

THE VISIONS OF PATMOS-- (2)

The book of Revelation written by John on the Isle of Patmos where he had been exiled by the Roman emperor of his day, is not only the seal but the sphinx of Scripture. Revelation is the least read and the most misunderstood book of the whole Bible. No other portion is so puzzling, yet, so full of promise, so actually difficult, yet, avowedly plain, so hated and so loved as this book written from the rocky exile prison of John, the beloved.

Of all the literature of the world, this ancient work written by an old fisherman, a fisherman of fish and men, has infinitely more challenge. It offers exceedingly more reward than all others. In the very first paragraph we read, "Blessed is he that readeth." And toward the end of Scripture we are told that, "Blessed are those who keep the sayings of this book." "He shall inherit all things. He will have the right to the tree of life and to enter into the city."

After spending over 20 years immersed in the study of apocalyptic literature, and Revelation is a species of literature and known as apocalyptic which has bizarre visions and dreams of unnatural imagery, R.H. Childs opened his lectures on the Apocalypse with this statement, "From the earliest ages of the church, it has been universally admitted that the Apocalypse, that is, the book of Revelation, is the most difficult book of the entire Bible." Now, about two hundred years earlier Archbishop John Chapel Woodhouse of England wrote in an introductory paragraph of his commentary on Revelation the following statement, "The prophecies of the Apocalypse though illustrated by commentators of all ages, have not been so successfully explained as to give general satisfaction. From the interpretations most commonly received, many of the learned have witholden their assent. Doubts have been expressed. Whether we are yet in possession of the fortunate clues to be derived from human sagacity or divine inspiration or of the necessary aids of learning, or of the events of history which at some future period may be destined to ascertain the completion of these predictions." Well, in other words, the Archbishop was saying, we're not satisfied yet with any interpretation

given in the Bible's last book. His words are as relevant now as they were two centuries ago. When individual Bible readers attempt to study Revelation the result is usually a baffling frustration. One pastor, and later a commentator, reported the reaction of his flock like this, "Most readers of the Bible," he said, "have a love-hate relationship with the last of its 66 books. Revelation is full of mysteries in the modern sense of the word as well as in the special Biblical sense of it. And like all mysteries, they alternatively repel and attract. Certain friends in my own congregation at St. Faith's in _____ have expressed both the exasperation of, 'I can't understand a word of it' and the curiosity of, 'Do let's have a shot at it.'

Well, that expresses the feeling of many a pastor as he listens to his flock as they comment on the book of Revelation. Among the learned many have felt what only Dr. South would say, "The study of Revelation either finds or leaves a man a little cracked." More reverent scholars, even among the reformers of the 16th century, have seemed almost to endorse such a negative comment by their own neglect of John's book. It's often been remarked that Calvin showed extreme good sense when he left this book of the Bible without a commentary from his pen, the only exception. As for the beloved, Luther, he wrote, "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it, that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized." And Luther could not have been more wrong. Zwengle, too, denounced the book as an intrusion into the cannon.

Now, 20th century commentators, they often begin like Charles Erdman whose opening lines describe Revelation as the most perplexing book of the Bible. And he continues by saying, "This volume (meaning his commentary) is published with diffidence because of the difficulties, the mysteries involved, with a plea for tolerance of divergent views, yet, with a deepening confidence in the practical and imperishable values of this portion of sacred Scripture.

Now I want you to compare the comments of Lee and Morris and John

Volwood (?) who represent strongly divergent schools of theology today. Here's Morris: "The book of Revelation is, I fear, a very neglected book. It's symbolism belongs to the first century, not our own age. Twentieth century men accordingly find it difficult and tend to dismiss it as irrelevant. This is unfortunate because it's theology of power is of the utmost importance to an age which is as preoccupied with the problems of power as is ours." Well, that was Morris.

Let us listen to it from Volwood (?): "No other book of the New Testament evokes the same fascination as the book of Revelation. Attempts at its exposition are almost without number, yet, there continues the widest divergence of interpretation. Because the book reveals truth relative to every important fundamental of Christian theology, it's inevitable that its interpretation be influenced by the contemporary confusion of Biblical scholarship, especially in the realm of eschatology. In some sense, the book is the conclusion of all previous Biblical revelation and logically reflects the interpretation of the rest of the Bible. The expositor is faced with enumerable hermeneutical decisions before beginning the task of understanding the peculiar contribution of the book of Revelation. That is an undertaking made more difficult by the fact that his decisions not only color the exposition of the book itself, but also, in a sense, constitute an interpretation of all that proceeds it in the Scriptures." So there you have Volwood (?) saying, if you want to understand Revelation, you need to understand every other book of the Bible.

Now, there are many who confess the difficult nature of the task of interpreting Revelation who also assert the worthwhileness of the task.

That old church father, Jerome, he said, "The Apocalypse has as many secrets as words." He also said, "It's beyond all praise."

In our own century, G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "There's no book in the Bible which I have read so often, no book to which I've tried to give more patient and persistent attention, there's no book in

the Bible to which I turn more eagerly in hours of depression than to this with all its mystery, all the details which I do not understand."

Well, the scholar, Frank Stagg (?), who suggested the chief reason for the fascination of the Bible's last book and here he contradicts Luther, he said, "Probably no book more fully exalts Christ and his cross."

W.A. Criswell (?) the contemporary dispensationalist preacher said this, "The Revelation is a summation of all the past, all the present, all the future. It's the celestial capstone of all God's handiwork. What the book of Genesis is to the story of God's redemptive grace, the book of the Revelation is to the fruition of our Lord's atoning mercy. The first is meaningless without the last. Almost literally in preaching through the Revelation I preached again through the Bible itself, every promise, every theme, every hope, every dream of the Holy Scriptures finds its fulfillment and consummation in the glorious pages of the Apocalypse.

Perhaps you have heard of Bishop Wordsworth. He was a relative of a poet of that name. He wrote the very finest commentary on Scripture and he said this, "There never was a book penned with that artifice as this one, as if every word were weighed in the balance before it was set down."

Another modern writer, Kerd (?), said, "No other book can have aroused such equally passionate love and hatred. It's been the inspiration of poetry, music and art, the fountain of worship and devotion, the comfort of the bereaved and the strength of the persecuted."

Well, it's true to confess as W.R. Stroggy (?) reminds us, "This book has been a storm center of controversy from the second century A.D. and, no doubt, it will continue to be so.

Well, what are we to say about such melange of conflicting appraisals? Is it worthwhile, the study of this book? Well, we have several reasons to encourage you to study the book of Revelation. First,

we should observe that as with Christ, himself, so the revelation of Jesus Christ leaves no man neutral who is confronted by its claims. Secondly, the history of the church as a whole testifies to its value. H. Graton Gonesse (?), a well known prophetic expositor, he had to say this, "Well, of what practical benefit have these prophecies been to the church in the last 18th centuries?" And he answers it, "She has read, studied, marked and inwardly digested the sure word of prophecy. To what extent has it guided her footsteps, sustained her hopes? If these prophecies have proved to be a mighty power in her history, if they preserved the faith of the church in the times of general apostasy, if they have given birth to great reformation movements, if they have inspired confessors and supported martyrs at the stake, if they have broken the chains of priestcraft, superstition, and tyranny and produced, at last, a return on the part of many, many millions of men to a purer, primitive Christianity, they have answered their purpose and justified their position in the sacred Scriptures of truth." So much for Gonesse.

Third, we should say what Sturgeon said about difficult passages of Scripture, "The harder the kernel, the sweeter the nut inside." Contrast the wealth in the carefully guarded Bank of England with the accessible coins of the child's piggy bank. In this book, all of the books of the Bible meet an end. It is a compendium as well as a seal but for this reason, it can only be understood by those who have grasped the essence of the preceding Scripture. Particularly, does the Old Testament in its historical, legal, and eschatological elements here live again. But the treasure is only for the diligent, the prayerful, and the careful.

Now, the fourth reason may seem strange as we talk about the value of the book. We should remember that what does not torment, does not bless. The task of Christianity has every been to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Someone has said that Revelation was not written without tears, alluding to chapter five where John wept--and neither without tears shall it be understood. Difficult Scriptures are intended to awaken us, to challenge us lest we should assume that we understand it all.

Fifthly, we must keep in mind the legal maxim that abuse does not cancel use. Christianity has often been murdered in the house of believers. Voltaire's words were appropriate, "God, deliver me from my friends, I can look after my enemies myself!" No Bible book has suffered so much in the hands of interpreters as has Revelation. The unlearned who seek to understand it--no experience can be more frustrating than to randomly seize from the shelves of a great library, 20 books or so purporting to explain the Apocalypse. Some of them written in our century trace the story to Napoleon Bonaparte amid the seals, the trumpets, and the vials of Revelation. Others, written after World War I find the Kaiser there just as surely. Following World War II, Hitler came into equal prophetic prominence. You go back before the 19th century, all sorts of wonders unfold, for example, there was a famous prophetic commentator, E.B. Elliott, who soberly informed us that the half hour silence in Heaven referred to in Revelation 8:1 was fulfilled by the 70 years that intervened between Constantine's victory over Licinius followed by the dissolution of the pagan heavens, A.D. 324 and _____ Revolt and invasion of the empire consequent on the death of Theodosius in A.D. 395. In other words, the 70 years of peace in the Roman world of the 4th century cast 30 minutes of silence in the grateful Heavens.

Now, Bishop Barnes applied the 7 thunders of Revelation 10:4 to Papal anathemas ^{against} / the reformation and he explains the prohibition addressed to John, commanding him not to tell the content of the thunders, was because there's nothing worth recording in those anathemas. Well, that may be an example of protestant humor but it's not exegesis.

We should remember the _____ words of _____ Deacon Farrah (?). He said, "A book less sacred would have discredited by the dangerous uses to which it has often been perverted. But no aberrations of interpreters have been suffered to weaken, much less to abrogate the essential revelation that's been exercised from the first and will, to the last syllable of recorded time, continue to exercise a unique power over the hearts and consciences of men."

Now, sixthly, if ever an age needed particular guidance amidst its shoals of troubles and dangers and a special prophylactic for its ills, it's this one. If we are, indeed, living on the borders of eternity, we should expect increasing light on the last things. The present is not only shaped by the present but by the future. What one anticipates has a reflex influence on one's immediate choices. Now eschatology, the study of the last things with its key doctrines of the judgment, the advent, acts as a warning against lawlessness. It acts as a deterrent to carelessness. It tells us of the solemnity of our choices, our words, our thoughts, our deeds. In fact, philosopher Kant once said this, "You, who say you cannot change your ways, if I warned you that there would be a gallows awaiting you at the end of this day if you did not change, would you not suddenly find new moral energies to correct your wrong habits? I prophesy you would, indeed!" Well, I suspect Kant was right.

New Testament eschatology not only promises an end of evil and redress for the oppressed but it also warns professed believers of the judgment for them. By far, the majority of texts in the Bible about the judgment apply to believers, not unbelievers. Awareness of this does two things, it reminds the believer that the decision of faith has constantly to be made anew until the end of this life and, secondly, it shows the indispensable nature of the Everlasting Gospel, for only the imputed merits of Christ can avail in a judgment that investigates not only the outward behaviour but inner desires and motives. Furthermore, in an age of mass media, all are intensely aware of the problem of evil. It is strange, for every 1000 that ask about the origin of evil, the problem of evil, there is hardly one that asks about the problem of good. We are prepared to doubt God because evil exists. We forget to praise Him because good exists. Now, the problem of evil will be solved. It will be solved in the last great judgment day and all God's deeds will be made manifest as just, righteous, true, and loving. That's why it's been said that eschatology is also the study of theodicy. Theodicy just means

the vindication of God.

Now, we should also add, that if the world is nearing a final crisis we would expect a divine warning to that effect. We would expect heavenly counsel on how to prepare. Well, that's exactly what Revelation offers. May I refer you to Revelation 13 and Revelation 14 verses 6-12.

Now, lastly, there's a major cause for the widespread failure to interpret this book aright. And let it be remembered that if there is any specific correct approach that yields right conclusions, then the vast majority of interpreters must be wrong. But this major cause I refer to is inherent not in the book but in its readers. It was Thomas Aquinas who said, "If a donkey looks into a book, you can't expect an angel to look out." The trouble is that we're all donkeys and our only consolation is that the Lord himself at least once had need of one.

Well, what's the key to interpreting this book? The answer is simple and sufficient. The key is Christ. The Gospels that begin in the New Testament talk about Christ coming in the flesh. The book of Acts that follows the Gospels talks about his coming in the Spirit at Pentecost. But Revelation talks about his coming in glory. You see, the Gospels have to do with the head of the church, Jesus Christ. The Epistles have to deal with the body of Christ, the church; but Revelation talks about the union of head and body, when Jesus comes back for his church. The Gospels tell us about the atonement of Christ which brings us justification every moment of our lives. The Epistles not only talk about justification but sanctification--not only being counted holy but being made holy. But Revelation--that talks about glorification when sinfulness itself -- not just its guilt, not just its power--but its presence will be removed by the second coming of Christ. The first verse of this book calls it the revelation of Jesus Christ. It's really not true to call it the revelation of St. John, the divine, as the King James version says. The first verse contradicts that. It is the revelation of Jesus. It's all about him. It is from him and it is about him. The very first chapter

contains a vision of Christ and before every vision of the book we are first shown Jesus. Revelation reveals him as our sacrifice, our saviour, our priest, our judge and our king. Twenty eight times in this book Christ is called the Lamb. You know, there are two Greek words for lamb and the one here used is the word which means, "little lamb," Christ as a lambkin, a little lamb, as if to arouse our love for him who was our sacrifice. In this twenty five different titles are given to him. He is called God, the Almighty, the Son of God, the Lord, the Holy One, the Word of God, the Amen, Son of Man, Jesus, the Faithful and True Witness, the Master, the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the first begotten, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root and offspring of David, the Morning Star, etc.

My friends, if you will read about Jesus in this book, you will say with the hymn writer, "Thou, Christ, are all I want, more than all in thee I find." The whole history of the church (it was future when the book was written) is told in terms of Christ's own experience; he who preached for 1260 days and then was put to death and then was resurrected to heaven _____ ascension, that's the way the story of the church is told in the chapters of this book, particularly in chapter 11. It speaks of the church presenting the message of the Old and New Testament for 3½ years and then being put to death and after 3 days in the tomb, being resurrected and ascending to glory and at the same time the veil in heaven opening and the most holy place being seen, the ark revealed--you see, the whole story of the church is told in the stories of its head, Jesus Christ. Even the picture of antichrist in the book of Revelation is modeled as a parody of Christ. We read about antichrist that he was, is not, yet is and shall yet appear. That's modeled on Christ who was, during the days of his flesh; was not, in death; and then appeared again rising up out of the pit of death. Even antichrist is set forth in terms of ^{the} Christ. So Christ is the Alpha and Omega of time and life and salvation.

My friends, let me ask you, is he that to you? Do we realize what this world would be like without Christ? Have we ever stopped

to think of what would happen if all the influence of the Gospels was suddenly removed from the world. Is Christ everything to you, my friend? Let me tell you a story which may illustrate my prayer for you today. A minister had just returned from preaching in a communist country and he said to his wife, "I feel convinced that I should go to the hotel." His wife looked at him aghast. "Go to the hotel, husband? Don't be silly. They will think that you drink beer, that you are a drunkard." He said to her, "Well, you come too, and then they will think that there are two of us who drink beer and who are drunkards," and laughingly, he led her across the square to the old giant hotel. They went into the bar room and what a sight struck them there. Men were hiding under tables. The barkeeper himself was under the bar and a Russian officer was surveying the lot with a bottle in one hand and a revolver in the other. When the minister and his wife entered and demanded to know what was happening, the bartender called out from under the bar, "This man is drunk and he is asking for more alcohol and he is threatening to shoot us if we don't provide it." "Well," said the minister, "give me a bottle and I'll be responsible." And so, the hand of the bartender appeared for a moment with a bottle, placed it on the bar and then rapidly disappeared again. And the minister steered the Russian officer and his own wife to a table. He opened the bottle and poured out a glass for the officer. He began to talk to him about the story of Christ, about the one who loved all men, about the one on whose shoulders the universe hangs, who became so helpless as to hang at a woman's breasts, a peasant woman's breast. He spoke about the time when eternity was contracted into time, the king of glory contracted to a span, even less, as a seed in the womb of a Jewish maiden. He spoke of the time when day came into night and summer into winter, when this earth was lifted to heaven and heaven stooped low to her. He spoke of the cross and suddenly the officer interrupted him, "Don't tell me that," he said, "anymore, I know all that. I was a Greek orthodox priest." The preacher looked at him, stunned. And the Russian officer went on, "I baptized the little children into the story of Jesus and when the communists came to my country, to my city, they told me they would either shoot me or I must

become an atheist and an officer in the army." He said, "I was forced to teach atheism to the very children I baptized." He said, "What's the use of telling me about the Gospel, I know it." And he shook his head. The preacher looked at him and said, "My friend, you know the Apostle's Creed, 'I believe in God, the Father, maker of Heaven and earth,'" and he went on to recite it. "Yes, I know it," said the officer. "Well," said the preacher, "it says there, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins,' Do you believe in that?" "Oh," said the officer, "my sins are too many." "But," said the preacher, "it doesn't say, I believe in the forgiveness of a few sins." "Ah," said the officer, "my sins are too dreadful." Replied the preacher, "It does not say, I believe in the forgiveness of sins, but not dreadful." "But," said the officer, "I sinned against children." The minister replied, "It does not say, I believe in the forgiveness of all sins that are not against children. My friend, Jesus Christ bore your sins on Calvary. You must say, as you said long ago, you believe in the forgiveness of sins," and he looked the officer very directly in the eye and said, "My friend, do you believe in the forgiveness of your sins?" The Russian officer stared back at him and it seems as though some music from heaven was being heard in his dulled brain and a light came into his eyes and suddenly he exclaimed, "I believe in the forgiveness of my sins."

My friend, the visions at Patmos, the book of Revelation are not meant to make us wise about every detail of the future but they are meant to tell us that the Lamb of God who is coming soon to judge the world has forgiven all our sins at Calvary and if we believe, they will not be held against us in the great judgment day. And so I ask you, do you believe in the forgiveness of your sins? Believe today...he says, "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men and he that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." God bless you my friends.