

“Coming Soon...”
(sermon given 5/16/10 by Scott Jansen)
Revelation 22:7-21

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[Prayer for Illumination] Awesome God, Creator of all worlds, stoop to our weakness now, that we might have ears that hear at least a portion of your message this day—through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray... Amen.

Today we read the conclusion of the book of Revelation—always a dangerous selection. The author of the book calls himself John, though we don't know which John.... Anyway, John wrote down what he could remember of a dream vision. And if you know anything about dreams, you know that there are a lot of symbols; and also, the scene can change in a flash. So, it's not always clear who is speaking from one phrase to the next. That makes it hard to understand this book. We are not going to understand every reference, every verse, of this reading. You have to read Revelation humbly. Hold on to what makes sense, and simply let go of what does not. With that in mind, then, listen now, for God's word for you....

"See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me...; but he said to me, "You must not do that!!! I am a fellow servant with you, and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!!!!!!"

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."

"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."

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.

"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...." 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....

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." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!!!! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

The temptation with Revelation is to say that there are so many intractable mysteries within the book... that it's not worth studying. For example, what does it mean to say that Jesus is coming soon? That it's too late for anything to be changed? That the evildoers should just go on doing evil and the righteous should continue doing right, because the end is at hand? How can we apply such thinking to our lives?????????

Is the world really about to end???? Is Jesus truly "coming soon?????" There are lots of popular movies about how the world is going to end in 2012. But how would you live if you honestly believed that? Would you send your kids to college? Or, if you were attending college, would you bother to go to any of your classes???? Would you bring a new child into the world; buy life insurance; or save money for your retirement? Given their vast creativity, I'm surprised that neither of my boys has come up with the argument—"We don't need to mow the lawn. Dad—the Bible says, the world is coming to an end soon...."

Let's face it. Very few people actually believe the end is coming soon. There may be a fair number who wish... that the world would end soon, who may even pray for that, but I don't see much evidence that they actually believe those wishes will come true.

But you may wonder... who... wishes and prays for the end of the world? What kind of people would ask God to kill off a huge portion of the global population???? For the most part, such people would have to feel unjustly oppressed, feel a need for vindication, feel a passionate hatred toward the powers that hold sway in the world....

Are there such people? Yes. I have known some, and I'm sure you have as well. My guess is that John was such a person. He tells us that he wrote this book while rotting in a prison on the island of Patmos—suffering from the persecution of the Romans. Imagine being in his position....

Where Matthew, Mark and Luke always quote Jesus as instructing us to love our neighbors, even to love our enemies..., John remembers Jesus telling us to love one another—to love those within the Christian community. John seems to relish the idea that the bad guys will be left outside the Heavenly city gates. He has no desire to reach out to them, to try to save them, with the love of Jesus. No. He advises them to keep on doing evil, so that they may receive the full measure of their punishment....

I believe that John saw a vision, caught a glimpse of the glory of God..., but did not see everything clearly—did not attain a perfect understanding. In fact, I think there are two verses in this passage, where the author himself gives us a hint about exactly how God was trying to correct the mistakes within John's thinking....

The first is verse nine. The angel tries to explain the situation to John, but John does not get it.... Instead, he falls down at the feet of the angel, and worships the angel. And the angel scolds him and says, “you must not do that!!!” You must never worship anything less than God. Worship only God, and no one else....

We can learn an important lesson from John's mistake. We all find unique ways of connecting with God. We may be visited by an angel, or we may get a sense of God's presence during prayer, or we may be granted a sign, or a miracle. Who knows? Everyone is different. The Greek word for “angel” can be interpreted broadly as simply a way, any way, of connecting with God.... God reaches out to us through all different forms and varieties of “angels.” But, like Paul says, we must not get too puffed up because of those revelations.

If a middle school child learns that $E=mc^2$, and then says, “now I understand the fullness of Einstein's theory of relativity,” you would laugh at such a child. Likewise, a vision of an angel from God... does not mean that you now understand everything there is to know about

God—that there is nothing left that can be added to or deleted from your perfect understanding.

Some people despair that they can't find any way to connect with God—they give up too easily.... But others find a connection, a real connection, but then they make an idol out of their connection with God, and pretend that they have no need to learn anything else. A relationship with God takes a lot more effort than that...

Often such idolatry is a form of self-glorification. We are awed that the living God would do something unique, something powerful, perhaps something miraculous, and would reach out and touch us and teach us something. And it's good to be awed by God. But then our awe turns to idolatry when we assume that the angel of God IS God. We assume that our little connection with God is all that we need.

That's like grabbing a hood ornament and thinking you got the whole car. God is so much more than the little glimpses that God makes available to us.

For example, maybe you have gone through a horrible tragedy. Maybe someone in your family died, or you lost your job, or your health took a terrible turn for the worse. And maybe in that time of weeping and mourning, you felt a powerful sense of God, wrapping loving arms around you—comforting you and supporting you through the grieving. Dozens of people have told me stories like that. That almost tangible sense that God is with you, that God loves you and comforts you, even in the midst of tragedy—well, let's just call that feeling an "angel" of God. It's a connection with God. It's perfectly real, and very important. But the angel of God is not God.

So, why do people worship guardian angels, or some special saint who has helped them connect with God? Why did John fall at the feet of his angel???? It can be just laziness. But it can also be a form of self-glorification. If the special angel that's sent to you is elevated in importance, that also, in a sense, elevates your own importance.

I made this mistake before I became a Christian. During High School and College, I connected to God through music. As I listened to inspiring words, passionately sung, I felt that I heard some messages from God that were meant especially for me. I felt God was calling to me—teaching me, shaping me. And I still feel that I was right about that. But my mistake was in thinking far too grandly about that connection. I felt I didn't need the Church, didn't need to

study, didn't need the wisdom of others, because, hey, I had a direct channel to God.... My mistake was in equating a piece of an understanding of God... with an adequate understanding of God.

I frequently see this same mistake within the church. Someone connects to God through one particular program, or one particular portion of the worship service, and that's great. But if something changes in that little area, then they might leave the church, because they thought of that one channel of connection as the only thing that mattered, as if that one channel contained the entirety of God. The annual report of our church's ministries may be fifty pages long, but if someone doesn't like one sentence on page 27, they pretend that that's justification to leave the church.... To focus entirely on the one area that matters most to you, and to ignore everything else that the church does—that's not honoring God—it is self-glorification.

Envisioning God in such a way that your understanding brings glory and honor to yourself... is perhaps the biggest temptation and the biggest sin a Christian faces. That is the sin that fueled the crusades, the inquisition, the racism and sexism within the church's history.

And what about the notion that God is coming soon, that the end of the world is upon us, that two thousand years after Jesus's wrongful execution, God is finally going to get around to punishing humanity. Isn't that notion also a type of self-glorification....., because within that notion is the idea that my generation is so important, I am so important, that nothing beyond me can have any value. If it all ends with me, after fifteen billion years, if I am the end point of the universe's story, doesn't that say an awful lot about how important I am?????

Of course people want to believe that they are extraordinarily important. So, the most popular preachers will tell folks that nothing beyond their lives could have any value for God, that the world will end soon—the unspoken implication being that they are the pinnacle of God's creative work. Self-glorification is very popular, and always has been....

But I mentioned that God was giving John two hints in this passage about where John was mistaken. The first was when the angel scolded him about worshipping an angel instead of God. The second is when God declares "I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end."

Life... begins and ends with God..., not with the world. John wanted life to end with the world. That would have vindicated John amidst his persecutions, and would have glorified John as being so important that nothing after him could have any divine value. But life does not end with the world. Life ends with God, with the Alpha and Omega.

God is the Alpha and Omega for each of us. I think the story of Ryan Womack reminds us that God is the Alpha and the Omega for each of us. Life is fragile. And one never knows exactly how much time one has left. We should make the most of every precious moment. We should not rest satisfied with a partial understanding of God. We should not rest satisfied with an immature relationship with God. Nor should we waste what little time we have being angry about some trivial little manifestation of human frailty. If such anger blocks us from a fuller, richer connection with God, wow, what a waste! If you don't like one little aspect of the church, get over it—pour your enthusiasm into some other aspect of the church. From a cosmic perspective, none of us will live all that much longer. In that sense, for each of us, Jesus is “coming soon.”

Amen.