

A New Vision of Jesus ... An overview of Revelation: An Apocalyptic Adventure

One of my favourite hymnwriters is a Welshman called Vernon Higham. He was a pastor in Cardiff for many years, he's now with the Lord. He's the man who wrote that inspirational hymn: *Great is the gospel of our glorious God*.

At a very low point in his life, he wrote another testimony-type song, it goes like this: *I saw a new vision of Jesus, A view I'd not seen here before, Beholding in glory so wondrous, With beauty I had to adore*.

I want us to take that first line and use it as the theme for our Bible ministry this evening: a new vision of Jesus.

I reckon that's what Revelation is all about. It's compulsive reading, even though we don't fully understand it all; it's a page turner. By the time you come to the end of it, it's the book with the happy ending. You see, what we have here is an unblurred, undimmed vision of the glorified Christ.

We come face to face with the majesty of God and the mercy of God, with the sovereignty of God and the satisfaction of God, with the grace of God and the government of God, with the justice of God and the judgment of God, with the severity of God and the supremacy of God; ah, we see him, far above all, exalted and enthroned on high.

Here is the Alpha and Omega, the one who runs the entire show from start to finish; the one who calls all the shots from beginning to end! Here is the Ancient of Days, the one whose finger is on the pulse of world affairs, from eternity past and on in to eternity future.

We have, in these 22 chapters: cameos of the many splendored Christ! Within these pages, there are so many sparkling facets of the jewel that is Jesus Christ. That's why he is the pearl of greatest price.

As we unpack this fantastic book - the last in the canon of Scripture, we take on board the request of men of old, in John 12:21 ... *Sir, we would see Jesus*. It seems to me, if you can't see Jesus in Revelation, you have a problem, you're blind! To miss seeing the Lord Jesus Christ in this book, is like squinting into the sky at 12 noon and not seeing the sun. I mean, he's there on every page, he's there in every chapter! You can't miss him. I like to think of it like this: there's one storyline in this ultimate action thriller - it's Jesus.

Why do I say that? It's because of what we read in the introduction in 1:1 ... this is *the revelation of Jesus Christ* ... the living Lord is unveiled! He is disclosed to us in all his attributes, as I've said already - it's a bit like turning over the pages of a photograph album ... this book is *about* him and *by* him. We see Jesus! That's the basic idea behind the Greek word 'apokalupsis' - and that explains why the book of Revelation is sometimes referred to as the Apocalypse.

There's something unique about Revelation - so far as I'm aware, it's the only book in the Bible that contains an inspired outline of its contents, as in 1:19. What's the point of an outline? Well, it helps us as we navigate our way through the book, it gives us signposts for the journey. For all

you budding preachers out there, here's a classic 3-pointer:

First, *what you have seen* (chapter 1) ...

Second, *what is now* (chapters 2-3) ... **Third**, *and what will take place later* (chapters 4-22).

A pastor friend of mine from the Carolinas has a superb outline for the book: **One**, the sovereignty of Christ in his church (chapters 1-5); **Two**, the severity of Christ in his chastisement (chapters 6-18); **Three**, the supremacy of Christ in his coming (chapters 19-20); **Four**, the satisfaction of Christ in his new creation (chapters 21-22).

Let me ask you a question: **Do you want to be blessed?** Do you have an all-consuming passion to experience and enjoy God's blessing? Sure, you do! Well, it's time you read this book from cover to cover ... I'm serious when I say that! See what it says in 1:3, *Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.*

This is the only book in the entire word of God which promises a blessing to those who read it! Isn't that amazing - what a beautiful incentive we have to get into it and peruse its pages.

The recipient of the vision is none other than John, that's in verse 9. He's the man who wrote the Gospel of eternal life; the man who often leaned on the bosom of Jesus; the man who, in later years, wrote three letters on the theme of love.

He's the one who started life as a fisherman and then he heard the call of God; he became a best friend to the Lord Jesus; he watched his ministry develop over the years; he was there on Hermon,

the snow-capped mount of transfiguration, he was there in the garden of Gethsemane, and he was there at the foot of the cross at Calvary.

This is the man who now receives an awesome vision of the glory of God. John would never be the same again. On earth, he looked into the face of Jesus, and here he sees the lovely face of Jesus in heaven itself. I tell you, having sampled heaven, John would be forever spoiled for life on planet Earth.

For John, the isle of Patmos became the gateway to heaven. The Patmos of persecution became an open door for service. I imagine, John probably thought that his best years were in the past, that his long life and fruitful ministry were all behind him but, in the purpose of God and providence of God, his most significant ministry was still before him.

When the bad times come, so many of us cry: Why? Why now? Why this? Why me? Perhaps the question would be better rephrased: why not me? After all is said and done, why should any one of us be exempt from life's trials? Why should you and I be immune from the hassles and hurts of daily living?

Look folks, here's what kept John going, here's what kept him on track! He had Jesus! He saw Jesus! For there, walking among the lampstands, is the One who is the focal point of this beautiful, breathtaking vision. He hadn't seen the Lord for the best part of sixty years, until now. When he sees him in this sensational vision, it was a magic moment, he collapsed, he froze in time and space.

How did John see him? That's the big question! He saw him in a nine-fold way and that's what we have detailed for us in verses 13-16. This paragraph is a masterpiece, every stroke of the Spirit's brush on the canvas of Scripture has a special meaning.

One, he saw him as the Son of man for the Lord is risen - two, he saw him as the Great High Priest for the Lord is reigning - three, he saw him as the Ancient of Days for the Lord is righteous - four, he saw him as the Judge for the Lord is revealing - five, he saw him as the Lamb of God for the Lord is relentless - six, he saw him as the Voice of our Beloved for the Lord is regal - seven, he saw him as the Lord of the Harvest for the Lord is the regulator - eight, he saw him as the Captain of our Salvation for the Lord is resourceful - nine, he saw him as the Altogether Lovely One for the Lord is resplendent!

Here is a one-liner summary of chapter 1, we meet a triumphant Saviour who outshines everyone and everything.

I want us to come back to that when we finish our whirlwind tour of the book this evening ... so, one chapter down, 21 to go ...!

In chapters 2 and 3 we are introduced to seven letters to seven real churches in Asia Minor - all 7 congregations were located in what is modern-day Turkey. Beginning at Ephesus, we go on a clockwise, circular tour and finish up in Laodicea - here we are given an insight into things Jesus saw when he turned up at church. Some good stuff, a lot of bad stuff, and some downright ugly stuff!

The message to each assembly was relevant to them in their particular situation ... there was a note of commendation for most of them, and a word of condemnation for all but one. For us, the challenge we face today is to take on board the lessons we learn from each one - all of this is so up to date, even in the 21st century.

Even though we have so much going for us, have we left our first love, like those in Ephesus? Are we facing a degree of persecution like the saints in the small congregation in Smyrna? Perhaps we are enveloped in an air of confusion and we're bewildered when it comes to our faith, like those in Pergamum? Or have we fallen foul of biblical truth and jettisoned our experience of grace so as to condone sin in our midst, like the assembly in Thyatira?

Maybe we're more like those in Sardis - we keep up appearances so as to enhance our growing reputation, but to all intents and purposes, we're as dead as a dodo? The church in Philadelphia is a beacon of light and love - they tick all the boxes and are well blessed in every way. They are the real deal. The kind-of gospel church I'd love to belong to ...

The last one is Laodicea where, quite frankly, they messed up big time and were marked by lukewarmness - one look at them and Jesus was nauseated ... it's a church with no vitality, no vision, no values, and no vesture ... a sad reflection of much of what we see around us today! The big question is: if Jesus walked into your church or my church next Sunday morning,

and carried out an exhaustive appraisal, what would he have to say?

I love the next two chapters, 4 and 5 - they turn our eyes heavenward and remind us that there is a higher throne and it's occupied by the High King of Heaven. The powerful message is, God rules, our God reigns.

The keynote theme of chapter 4 is: 'Let's worship the Lord - he is the Creator, the giver of life!' And, in a similar vein, the thread woven into the fabric of chapter 5 is: 'Let's worship the Lord - he is our Redeemer, the giver of new life!' In other words, as the old gospel song says, 'the great Creator became our Saviour.' And one sweet truth in verse 1 - did you notice God's open door policy - the door is wide open and there's a welcome there for you and me!

In chapter 4, God's throne speaks to us of eternity - unlike the thrones of mortal man, God's throne is forever. It speaks to us of personality - it's an occupied throne, someone is sitting on it in verse 2. Take note, he's on it, all the time! It speaks to us of majesty - see how John describes it in verse 3. It speaks to us of authority - for it is surrounded by other thrones in verse 4. And it speaks to us of purity in verse 5.

Chapter 5 is one of my favourite all-time chapters in the Bible with an immense theme, Worthy is the Lamb. The unfolding drama here shows the Lion of Judah is the Lamb of God - see verses 5-6. We talk about the many splendored Christ - take a look at verse 6 ... he has *seven horns* for he is all-powerful - he's omnipotent ... he has *seven eyes* for he is all-seeing and all-knowing -

he's omniscient ... they are the *seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth* for he is all over the place - he's omnipresent.

There is rapturous praise and singing to him for he alone is worthy. He *takes the scroll* (which represent the title deeds to planet earth) and *opens its seals* - and that's what happens in the next chunk of chapters up to chapter 18 ... tribute is paid to the all conquering Redeemer in verses 9-10, when they sing: *You are worthy ... because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.*

See what they do? In verse 14 they *fell down and worshipped*. I mean, what else could they do? For you and I, that's what God expects from each one of us. When we see him as he is, the least we can do is to fall down, lost in wonder, love and praise, and worship him.

So far, so good - it's lovely to talk about Jesus! Now, we move into the main section of the book, spanning chapters 6 thru 18. I have to say these chapters are enormously challenging for things really take off on a global scale - there's a whole series of cataclysmic events which impacts the entire world and its peoples.

I believe these are linked to what is often called Daniel's 70th week, or as Jesus called it in his Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, a period of 7 years tribulation on earth - the like of which has not been seen before! It's unprecedented, it's unparalleled. It is wave after wave of trouble.

These events happen when the church is taken from the earth, in what is often called the rapture of the saints of God, as in 1 Thessalonians 4. It's when the Lord comes to the air for his people.

Some of the stuff we read of is like watching grim scenes in a horror movie - the consequences are catastrophic - it underlines the unshakeable truth that the invincible Lord does have the final say. Even though his wrath is tempered with a dollop of mercy, we quake in our boots for the outcome is devastatingly disastrous - it's a worldwide tsunami of terror ... for you and me, that's why, in this age of grace, we need to be out there telling people about Jesus! People need the Lord!

Basically, within the parameters of these 13 chapters, there are 3 full-on, action packed sections: **one**, chapters 6-9 take place in the first half of the Tribulation - they revolve around the 7 seals being opened and the blowing of the seven trumpets ... **two**, chapters 10-14 occur midway in the Tribulation ... and, **three**, chapters 15-18 are linked with the second half of the Tribulation when the seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out on planet earth.

There's no way we can cover all of this ground in the time allotted to us, so let me highlight one or two things as we work our way through ...

In chapter 6 we have what are famously called 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse' - 4 horses, different colours - white, red, black, and pale. It paints a picture of delusion, destruction, drought, and death [stroke] damnation. There is the cry of the martyrs when the fifth seal is opened in 9-11 and a poignant reminder that a faithful God has

not forgotten them. In verses 12-17, when the sixth seal is opened, there is the greatest earthquake in history, the greatest cosmic disturbance in history, and the greatest prayer meeting in history!

Chapter 7 begins with God putting his seal on 144,000 Jewish people, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes - they will be endtime missionaries to the ends of the earth! They are not JW's ... but they are witnesses to Jehovah! They are numbered!

The second half of the chapter sees a great crowd of people gathered around the throne of God - so many, in contrast to the first half, they are numberless! Such is the power of the gospel to transform lives - it proves that 'the gospel is the power of God unto salvation' - and they have come *from every nation, tribe, people, and language*. Here is an insider's view of heaven.

When the seventh seal opens in chapter 8, we hear the sound of the first four trumpets! They cause massive environmental damage and spell desolation in bold capital letters. An ecological nightmare. The chapter kicks off with a beautiful picture of the *prayers of all the saints*. 3 lessons to learn: one, prayer is a privilege - two, God helps us when we pray - three, our God answers prayer!

Chapter 9 is a tale of two armies - trumpet 5 blows and an army comes from the pit - trumpet 6 blows and an army comes from the east. There is untold devastation - pain, panic, pandemonium - people are tormented, troubled, and traumatised. And, yet, there's a telling phrase in verse 20, *the rest of mankind that were not killed by these*

plagues still did not repent ... With all that is going on around them, you would honestly think men would turn in their droves to God. They don't. Zero repentance. Man is defiant!

We sometimes ask the question: Where is God when heaven seems silent? You have the answer in chapter 10:7, where we read that *the mystery of God will be accomplished ...* the lesson is, in God's time, all will be revealed! There is coming a day when the answers will be given, when the dark things shall be made plain.

A quick look at chapter 11 and we meet two witnesses - the question is, can we identify them? I think we can - they are Moses and Elijah! Down in verse 7, we are introduced to the Antichrist for the first time - Satan's puppet on a string.

The second half of the chapter focuses on the response of a worshipping community to the news that *the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord ... and he will reign for ever and ever.* It's an acknowledgment of the majesty of King Jesus.

The glorious message of chapter 12 is that Satan can go so far and no further, he can do so much and no more! He could not **harm** Jesus for he is the one who **came** in verse 4 ... he could not **halt** Jesus for he is the one who **conquered** in verse 5 ... and he could not **hinder** Jesus for he is the one who **controls** in verse 6. Intriguing, isn't it. It gives you a behind the scenes look at unseen events surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 13 introduces us to an unholy trinity from hell ... the antichrist; his right hand man, the false prophet - he's a kind-of spin doctor for the world's

political leader; and Satan himself. Each will try to mimic the godhead - Satan and God ... the antichrist and Jesus Christ ... the false prophet and the Holy Spirit. It climaxes with the mark of the beast - the triple 6 ... Satan is no match for the perfect triple 7 in the Godhead!

In chapter 14:1-5 we meet the Lamb who shepherds his people ... they are exalted, and euphoric, and exclusive, and exemplary! Then 3 angels do what they have to do, followed by a nugget of truth in verse 13, where we read: *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ...* what precious words of comfort they are to the child of God. That is the 2nd of seven beatitudes in the book! (the first was in Ch. 1 - five more to follow). We could write over chapter 15, 'Then sings my soul, how great thou art.' This is the martyr's song - the song of Moses and the Lamb. Listen in for they praise the marvellous works of God, when they sing *great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty ...* they praise the mysterious ways of God when they sing *just and true are your ways, King of the ages ...* they praise the manifold worth of God when they sing *Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy ...* and they praise the majestic worship of God when they sing *all nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.*

Chapter 16 is a gripping narrative of what takes place when the seven bowls of God's wrath are spilled out on the earth - indescribable things happen when God dishes out his short, sharp,

shock treatment. We read about the Armageddon campaign in verses 12-16.

In chapters 17 and 18 the spotlight shines on the tale of two Babylons - one is mystical, the other is material; one is religious, the other is economic.

In chapter 17 we have the scarlet woman, the world's greatest flirt - aka Satan's megachurch! She gets her comeuppance when God deals with her - basically, he has no time for religion.

In chapter 18 we hear the resounding message that *Babylon the Great is fallen*. All that man holds dear and cherishes in this life is dealt a double whammy - *Babylon bites the dust*. The curtain falls for the last time - she went out with a bang for God lit the fuse.

Turn over to chapter 19 where we hear the shout of four hallelujahs in heaven in verses 1-6. Each one affirms that Jesus is the Saviour, Jesus is the Judge, Jesus is the Greatest, and Jesus is the King. We read about the marriage of the Lamb in verses 7-9 and our hearts are stirred with the second advent of Jesus from verse 11 to the end! The King of kings is coming back to earth to rule and reign ...

We're introduced briefly to the millennium in the first half of chapter 20 - a golden age on earth, 1,000 years of Jesus' rule ... and that leads us to the final demise and ultimate doom of Satan and his henchmen - then we read about the moment when sinners are in the dock at the Great White Throne judgment. Believers will not be there, this is for sinners only. Tragically, the sentence handed down spells an eternity in the lake of fire - there's a way in, but there's no way out!

The closing two chapters take us forward into the future and speak of eternity itself - the new earth, the new heavens, the new Jerusalem ... we hear the voice, *Behold, I make everything new*. So massively reassuring. This is bliss, unspeakable joy and delight in the presence of the King of all the ages. We with him and he with us ... again, we are reminded that Jesus is coming soon - the book ends with a glorious benediction of grace!

What a stupendous vision of the all conquering Lamb ... a wonderful, victorious Saviour! Here is the many splendored Christ ... see the impact all of this had on John: he just melted in the Lord's presence. We read in 1:17, *when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead*. Prostrate in the presence of the glorified Christ. Ah, the sequel to this is quite amazing, for the Lord didn't leave him lying there, we read in verses 17 and 18 ...

What we have here is a tender pick-me-up kind of touch, a touch of reassurance, a touch that says, 'all is well.' I think it's wonderful to realise that Jesus wasn't afraid to touch people, in fact, when you read the gospel narrative you find he touched all sorts of people: when he healed a leper, he touched him; when he restored sight to the blind, he put his hands upon their eyes; the touch of his hand brought healing to broken lives, it brought strength to those who were crushed, it brought comfort and acceptance to those marginalised to the fringes of society.

When Jesus placed his right hand on the trembling shoulder of John, he said: 'Hey, John, don't be afraid, it's me!' The first two words of his introduction would mean more to the old saint

than anything else, the memories would flood back, they would register with him straightaway: the Lord said: *I am*. No fewer than seven times did Jesus introduce himself in that way in John's gospel. It would ring a bell with dear John!

Then he went on to describe himself in a variety of ways. He reminded John that he was *the first and the last* – he's all-sufficient. There were none before him and there will be none after him, nothing came before him and nothing will come after. There never was a time when he did not exist, and there never will be a time when he does not exist. He is the eternal word.

He then advised John that he was *the living one* – he's all-victorious – death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered. The Lord is risen! To crown it all, he told him he *holds the keys of death and Hades* – he's all-powerful. He was reminding John that he was sovereign in all matters relating to time and eternity. What encouragement that is for you and I.

We need not fear life for he is the living one; we need not fear death because he died and is alive having conquered death; we need not fear eternity for he has the keys in his hand. He's the one who opens the door, the one who has authority! The old hymn is spot-on when it tells us: *God holds the key of all unknown and I am glad.*

You see, our future is in his hands, and it couldn't be in a better pair of hands. Safe hands, strong hands, secure hands, nail-scarred hands. He's got the whole world there, and we are there as well!

That's what it's all about ... whatever the ups and downs in your life at this point in time, whatever is going on in the world right now - and there's a lot happening out there, a new vision of Jesus makes a colossal difference. Whatever it is, you can say: For this, I have Jesus! And that's what makes Revelation the cherry on the cake when it comes to the word of God.