

SEEING WHAT IS REAL: THE WORLD OF REVELATION

(2 June 2002)

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I enjoy reading. When I find the time to read for fun, I most often choose from the category of Science Fiction and Fantasy. My forays into fiction or flights into fantasy allow me to escape from the real world in which I live. Through my “mind’s eye,” I enter a world of warp speed, wormholes, and weird life-forms or, perhaps instead, I enter a world of magic, wizards, and dragons. The printed page is not the only doorway into these worlds; the movie screen allows me to see what is not real. Last Christmas Season, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* made its way to the theater: *The Fellowship of the Ring* was but the first of a trilogy of movies. Now showing in theaters is Episode II of George Lucas’ six-episode-*Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* takes place ten years after the events of *The Phantom Menace*. But, alas, these wonderful worlds that I enjoy so much are not real. They are, after all, the worlds of science *fiction* and *fantasy*.

Every good storyteller paints a picture with words of an imaginative world and then invites us to enter. This world may or may not be real, but more often than not, the storyteller tells their tale because they wish to say something significant about the world in which we live.

I am learning to read the Bible like I read a science fiction or fantasy novel. This is due, in no small part, to our study of the Book of Revelation. Revelation . . . with its stunning and surreal symbols, its remarkable and repulsive imagery, and its apocalyptic audacity to suggest that the world in which we live is *not* the real world . . . is a book like no other. I am not suggesting that Revelation is a work of fiction or fantasy. My point is this: *if we fail to see the world created by Revelation, then we have received no revelation*. It is not enough to explain the world that created Revelation; we must experience the world created by Revelation. In other words, as necessary as it is to understand the first-century Roman world out of which Revelation arose, it is equally essential to understand the worldview espoused by Revelation. So, then, here is the Apostle John’s three-dimensional world. Let me rephrase that. Here is the Apostle John’s Trinitarian world because *God is the ultimate reality*. John opens his letter in 1:4b-5a with words depicting the divine in threefold terms:

Grace to you and peace
from Him who is and who was and who is to come,
and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne,
and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead,
and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

First, in the world of Revelation, God the Father is sovereign. The four most important designations of God in Revelation are: (1) “the Alpha and the Omega,” and variations of this form—“the first and the last” and “the beginning and the end”; (2) “the One who is and who was and who is to come”; (3) “the Lord God the Almighty”; and (4) “the One who sits on the throne.” God the Father is the origin and goal of all history; He

is eternal; He is all-powerful; and He is seated on the throne. The throne is one of the central symbols of the whole book. In John's vision of the divine throne-room in chapter 4, God's sovereignty is seen as it is already fully acknowledged in heaven. On earth, the powers of evil challenge God's role and even masquerade as the ultimate power over all things, claiming divinity. But heaven is the sphere of ultimate reality: what is true in heaven must become true on earth. John is taken up into heaven to see that God's throne is the ultimate reality behind all earthly appearances. Furthermore, the ceaseless worship around the throne demonstrates that all reality exists ultimately to glorify God. The vision of chapter 4 continues in the vision of chapter 5, which introduces the Lamb, Jesus Christ, as the One who is to bring God's rule into effect on earth. And that is our next point.

Second, in the world of Revelation, the saving sovereignty of God the Father is exercised through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. God is not present on earth as "the One who sits on the throne"; He is present as the Lamb who conquers by suffering. Christ's suffering witness and sacrificial death are the key event in God's conquest of evil and establishment of His kingdom on earth. And it is because Christ functions as God that He is worthy of worship. In Revelation, Jesus is praised for His work of redemption. It is through Jesus Christ that salvation is possible for every single human being.

Third, in the world of Revelation, the saving sovereignty of God the Father exercised through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ becomes real through the power of the Holy Spirit. The "seven Spirits" are the fullness of God's power "sent out into all the earth," and this power was unleashed by the victory of the Lamb. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is the power behind the church's faithful witness to the truth of God and the righteousness of God against the idolatries and injustices of the Roman beast. "The Spirit" speaks through the prophets to the churches; "the seven Spirits" address the whole world through the churches. Prophecy within the churches equips the churches to fulfill their prophetic ministry to the world, which is their indispensable role in the coming of God's kingdom. *And this is the function of Revelation: to call the church to fulfill its role in the coming of God's kingdom on earth through faithful witness to the truth and righteousness of God in a world of idolatry and injustice.* In so doing, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ—footsteps that involve witnessing in death.

Now, I want to return to where I began this lesson and connect that with the work of the Spirit. Like every good storyteller, John creates an imaginative world and invites us to enter into it. John believes—and listen carefully because this is *the point* of this sermon—*John believes that the world he sees is the true world and that the world of Rome is a world of deceit and delusion.* Satan and the beast present a world in which Rome is irresistible and invincible; a world in which Rome is supreme and sovereign; a world where the beast has slaughtered the Lamb and is winning the war against the Christians. But this is not true! Those who follow the beast are living in a fantasy world! Satan is who he is and where he is because he refuses to acknowledge ultimate reality. There are four references to John's reception of revelation "in the Spirit." Twice John says that he "was in the Spirit" (1:10; 4:2) and twice that the angel "carried him away in the Spirit" (17:3; 21:10). The four references are strategically placed: at the two beginnings of John's whole vision, on earth among the churches (1:10) and in heaven in the divine throne-room (4:2), and at the beginnings of the two parallel visions of Babylon (17:3) and the New Jerusalem (21:10). *It is the Spirit that enables John to see reality.* Without the

heavenly perspective, the world of the beast appears to be the real world. With the heavenly perspective, the world of the beast is seen for what it really is: a fantasy.

But what does all this mean for us? Good question . . . and here is the answer. The physical world in which you and I live cannot be rightly understood without the spiritual world that lies behind it. Furthermore, the spiritual world is the ultimate reality and it is superior to the physical world. To state the matter succinctly (and pardon my puns), *the world of the spirit supplies sense for the world of the senses; the world of the senses is senseless separate from the world of the spirit.* I realize to say this is to betray my Age of Enlightenment/Age of Reason roots, and someone schooled in philosophy could label me a Platonist; but—in the words of Walter Cronkite—*that's the way it is.* In the words of Christ, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

There is another observation that I wish to make. Worship permeates the Book of Revelation. Every stage of God’s victory is punctuated with worship. Worship is the spontaneous expression of praise called forth by God’s worthiness. All of reality exists to glorify God. And all the worshippers are united in their worship. It is all too obvious that this is a heavenly perspective for it certainly is not an earthly reality. Why is this so? Why is earthly worship so fragmented and factious? Why do we have “worship wars”? Perhaps it is due in part to placing our personal preferences on the throne rather than allowing God to reign from there. The position of “the One who sits on the throne” is taken, and it is time that we Christians worshipped together in the light of this reality. Perhaps it is due in part to our striving to be a savior for the church. But the position of savior is already filled; there are, however, unlimited openings for servants. Perhaps it is due in part to the dullness of our hearing. Maybe our selfish and sinful ears are not sensitive to the Spirit. “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” *When we bow before the One who sits on the throne, submit to the slaughtered Lamb, and listen to the Spirit, we will be united in our worship.* Unified worship comes by bowing, submitting, and listening.

Revelation . . . it is a vision to live by and a victory to die for. “Seeing is believing,” shouts the world around us. “Believing is seeing,” says the Spirit. “What we see is real,” is the proclamation of those blinded by a fantasy. “What we believe is real,” is the profession of those enlightened by the Spirit. As Christians, we are called to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). And the reward for walking by faith is that we shall see what we have believed. Augustine (354-430) put it this way:

Faith is to believe, on the word of God, what we do not see, and its reward is to see and enjoy what we believe.

^{Rev 22:6}The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

⁷“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”

⁸I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. ⁹But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant

with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!”

¹⁰Then he told me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. ¹¹Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.”

¹²“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

¹⁴“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

¹⁶“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book.

¹⁹And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

²⁰He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.

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