

Following the Jesus of the Apocalypse

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] We come now to the conclusion of the series of expositions in the revelation of Jesus Christ, which we began last October. We do not come to the end of the book.

We already did that during this past Advent season, when we lived in Revelation 21 and 22, this vision of a spectacular future which Jesus has shaped for us.

We come today to the conclusion of the series. Which means you can tell your friends who have stayed away the last month, it's safe to come to church. Now, the fact is, no one who makes their way through the last book of the Bible ever leaves it.

Oh, you may never read the book again. Yet once you've spent any time in this book, you never leave it.

Why? Because it will never leave you. Once you have worked your way into the last book of the Bible, the last book of the Bible begins to work its way into you.

[1 : 11] And you're never the same. The risen Jesus gave the revelation, the apocalypse, in the form that he did, so that it would never leave us.

All the symbolism, the vivid imagery, the special effects, are designed to capture our imagination, to capture that part of our being where we live our lives.

All the symbolism, imagery, and special effects works its way beyond the intellect and beyond the emotions, and into the imagination, in order to transform the intellect and the emotions, enabling us to live differently.

At the beginning of this series, I quoted from Richard Balcombe, who is probably the world's leading revelation scholar. He writes, We have already noticed the unusual profusion of visual imagery in Revelation.

Right? The unusual profusion of visual imagery in Revelation, and its capacity to create a symbolic world which its readers can enter, and thereby have their perception of the world in which they live transformed.

[2 : 30] To appreciate the importance of this, we should remember that Revelation's readers in the great cities of the province of Asia were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world.

In this context, Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images, which impress on its readers a different vision of the world.

And then he says this, The visual power of the book affects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative vision of how the world is, and will be.

I want to read that sentence again. The visual power of the book affects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is, and will be.

Once all this imagery gets inside us, it never leaves us. And one day, it will have its way with us.

[3 : 46] One morning, we are going to wake up and realize we're living in a different world, and we're going to live differently. Our text this morning is Revelation chapter 20.

If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of God's word. And I saw.

Now, this is in a series of I saws. Chapter 20 is right in the middle of the final act of the drama. And it begins at 1911 with, I saw.

Then in 1917, I saw. 1919, I saw. 20 verse 1. And I saw. An angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the abyss, and holding in his hand a great chain.

He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore, until the thousand years were ended.

[4 : 56] After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus, and because of the word of God.

They had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.

This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for a thousand years.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison, and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. In number, they are like the sand of the seashore.

They marched across the breadth of the earth, and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven, and devoured them. And the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown.

[6 : 05] And they will be tormented there day and night forever. Then I saw a great white throne, and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what had been done, as recorded in the books.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. And each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake. And I can't resist reading the next line. And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. Spirit of God, we believe that you inspired this book for a great purpose.

[7 : 17] And you inspired this text. And I pray in your mercy and grace that the reason you inspired it might be fulfilled in us today. For we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. One thousand years.

Statistic or symbol? Symbol. All the numbers in the last book of the Bible are symbols. One thousand years. Ten times ten times ten.

Ten is the number of completeness. Ten fingers. Ten toes. Ten commandments. Ten times ten is a really complete number. Ten times ten times ten is a really, really complete number.

Could literally be a thousand years. Could be a whole lot more. The point is that however long it is, it is complete. It is enough time for God to completely complete his complete purposes in the world.

[8 : 22] A period of time completely under the sovereign control of God. One thousand years. In Latin, and we've heard a lot of Latin lately, haven't we?

In Latin, it is *mili annum*. *Mili*, one thousand, *annum*, years. And thus the word *millennium*. As you know, there is a lot of debate about what this one thousand year text is all about.

A lot of debate. And sadly, much of the debate has led to unnecessary division. So we have the pre-millennialists, the post-millennialists, the amillennialists, and the pan-millennialists.

The pan-millennialists. Those who throw up their hands and say, it's all going to pan out in the end. Now, I'm not going to tackle the issues involved in this debate, in this concluding exposition.

I've done the best I can in the book that I wrote on the revelation of Jesus Christ. And I'm simply going to turn you to chapter 26, entitled, *Millennium Madness Made Manageable*.

[9 : 36] And I'm also going to commend to you the work of Stanley Grins. Stanley Grins is one of the clearest thinking theologians of the past decades who was taken from us far too soon.

And I commend to you his, *The Millennial Maze*. What I want to do in this concluding exposition is show you how the text, how the one thousand year text, how the millennium text goes together

together with the rest of the book.

And then after doing that, that will be the hard part of this sermon. After doing that, in light of what we discover, we are then going to celebrate what the text teaches us about following the Jesus of the apocalypse.

That, after all, is why Jesus gave us the apocalypse. He gave it to us so that we could see who he is and that seeing who he is, we would follow him and learn what it means to be his in the world.

Okay. First, how this text goes together in the rest of the book. If you were here at the beginning of the series, you might remember that I gave a number of guidelines for how to read this book on its own terms.

[10:50] And one of those guidelines was making sure to ask the right question as you read. The question is not what happens next.

The question is what did John see next? As the whole book unfolds, John does not say and then this happened and then this happened and then this happened and then this happened.

Rather, as the book unfolds, John says again and again and again, I saw, I saw, I saw, I saw. And so the question to ask when moving from one section to the next section, moving from one paragraph to the next paragraph is not what happens next but what did John see next?

For what John sees next may or may not happen next. I learned this from Michael Wilcock of England in his very fine commentary, I saw heaven open.

The question is not what happens next but what does John see next? for what John sees next and I saw an angel coming down from heaven may not happen next.

[12:02] It may have happened long before what we read when he says I saw. So, the 1,000 year text, the millennium text, chapter 20, verses 1 to 7.

I want you to take careful note of what comes before this text and after this text. Both before and after peoples and powers gather to make war.

Before I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their army assembled to make war against Jesus and his army. After Satan gathers together for war the nations represented in Gog and Magog.

Now, in neither of these wars is the battle fought. In these war scenes is the battle fought. For as we saw last Sunday the battle does not need to be fought. The war for the world has already been fought and won at the cross on Good Friday.

In war text Jesus Christ simply shows up and it is all over. So, John tells us of people and powers gathering for this war both before and after speaking of the 1,000 years.

[13:20] So, which is it? War before or war after? The forces gather for war. It is not fought. The forces are defeated by Jesus simply speaking up.

And then John speaks at this 1,000 years and then the forces already defeated gather for war. It's not fought. The forces already defeated are defeated by Jesus simply showing up. Is John saying that there are two wars?

That forces against Jesus fight two wars? I don't think so. John is speaking about the same reality in both war texts. He's speaking about the same reality twice.

Jesus Christ who won the battle on the cross simply shows up and it's all over. So, what is going on? Not what happens next but what does John see next?

The two war texts are about the same reality which tells us that something else is going on in the text that comes between them. Something else is going on in this 1,000 year text.

[14:23] Now here I'm greatly helped by G.K. Beal of Gordon Conwell Seminary. He has written the definitive exegetical commentary on the last book of the Bible.

It's 1,200 pages long and he comments on every word and phrase and sentence in this book. It is a treasure to have. I was almost going to bring it to you and share it but I thought that maybe I put it here and then while I was greeting people someone come steal my treasure.

It's worth stealing. Don't buy it. Commenting on Revelation 20 verse 1 Beal focuses on and I saw an angel coming down from heaven and I saw an angel coming down from heaven and John uses that little word and 35 times in the book and and and and 35 times but says Dr. Beal only 3 times does the and move the drama forward historically.

The other 32 times the and simply links different visions which may or may not go in historical sequence. Now what is clear says Dr. Beal is that when and is coupled with I saw an angel descending from heaven without exception.

Now when you're reading a scholar and a scholar says without exception you pay attention they don't use those words very loosely without exception it introduces either suspending the temporal progress or reverting to a time prior to the preceding section.

[16:11] Now every commentator I know notices how this works in all the other places where and an angel comes from heaven are coupled but only recently have the majority of commentators now notice this in chapter 20 verse 1.

All of this to say that the thousand year text speaks of a reality that precedes Jesus emerging from heaven on a horse showing up and simply speaking.

The text after the thousand years speaks of the same reality in the text before the thousand years of Jesus on a horse showing up and speaking. What John sees next one thousand years does not happen next.

What John sees next one thousand years has been happening before what John sees when he saw heaven open and Jesus riding victoriously on a horse.

Now we've met this phenomena in the book of Revelation in our journey before. We've met it to two significant places. Chapter 12. You remember that chapter 12 is the vision of the woman the dragon and the child.

[17:31] The woman gives birth to a child who is to rule the world. And as soon as he is born the dragon tries to kill the child but he does not succeed because the child is lifted to the throne and installed as king of kings.

Now when does what John sees in Revelation 12 happen? Christmas Eve. The woman gives birth to the child.

Mary gives birth to Jesus. the dragon working through Herod the great expression of the beast tries to kill Jesus. But he does not succeed so others tried to kill him.

And on Good Friday they do. But they do not accomplish what they thought they had. For in the very moment Jesus dies he wins.

And three days later he emerges from the grave as the everlasting man. As the everlasting Lord of Lords. And forty days later he ascends to the throne. So as we read through the book, the last book of the Bible, we read chapter one, we go to chapter two, we go to chapter three, on and on through chapter eleven, we come to chapter twelve and we realize that what comes next in chapter twelve does not happen next.

[18:51] What we read in chapter twelve happened long before anything in chapters one to eleven. The other example of how texts work in the book is chapter six and seven.

In chapter six, the Lamb unseals the seven-fold sealed scroll of history. Then in chapter seven, John sees an angel ascending from the rising sun who seals the one hundred and forty four thousand, which is the symbol of all those redeemed by the Lamb.

But when did the sealing of the saints take place before the Lamb starts opening the scroll? He seals the saints so that as the scroll is opened and as the saints begin to experience all the historical realities symbolizing the scroll, they are able to stand.

They're sealed before he starts opening up the book, which means chapter seven happens before chapter six. What John sees next did not happen next.

So, whatever else we make of the thousand year text, of the millennium text, we have to honor the way the text is working in the whole book.

[20:12] John is taking us back in time and reminding us what happens before Jesus rides to victory. That makes sense, doesn't it?

I mean, what happens when the heavens open and Jesus emerges on the horse? We're set up for the end. We're set up for the great finale. And I saw heaven, a new heaven and a new earth descend.

Here I agree with John R.W. Stott. Many of you know that name. You know him and you've read many of his words. I think John Stott, and here I'm taking a moment to honor someone who's blessed me, I think John Stott is the purest expositor in church history.

He's probably not the most dynamic or creative, but he's the purest. He doesn't get it right on everything. No one can. But he gets it right on most things.

And in the last book he wrote, *The Incomparable Christ*, Stott shares the results of years of living in the last book of the Bible. And of the thousand-year text, Stott writes this, John is recapitulating his story from the beginning.

[21 : 25] With the 15 verses of chapter 20, he retells the outline of church history between the first and second comings of Christ. After speaking of heaven being opened and Jesus emerging, but before speaking of the new creation descending, John summarizes Jesus for us, what Jesus has been doing throughout all the ages, and what it means to follow him in any age.

And here is what John wants us to know in Revelation 20. Eight truths. It's the last time I get to preach the book, so will you bear with me? Eight truths.

Here we go. It won't take long. Eight truths. number one. When we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse, we are following the one who has already overcome the enemies of life.

He has already won the victory over the enemies of life. We are not waiting for him to come and win the victory. We're waiting for him to come and apply the victory.

Yes, but not to win it. He's already won it. He has already overcome the power of sin, the power of evil, and the power of death. Right? Palm Sunday.

[22 : 50] Jesus declares, now judgment is upon this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. We hear that declaration in the Gospel of John.

I believe that the author of the fourth Gospel and the author of Revelation are the same John. And whenever in the Revelation, John speaks of the enemies of God being defeated, he's taking us back to the events of Holy Week.

The Jesus of the Apocalypse has already won. Number two. When we follow the Jesus of the Apocalypse, we are following the one who has already bound the evil one.

We are not waiting for Jesus to come and bind the evil one. Satan is already bound. We are waiting for Jesus to come and throw Satan into the lake of fire, yes, but not to bind him.

Jesus has already done that right at the beginning of his earthly ministry. Jesus emerges from those 40 days in the wilderness in this encounter with the evil one, and immediately, immediately, he starts freeing people from demonic power.

[23 : 58] Some people accuse him of being in cahoots with the devil, and then Jesus speaks his first parable, Mark 3, 29. No one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.

Jesus has come and already bound the strong man. He's already bound the enemy, which is why Jesus could then start setting people free, and which is why John will say in Revelation 20, the enemy can no longer deceive the nations.

If the enemy were not bound, deception would be total. Every person who believes in Jesus is another sign that the deceiver has been bound.

The Apostle Paul, Colossians 1, 14, praises God the Father for rescuing us from the dominion of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of the Son he loves.

Anytime anyone comes into the light and confesses Jesus Christ as light of the world, it's another sign that the prince of darkness has been bound.

[25 : 10] Yet we ask, if the evil one has been bound, why is there still so much havoc? Well, for one thing, most of the havoc in our day is our doing.

It's humanity's doing. Hunger. That's our doing. War. That's our doing. We don't need to factor the evil one in to explain that.

But the revelation answers another way. The evil one is bound, locked up, but can still influence things through two henchmen, the two beasts, dragon-manipulated political power and dragon-manipulated religious power.

Think of it this way. Think of the mafia or the drug cartels. You can arrest and put into prison the key-pin leader, but they can still do their dirty work from prison because they'll manipulate the system and they'll work with the henchmen who are on the outside.

So the evil one works through these henchmen and can still wreck havoc, yet not total havoc. For even the henchmen are not greater than Jesus Christ.

[26 : 23] Even they are on a leash, as Martin Luther says. Yes, it's a long leash, but it is a leash nevertheless. This is St. Patrick's Day.

And I love on St. Patrick's Day to be able to point out that St. Patrick understood the reality of the last book of the Bible. Yesterday at our CLT retreat, Carson shared some of his work that he's doing on St.

Patrick and leadership. Patrick was born in 385 A.D., just about 300 years after Jesus gives the apocalypse to the church. At the age of 16, Patrick is captured by slave traders, and for 16 years

he's forced to tend sheep.

During those years he's exposed to cold and to hunger and to danger and spends months alone in the mountains. Then when he's 32 years old, he has an encounter with the risen Jesus, and Jesus calls him to go to Ireland with the gospel.

And within 30 years, just 30 years, Ireland is almost totally gospelized. While the Roman Empire was moving from order to chaos, Ireland was moving from chaos to order.

[27 : 41] In his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill shows why Patrick could have such a transforming impact on that society.

Before Patrick came to Ireland, Ireland was held captive with what Cahill says is the most frightening worldview ever devised in humanity. In the old Irish worldview, dark forces were everywhere.

Everywhere you turn, there were hidden traps and pitfalls, and people devised all kinds of taboos to ward off these dark forces. But one never knew whether one of these taboos would work, because in the old Irish worldview, the powers kept changing their shape.

At one time or another, a god or a goddess could be a river, and then in the next moment it would be a sea, and the next moment an ocean, and the next moment turned into an ox or an eagle or a hawk, and so on.

And Patrick comes and speaks the gospel into all of that fear. Patrick was not afraid of any of those dark forces, because he knew that whatever they were, Jesus had defeated them.

[28 : 55] Darkness was not lord of Ireland, Jesus was, and still is. Within 30 years, Irish trade trafficking stopped.

Murder and tribal warfare ended. Marriage became an honorable institution in culture again, and there was no need to keep the force with the sword, because the people came to believe what Patrick believed, that already Jesus has overcome the enemy, that already Jesus has bound the henchmen of havoc.

Number three, when we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse, we follow the one who is already reigning as king of kings and lord of lords.

We are not waiting for Jesus to become king. king. He already is. Now, Revelation 1 6, ruler of the kings of the earth. Now, it seems to me that many of us who name his name do not really believe this.

Many of us operate as though one day Jesus will become king. Many of us operate as though one day God will install Jesus on the throne.

[30 : 14] And so, in the meantime, we let other lords set the agenda of our lives. The last book of the Bible keeps us from falling into that deception.

Jesus the lamb is reigning already now ahead of the grand finale. Now, the challenge in believing this is that it doesn't look like it.

Right? It doesn't look like it. And that's where reading the last book of the Bible is so helpful.

Because the last book of the Bible tells us how Jesus is reigning.

The same way he did in his earthly life. As a servant. As a lamb. Not as a lion enforcing his way on the world.

I think you're with me. I would wish sometimes he just would be a lion and enforce his kingdom on us. But he doesn't do that. He did not win as a lion and he does not reign as a lion.

[31 : 13] He the king of glory came to earth to live as a servant. And he did it because that's what it means to be the king of glory. For Jesus king equals servant.

And when he ascended to the throne he didn't stop being servant. God exalts him to the highest place in the universe because when Jesus lived as a servant it demonstrated that Jesus understands what it means to be the king.

king of kings is so mighty he can humble himself to be a servant. And he reigns already as the servant king.

Number four. When we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse we are following the one who has already brought us to life. Already he's brought us to life.

They came to life says John in this text. Already for as John records Jesus saying in John's gospel they who hear my voice and believe him who sent me have eternal life and they do not come into judgment but have passed out of death into life.

[32 : 29] Now not just at the end which is the beginning but now we are not waiting for Jesus to bring us to life. life. Oh we're waiting for him to give us new bodies.

Hallelujah. Some of us can hardly wait. But we are not waiting for Jesus to bring us to life. He's already done that and even as our bodies decay he keeps giving us life.

I am now going to say I could have used an amen along that way. Are you alive? Yes. Yes.

Number five. When we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse we are following the one who has already called his followers to reign with him. And they shall reign with him says John.

For John says the same thing in the prologue to the book. He says Jesus Christ loves us released us from our sins and has made us a kingdom.

[33 : 41] One six. He has made us a kingdom already. A kingdom already. We are not waiting to reign with him. We are not waiting to reign with Jesus Christ.

We are not waiting one day for him to lift us up and put us on the throne with him. He has already done that. That is why Paul can say in Ephesians God made us alive together with Christ raised us up with Christ and seated us with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ.

Already followers of the Lamb already reigning with him. How? Just as he does in acts of servant love.

This is one of the great secrets revealed in this book. Servants make the world go round. Actually, Jesus makes the world go round. But when we join him in servant love, we're joining Jesus in making the world go round.

I learned this when we lived in Manila. What makes that great city go round? It's all the servants.

That city would collapse without the servant love of the Filipino servants.

[34 : 53] the powerful and famous of the world cannot function without all these behind-the-scenes servants. And when you mothers give your lives for your children, you are reigning with Jesus, the servant king.

When you fathers give your lives to your wives and to your children, you are reigning with Jesus, the servant king. When you give your finances sacrificially and generously, you are reigning with Jesus, the king.

No one may ever know it. Your name may never be in the newspaper. It'll never be Twittered across the internet. It doesn't matter because when you serve another human being, you are reigning with Jesus Christ and you are making the world go round.

Number six, when we follow Jesus of the apocalypse, we are following one who holds our destiny in his hands. No one else does.

That's why you can take your life, but you can't end it. Only he has that authority. No one determines what happens to us after the grave, but Jesus Christ.

[36 : 10] And this is the point of the judgment scene in the second half of the chapter. Verse 11, I saw a white throne and him who sat on it. It's a pure throne because it's occupied by a pure judge.

Verse 12, books were open and in these books reveal what people have done with their lives.

When we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse, we are following the one to whom every human being must give an account.

He holds our destiny in his hands. Deeds, says John, you'll be judged by your deeds. That's because deeds reveal where faith is. All our deeds emerge from where we put our faith.

We always act in concert with what we think is the real Lord of life. If mammon is Lord, it will show in our deeds. If fame is Lord, it will show in our deeds.

If power is Lord, it will show in our deeds. If comfort is Lord, it will show in our deeds. If Jesus is Lord, it will show in our deeds. And the greatest deed of all is when we place our whole lives on the finished deeds of Jesus.

[37 : 21] That's the deed for which we are accountable. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny, we sing, because he does.

He alone. Number seven, we're getting it. When we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse, we are following the one who takes us beyond the grave. That's what this language of first resurrection and second death is all about.

The first resurrection is what happens to those who believe in the resurrection and the life. He resurrects us bodily. The second death is what happens to those who reject the resurrection and the life.

They die a final death. And Jesus takes his followers through that first resurrection so that the second death has no effect on them. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish second death but have eternal life first resurrection. Jesus takes us beyond the grave. Nobody else can. And finally, number eight, when we follow the Jesus of the apocalypse, we are following the one who has built a new city for the human race.

[38 : 36] and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband, already developed, already constructed, coming, coming, coming.

And he calls us in this city to live the values and priorities and holiness of that city. Series concluded.

The following goes on until that day when we will see him face to face. Let us pray.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you for inspiring this challenging book. Because we see you in a way we otherwise would not have.

[39 : 50] And to the best of our ability this day, we say, I will follow you all the way. And we trust you to make that happen.

Amen.