



Do We Need Revelation?

TEXT
Revelation 7:9–17,
21:1–5

February 24, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Do you believe there will be a time when all that has gone wrong will be made right? When all who have suffered will be comforted? When all who grieve will know joy again? When all who have lived knowing only the handcuffs of oppression will know liberation? When those whose bodies are broken, or spirits are broken, or hearts are broken will be made whole? I don't mean a day in this life, but beyond. Do you think there will be a promised day of God, when in the mercy and love of God, all that has gone wrong will be made right?

Or is life just a throw of the dice, and you get what you get? You might as well make the best of it and take good care of yourself, because it's all an accident?

The writer of Revelation says there is a promised day of God. I believe that's right.

I met Martin in American History class in college. He worried about me. His church taught him that the end of the world was coming, and evidently there was something about me that convinced Martin I wasn't ready for that. I think he was right. I was more interested in finding a way to pass American History — and

even more so, trying to get a date with a girl named Brenda. Jesus returning on the clouds wasn't high on my radar. That worried Martin. It didn't worry me. That worried Martin even more. He told me that he would hate for Jesus to return and I would not be ready.

I was no biblical scholar, but something in my gut told me that the end of the world is not something I should be afraid of — not because it won't end. It will. Like all creatures, the earth is finite. It had a beginning, and it will have an end. That's just science. But I didn't understand that when the world comes to an end, this should be some kind of judgment. But I hadn't read Revelation. Maybe I was missing something.

Since college, I have studied Revelation a bit, and I am glad I have.

The first thing that my friend Martin missed is the tone of this book. It's not a threat. It's a book of promise. And the promise is communicated most clearly through singing. Revelation is filled with songs of praise, songs of defiance, songs of hope.

Revelation is apocalyptic literature. The images are big: dragons and battles. And all through it, the congregation

joins in singing hymns of praise. Even with complicated language, John's point is simple: Jesus was Lord at the beginning. He is Lord even now. He will be Lord at the end. John makes no attempt to tell us when the world will end. He makes no attempt to provide a schedule. John simply wants to say, in the end, Jesus will be Lord.

Now my friend Martin is not alone. There have been many who interpret Revelation the way Martin did. They read Revelation as some kind of code which they are able to decode and — presto — they know when the world will end. Among the first to do this was a Christian named Montanus, who lived in the second century. He predicted that the New Jerusalem described in Chapter 21 would descend from heaven in a town named Pepuzza, which is now in Turkey.¹

Of course, Montanus was wrong. His being wrong has not slowed others from adopting his approach. In the 1880s, followers of William Miller discerned that Jesus would return in 1884. People quit their jobs. People gathered together to pray until Jesus showed up. It didn't happen.

That didn't stop Tim LaHaye, in the last 20 years, from

writing a series of books called *Left Behind*. It includes what he calls the “Wrath Trilogy.” There was a *Left Behind* movie, *Left Behind* T-shirts and a *Left Behind* board game, which gives you something to do, I suppose, if you are left behind.

Why are all of these people trying to identify the schedule? I would suggest that they are reading Revelation without paying attention to the context in which Revelation was written.

If I understand this book, John says Jesus is Lord; and in the end, Jesus will be Lord. Why does John have to say that so boldly? Because in the world in which we live, it’s not often obvious that Jesus is Lord. Revelation is written to those who are oppressed. It is not written to scare people that the world might end; no, it is written to people who are already afraid that the way the world is now will never end. It’s written to those on the bottom.

John has a vision. There was a great multitude from every nation, and they come before the throne of God singing, “Salvation belongs to our God.” And the elder asks, “Who are these people?” The response is, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal. These are the ones who have endured.”

This is what he means: In the year 112, not long after Revelation was written, Pliny the younger, a governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan. Pliny writes, “I have never been present at the interrogation of Christians. Therefore, I do not know how

far such investigations should be pushed, and what sort of punishments are appropriate. I have also been uncertain as to whether age makes any difference, or whether the very young are dealt with in the same way as adults, whether repentance and renunciation of Christianity is sufficient, or whether the accused are still considered criminals because they were once Christians even if they later renounced it.

“In the meantime, I have handled those who have been denounced to me as Christians as follows: I asked them whether they were Christians. Those who responded affirmatively I have asked a second and third time, under threat of the death penalty. If they persisted in their confession, I had them executed.”²

Who are these people? These are they who have endured the great ordeal. It is to these saints who confess that Christ is Lord, and know suffering. It is for these that John writes to say, “Hang on, it won’t always be this way. There will be a new heaven and a new earth and these former things will pass away. Hang on, for the promised day of God is coming.”

And then, John gives them a song to sing — because when life is hard, when the struggle seems overwhelming, when our bodies and souls have been broken, we sing.

My life flows on, in endless song, above earth’s lamentation. I hear the clear though far-off hymn that hails a new creation. No storm can shake my in-most calm while to that rock I’m

*clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*³

What my friend Martin did not understand is this. Revelation was not written as a threat to the comfortable: Get your life together or the world might end. No, it is a letter of encouragement written to those whose life is so hard that their greatest fear is that life may not end, that life will always be this way. To them, John says, “Hold on, do not lose your faith; the promised day is coming.”

There are folks who need to hear this promise today. Just one example: The Catholic Church is holding a four-day summit because it has been obvious for too long that far too many priests have a practice of abusing children and women, some of them nuns, and most appalling, this boys club has allowed this to be an accepted culture in the church.

For those struggling with the abuse, past and present, Revelation is written to them, those who have come through the great ordeal. *Hold on, because Jesus is Lord, and it’s not always going to be this way. Do not let the abuse that others heap upon you define you; no, Jesus is Lord. In the end, God will be God, and you will be whole.*

Revelation is not some threat of eternal judgment. It is exactly the opposite. Revelation confesses that Jesus is Lord. Because the government isn’t lord, because the nation isn’t lord, because the economic system isn’t lord, because privilege isn’t lord, we can say to the poor and the broken, to the passed by and the ill, to the

abused and the injured: Jesus is Lord, and the love of God has called you by name and will never let you go. When the great ordeal comes to you, hold on.

Yesterday, in a sanctuary filled ribcage to ribcage, many from across the city and across the nation gathered to remember the music and the energy and the ministry and the magic that was Mark Ball. We ended that service, with tears on our cheeks, singing. The most honest songs are often sung through tears.

Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;

Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;

Changed from glory into glory,

Till in heaven we take our place,

Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.⁴

Do you believe there will be a day when all who grieve will know joy again? I do.

Tom Long is a retired professor of preaching, and he has taught me much. I heard him tell a story of Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle was, as you know, a military hero and Head of State in France. What I didn't know is that de Gaulle's daughter, Anne, was born with Down syndrome. Regardless of what was going on with matters of state, de Gaulle would come home each day to play with Anne. At night, when they put her to bed, de Gaulle's wife, Yvonne, would often state the hurt in a mother's heart. She would say, "Charles, I will never understand why she cannot be like the others. I have so often

prayed that she could be like the others."

Before reaching adulthood, Anne died. They held a service. When it ended, Yvonne could not pull herself away. After a bit, de Gaulle said, "Come, Yvonne. Did you not hear the gospel? She is now like all the others. All is well, Yvonne. She is now like the others."⁵

Do you believe there will be a day when all that has gone wrong will be made right; when all who have suffered will be comforted; when all who grieve will know joy again; when all who have lived knowing only the handcuffs of oppression will know liberation; when those who battle the evils of poverty will be welcomed at the table; when those who walk this earth oppressed because of ethnicity will be valued because of their character; when those whose bodies are broken, or spirits are broken, or hearts are broken will be made whole? Do you believe there will be a promised day of God, when in the mercy and love of God, all that has gone wrong will be made right?

I do. For the day will come when we will hunger no more, and thirst no more, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes. As people of faith, we are living toward that promised day. Until that day, we will work for justice. Until that day, we will tell the truth, and we will be attentive to the passed-by and forgotten. And until that day, we will be generous in love. And until that day, we will sing: *Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust and not be afraid. For the Lord is my*

stronghold and my sure defense, and God will be my Savior.⁶

¹Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (1989), p. 2

²*Ibid.*, p. 14

³*How Can I Keep From Singing, Glory to God*, #821

⁴*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, Glory to God*, #366

⁵Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say*, (2011), p. 151

⁶*Surely, It Is God Who Saves Me, Glory to God*, #71

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.