness.

It's our own lack of faithfulness that most hinders the gospel. Not the beast, false prophet or prostitute. Not the dragon himself. Combined, they can make life a lot more difficult than it has to be, but they cannot truly slow down the spread of the gospel. Only Christians can do that, when we devote ourselves to anything other than Jesus Christ and the glorious kingdom he will bring with him.

I need a gospel hope that will keep me faithful. That's what Revelation gives me, if I have the eyes to see it.

The only thing more motivating than seeing the true order of things today, is to look ahead to the day when the former things will pass away. Today's order of things which we cannot change, Jesus will change. Just as surely as the Son of God was born in Bethlehem when the time was right, he will return when the time is right—when his church is complete down to the last soul whose name is written in his book. No matter how many nations he has to invade with grace and no matter how many generations he must search through to find them, there will come a day when everyone is safely gathered into the Ark. On that day the rains will come to wash this world clean.

We must raise that hope to full view and look upon it every single day ... in order to remain faithful every single day. Jesus is coming back to institute a new age for humanity. It doesn't matter how long it takes. It doesn't matter whether I see it in my short lifetime. It doesn't matter how much the dragon rages. This order of things shall pass away. The kingdom Jesus is building through us will be fully established.

And every act of good will, every joyful sacrifice, every mortification of sin, every act of justice and compassion, every exercise of faith will be vindicated. Every one. Every last one! Our dying bodies will sprout into something eternally fabulous. Our broken souls will become tuned to full efficiency. Our society that now is such a mix of best and worst, will then only be best.

Revelation shows us that we cannot control our lives as we would wish, or attain all our dreams. But we don't have to. We can afford to live for Christ no matter the cost, because God's dream for his children far exceeds our own. Our Heavenly Father has promised to wash this world clean and give it back to us fresh and ready to sustain our best efforts. We are indeed in a terrible, bloody battle, but we are on the winning side. Therefore, absolutely nothing is more important than remaining faithful.

Faithfulness to Jesus Christ is not the top priority in the world I naturally see. But it is in the world Revelation reveals.

The last image on the last panel of the tapestry looks over John's shoulder as he and an angel gaze toward the future. And there is just enough space left to stand alongside them.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. (Revelation 22:20-21)

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This is a summary chapter. The entire book, [\*Tapestry, the Book of Revelation\*](#), Glenn Parkinson, CreateSpace, 2015, is available on Amazon.