

August 28 Lesson: A Welcoming Invitation

Summer Quarter: Partners in a New Creation
Unit 3: The Great Hope of the Saints

Sunday School Lesson for the week of August 28, 2022
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Lesson Scripture: Revelation 22:10-21

Leaning In to the Invitation

For this third and last unit of the Summer Quarter, we have been working through the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation. Now, we are in the last lesson of the quarter. Additionally, because Revelation is the last book of the Bible, we are looking at the closing verses of the whole Bible.

Not surprisingly, the scripture for this lesson reviews some of the running themes we have encountered in our previous lessons from Revelation. What this review does is gets us to contemplate any actions we need to take. It is like the conclusion of a Sunday morning sermon. A good sermon should review what has been said and invite people to make a response. The same is true for our scripture lesson. There is an implicit invitation in some of the verses and in other verses the invitation is presented outright. We have an opportunity and an obligation to lean in to this invitation.

And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” (Revelation 22:10-11)

The opening lines of our scripture passage refers to all “the words of the prophecy of this book.” In the Book of Revelation, seals were opened which set events in motion. Now, we’re told that the words of the prophecy of this book are not to be sealed up—yet. Events are still in motion. Although much of the future has been foreshadowed in these words, there are still outcomes yet to be determined. Among the most important outcomes that are still to be determined have to do with where believers stand as human history continues to unfold. There is an invitation to act now and determine where you stand because it will affect the ultimate outcome for you.

We are also reminded that “the time is near.” This is why the invitation is to act now and not postpone the response we make to some indefinite time far in the future. Although the words of the prophecy of Revelation are not to be sealed up at this time, the assumption is that they will most definitely be sealed up in due time—which is reported to be near. This prods us not to procrastinate.

The next part messes with us. If the time is near and the outcome is not predetermined then why should “the evildoer still do evil” and “the filthy still be filthy”? We can understand the righteous

still doing right and the holy still being holy, but why is there not a call for the evildoers and the filthy to repent? Perhaps there is some reverse psychology being employed here.

Perhaps the point is that evildoers do not simply stop doing evil. Filthy people do not simply stop acting in filthy ways. If there is to be a different outcome, they must recognize the evil, filthy things they do, they must repent and invite Jesus to transform them. Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (Matthew 15:19) A heart change is needed. The invitation is for the intended audience of this letter to look within themselves and ask, "Am I committing evil or holy actions?" Where would these actions be coming from if not from a heart that is inclined in a certain way? This is an invitation to contemplate one's actions and one's heart.

Perhaps what is being stated here is that there is no middle ground. The time for fence-sitting is gone. It is time to assess whether you are truly a follower of Christ or not.

"See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Revelation 22:12-13)

When Jesus returns soon, his reward will be with him. Jesus will repay everyone according to their work. You might wonder what this means in light of all that we understand about grace and forgiveness. Every believer has a "B.C." and an "A.D." posted in their lives. B.C. represents our life before Christ. A.D. stands for "Anno Domini," which means "the year of our Lord." Our "A.D." represents our life after we turned our life over to Christ. Not only were we forgiven for our sins, but we also entered a life where we continue to experience forgiveness as we die to sin through repentance and rise to new life as Christ continues to hold us in his loving faithfulness. Our works reveal whether we have lived in Christ or simply given lip service to being a Christian.

If Jesus is "the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end," and he is coming to judge the living and the dead, then the time of his coming is a bookend moment. The bookend at the end of the history of time is the time when we must give an account. There is a sense of finality to this moment which demands from us a verdict. What choice will we make?

A similar message is found near the close of Deuteronomy. When the Book of Deuteronomy is coming to a close and God's people are preparing to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Moses issues a challenge that summarizes the message Moses has given throughout the book: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

The Book of Revelation has unfolded in a similar way. From beginning to end it is an apocalyptic message. A feature of the apocalyptic style is that it amplifies the conflict between good and evil. We are reminded that we are involved in spiritual warfare. This view of life presents clear choices for a person of faith: good versus evil, faithfulness versus sin, patient

endurance versus abandonment of the faith, and ultimately the powers and principalities of this world versus the reign and rule of Christ.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (Revelation 22:14-15)

When Revelation refers to “those who wash their robes,” it is referring to the saints. By this point much has been said about the saints, what they have undergone, and how God has dealt with them. They have gone through the upheavals presented in Revelation: seals being opened, trumpets blown, woes announced, and bowls of plagues poured out. These upheavals, however, have been punctuated by beautiful interludes in which we see that God has never forgotten his faithful followers.

In one of these interludes, one of the elders in the heavenly court addressed John, asking, “Who are these robed in white, and where have they come from?” John admits he does not know, but he wants to know, so the elder gives the answer:

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:13-17)

The saints have washed their robes and made them white by the blood of the Lamb. This visual is made all the more powerful by its apparent contradiction. Under normal circumstances blood-stained clothing is ruined. In this analogy, however, a robe has been washed by *using blood*.

This echoes Isaiah 1:18: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” This is the language of forgiveness won by sacrifice. The blood of a sacrifice was intended to show the injury and death caused by sin. It was understood that the sacrificed lamb had taken the place of the sinner. The lamb had received the punishment that the sinner deserved. Since the lamb paid the sacrifice on the sinner’s behalf, the sinner gets to go free and start anew. This reminds us that the forgiveness of sins comes at a cost. Christians understand that Jesus is the Lamb of God who was sacrificed for the sins of the whole world.

In the case of the saints described in the Book of Revelation, more is being said. The saints that endure the tribulations described in Revelation have in some cases shed their own blood. They patiently endured their trials in solidarity with Christ who also suffered death at the hands of sinners. Because of their faithfulness, some even to the point of death, they are privileged to wash their robes in the blood the Lamb. By remaining faithful in the midst of trials and temptations, they share in Christ’s victory over the forces of sin and evil.

No wonder that they “will have the right to the tree of life” and will be able to enter “the city by the gates.” The right to the tree of life can only be given by Christ. The only way to enter the holy city is by the gates that Christ opens to those who have finished the race and kept the faith.

Those who have oppressed the saints will be kept from entering and bringing further harm to the community of faith. The “dogs” are enemies who, like a pack of wild dogs, strike fear and bring harm to the community of faith, especially to its weakest members. “Sorcerers” would be those most active in leading people astray in a pagan culture. “Fornicators” would be those doing the most to sell sexual immorality and breed oppression among those being exploited. “Murderers” would include informants who turned their neighbors over to the authorities in a culture rampant with the persecution of Christians. “Idolaters” worshiped idols, dealt in the distribution of idolatry, and fed the superstitious obsessions of ordinary people in ways that degrade human lives and families. “Everyone who loves and practices falsehood” are those responsible for the erosion of truth in the culture. Question: What forms does this kind of oppression take in today’s culture where the idolatry is harder to name?

“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” (Revelation 22:16)

This is Jesus claiming the ultimate authorship for this message to his Church. Although an angel has given John of Patmos this guided tour through Revelation, Jesus is the One who told the angel everything to say. When Jesus says that he is “the root and the descendant of David,” he is providing a picture of his reign and rule over the universe that flows from the epic story of the Bible. Who could be both the *root* and the *descendant* of David?

In Matthew 22, Jesus tested the Pharisees over this very question. Jesus asked what they thought of the Messiah. He asked, “Whose son is he?” This was an easy question. Everyone there knew that the Messiah would be the son of David, not just *a* son, but *the* long-awaited son to emerge and sit on David’s throne. Jesus then asked, “How is it that David calls him Lord?” Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1, where David is speaking of the Lord who is to come and reign on the throne. Jesus then asks, “If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” The Pharisees could not give him an answer.

We know the answer. Jesus existed at the foundation of the world. Long before David came onto the biblical stage, Jesus was his Lord from eternity past. Jesus, the main character in the epic story of our redemption, is indeed the root of David. It is also true though that Jesus came onto the biblical stage when he was born in human form in a manger in the town of Bethlehem many generations after David—*from* David’s lineage. What an amazing story!

This is when we need to pause for a moment and ask a great theological question: “So what?” What does it mean for us that Jesus is “the root and descendant of David.” It draws attention to the grand sweep of the story of our hope in Christ. The reign of God has never been interrupted, despite appearances at times. Those long centuries without a descendant of David on an earthly throne may have seemed that God had not kept his promise, but the truth is that the Messiah was on his heavenly throne during that time. God was keeping his promise. In the same way, God will keep his promise to the Church concerning the return of Christ.

This is why Jesus is compared to “the bright morning star.” We know the actual bright morning star to be the planet Venus that can be seen near earth’s horizon at morning when the sky is still dark enough to see it. Venus reflects the light of the sun just before the light of dawn overtakes it. The bright morning star represents the light of hope that shines in anticipation of the dawn of our full salvation. Christ is both our hope and the One who brings about our full salvation.

In all that we have read thus far, an amazing invitation has been building. What has been implied, becomes explicit in the next verse.

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”

And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Revelation 22:17)

Notice that the invitation comes from the Spirit and the Bride of Christ, the Church. The Church has heard the invitation and accepted it. The Church is now being enlisted to share the invitation with others that others might be included. There are many who share a spiritual thirst that only Christ can satisfy. No one has to earn this life-giving water. It is offered as a free gift, because Christ has already paid the price. There is water enough for everyone who hears this invitation and responds.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” (Revelation 22:18-20)

Many have asked over the generations whether the Book of Revelation, with all of its symbolism, should be taken literally. Some ask the question as if they should take Revelation with a grain of salt. Although the apocalyptic symbolism of Revelation should not be taken literally, this does not mean it should not be taken seriously. The symbolism should fire our imaginations and our motivations. We should neither add to the message nor subtract anything from it in a way that waters down the sense of urgency and call to action in the Book of Revelation.

The Lord wants us to hear and believe that he is coming soon. Although we are living almost two millennia after this Revelation was first given, this sense of urgency should still be a driving force in believer’s lives.

According to the Second Letter of Peter, there has been a tendency since the first century to dismiss the promise of Christ’s return: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” (2 Peter 3:4) The letter reminds us that God’s timing is different than ours: “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” (2 Peter 3:8) There is an important reason for God to delay the return of Christ: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting

any to perish but all to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9) The door has been kept open for more people to enter a relationship with God.

According to Second Peter, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be destroyed with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” (2 Peter 10) In other words, the return of Christ will happen suddenly without warning, and the old order will end to make way for the new creation. Since we do not know when Christ returns, we need to be prepared and remain vigilant, so that we will be found faithful when Christ comes. Since we know the old order will pass away to make way for the new creation, the question is asked, “What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?” (2 Peter 3:11-12)

To believe that Christ is coming soon gives us hope. The fact that we do not know when he will come means that we strive to live as if he were coming today. The fact that the old order is passing and the new creation is coming means that we should no longer live in terms of the old order. Why would we want to do that anyway? Why should we postpone a minute longer the opportunity to be partners in God’s new creation? It is foolish to wait. We won’t be disappointed if we begin now working with God to 1) live as if we were a part of the new Eden, and 2) invite others to join us in God’s blessings and God’s work. In fact, we will be blessed beyond measure.

In mutual love and affection, let us end this Summer quarter together with the last words of the Bible, which offer a beautiful benediction:

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.
(Revelation 22:20-21)

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