

COMING WITH THE CLOUDS

Revelation 1:7

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Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen (Rev. 1:7).

Around the year 553 B.C., the prophet Daniel received an angelic visit in a dream. The prophet had by now spent most of his life in exile as a reluctant servant to the kings of Babylon. Change was coming, however, as the young ruler Belshazzar was soon to be ousted by the Medo-Persian army. Daniel's vision fittingly began with "the four winds of heaven... stirring up the great sea" (Dan. 7:1). Just when it seemed there would be no end to Babylonian power, God was stirring the waters of history.

As often happens, God's intervention began with initially troubling news. Daniel saw four terrible beasts rising in succession out of the waters, each representing a kingdom that would rule on earth: a winged lion for Babylon; a devouring bear for Medo-Persia; a winged leopard for Macedonia; and finally a terrifying beast with iron teeth, for Rome (Dan. 7:3-8). Above these visions, Daniel then saw the "Ancient of Days," sitting on his throne, with a river of fire before him. The scene emphasized the sovereignty of God over the mighty kingdoms of earth and his judgment of their evil. Daniel saw the fourth and greatest beast "killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire" (Dan. 7:11). The vision showed heaven's victory over the evil kingdoms that dominate the earth.

Daniel's vision did not conclude, however, with God's judgment of the wicked nations. He further saw another figure, designated as "one like a son of man," coming "with the clouds of heaven" to be presented before "the Ancient of Days" (Dan. 7:13). Daniel records: "To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all

peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away” (Dan. 7:14).

In our study of Revelation 1:1, we noted how John seems to have picked up language from the vision of Daniel 2, which like Daniel 7 presents earthly kingdoms overthrown by God and his kingdom. In Revelation 1:7, John makes another explicit reference to Daniel’s prophecy, saying of Jesus: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds.”

John’s repeated appeal to Daniel in the opening section of Revelation tells us two important things. First, the apostle relates the situation of his readers, the Christians in Asia Minor in the late first century, to that of Daniel in the Babylonian Captivity. Just as Daniel and his fellow exiles were separated from God’s city and forced to live under an oppressive, ungodly rule, so also were John’s readers physically separated from Christ and subjected to wicked persecution. This is the usual experience of Christians, who Peter describes as “sojourners and exiles” in this world (1 Pet. 2:11). We are a pilgrim people, living as “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb. 11:13), journeying through this world to the world to come.

Second, by appealing to Daniel’s vision of the coming Christ, John shows that Christians have this same hope of salvation. Like Daniel and John, we live in a beastly world filled with violent oppressors, tempters into evil, and ungodly opponents of God’s truth. Yet these evils will not hold sway forever. According to Iain Duguid, “Our challenge is to live our lives with our eyes firmly fixed on the heavenly throne room. Instead of being terrified by the beasts we must daily live remembering the one who will deliver the final and decisive judgment.”¹

CHRIST’S COMING IN GLORY

In the theatre, there is a practice known as “upstaging,” when the supporting characters turn their back on the audience, forcing their gaze on the lead actor who has entered the stage. John is doing something like this in the opening section of Revelation, drawing all our attention to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the doxology of verses 5 and 6, he glorified the present and past work of Christ for our salvation: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by

¹ Iain Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 119.

his blood” (1:5-6). Now, John completes his spotlighting of Christ by pointing to the future return: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds” (Rev. 1:7). Charles Spurgeon said of this theme: “Brethren, no truth ought to be more frequently proclaimed, next to the first coming of the Lord, than His Second Coming.”² According to the Bible, the return of Jesus is just as important as his first coming. The writer of Hebrews said: “so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:26-28).

When John speaks of Jesus “coming with the clouds,” he refers to Christ in the terms of Daniel 7:13. After seeing the judgment of the wicked kingdoms, Daniel saw “with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man.” Like Daniel, John faced the beastly opposition of wicked earthly rulers, against which Christ will ultimately be revealed as sovereign conqueror in his glorious coming. Psalm 2 sets the same theme, asking, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples’ plot in vain” (v. 1). This is the way it always is on the earth, whether in David’s, Daniel’s, John’s, or our own time: “the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed” (Ps. 2:2). Yet however terrible earthly idolatry may seem to us, it is all laughable to God. “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” (Ps 2:5). God responds to violent earthly presumption by doing what he has always ordained: “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps. 2:6). Daniel saw the glorification of Christ as the answer to the ungodly powers of history, just as Psalm 2 saw God’s coronation of his Son as the answer to the plotting kings of earth. John declares to Christians that the sovereign rule of Christ at history’s end is our hope as well.

When Daniel, and then John, spoke of Christ returning “with the clouds,” this imagery emphasized his divine glory and authority. Psalm 104:3 says that God “makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind.” These are the same clouds that sheathed Mount Sinai when God came upon the mountain to give his law (Ex. 19:16-19) and then later filled the temple of Solomon with glory (1 Ki. 8:10-11). For Jesus to “come with the clouds” is to return to earth in divine glory and power to bring his judgment upon the world.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons on the Second Coming*, ed. David Otis Fuller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943), Preface.

The Bible is unambiguous in declaring that Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, was raised from the grave, and ascended into heaven, will someday return to earth in divine glory and power. Paul refers to this event as “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:13). Just as Christians look to the past for salvation, trusting Jesus’ death on the cross, and look to heaven for our present spiritual care, we also look to the future horizon to see the final consummation of all our hopes in Christ. We stand on the past work of Jesus’s cross, are upheld by his loving intercession now in heaven, and we look ahead to his glorious return when our inheritance in glory will appear.

Looking forward to Christ’s return will have real implication for how believers think about their lives. For instance, a vision of Christ’s coming will shape our outlook on earthly treasures. Jesus said: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Mt. 6:19-20). We store up treasures in heaven by serving the kingdom of Christ now: investing in ministry to others and in the building up of Christ’s church.

A future focus on Christ’s coming will produce a different lifestyle than one that is focused on earthly things. Paul saw the purpose of his life in terms of spiritual growth: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14).

Unbelievers glory in worldly pleasures, “with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). “But our citizenship is in heaven,” Paul writes, “and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20-21). In saying that Christians “await a Savior” from heaven, Paul means a life of godly service, biblical devotion, prayer, and witness to the gospel, actions that all point us forward to the hope that we have, no longer in the world, but in the coming of Christ. Can these things be said of us? Does our manner of life suggest that we are awaiting a Savior from heaven? Or is our life fixed on earthly things?

EVERY EYE WILL SEE HIM

As John speaks of Christ's coming, he specifies that his return will be visible to all: "every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). This teaching rules out the idea of a merely spiritual coming of Jesus. John does not say, "Every mind shall perceive him," but "every eye will see him." Spurgeon writes: "The Lord Jesus Christ will not come spiritually, for in that sense he is always here; but he will come really and substantially, for every eye shall see him, even those unspiritual eyes which gazed on him with hate."³

John claims that Christ's return will be visible to all people on the earth. This claim is contrary to the doctrine of Christ's secret coming, which many Christians today believe, together with the rapture of believers from the world and Christ's visible return on a second occasion. Notice, however, that John makes no mention of two comings of Christ: one secret and one visible. In fact, the Bible consistently speaks of Christ's coming to save his people and judge his enemies as a single event. Paul writes that Christ comes both "to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted..., when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven" (2 Thess. 1:6-8). 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, the key text which teaches the rapture, or the taking up of believers from the earth, presents Christ's return as anything but a secret event. Jesus comes "with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." Christ will not only be seen by all when he comes for his people, but he will be heard by everyone as well.

When John writes that Christ is "coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7), this agrees with the picture throughout Scripture of a cataclysmic, glorious event that decisively ends history as we have known it. Jesus said, "they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Mt. 24:30). "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west," Jesus added, "so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Mt. 24:27). These statements make clear that Jesus will not be made visible to all the earth by means of electronic technology but in a decisive and sky-slipping display of divine glory.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1974), 33:596.

An important implication of this teaching is that when Christ returns there will be no further opportunity for salvation, since his coming involves the immediate resurrection and final judgment of all persons (Mt. 25:31-32; 1 Thess. 4:16). Those who rejected Jesus in this age will be forced to see how wrong they were as his sovereign glory is displayed to all. Philip Hughes writes that on that day, “there will be no escaping or hiding from the resplendent majesty of his coming; every knee will bow in submission to him and every tongue will acknowledge his lordship (Phil. 2:10f; Rom. 14:11; Isa. 45:23).”⁴

HIM WHO THEY PIERCED

In addition to Christ being seen by all the earth, John highlights two other features of his return. The returning Christ will be seen as the one who was crucified and rejected: “even those who pierced him.” In addition, there will be great sorrow: “and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Rev. 1:7). In making these statements, John is echoing the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10: “when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him.”

There are three primary options for understanding the fulfillment of this prophecy. One approach is that of preterism, the view which understands Revelation to have been written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and which sees most of Revelation’s prophecies as pertaining only to that event. In keeping with that approach, preterists see Revelation 1:7 not as referring to the return of Christ but symbolically referring to God’s judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. David Chilton asserts that the language of Christ coming with the clouds refers merely to “the Coming of Christ in judgment upon Israel, in order to establish the Church as the new Kingdom.”⁵ Likewise, “those who pierced him” refers strictly to the Jewish nation, who “wail on account of him” because of the torments of the Roman siege.

There are a number of reasons to reject the pretest reading of Revelation 1:7. We have already seen that it is unlikely that Revelation was written prior to AD 70 with the destruction of

⁴ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 21.

⁵ David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 64.

Jerusalem in mind. The persecutions described in Revelation better fit a later period and the early church gives an extensive witness to the later dating of Revelation. We should also note that whereas the preterists see Christ coming with the clouds pertaining to a local judgment, Daniel and Zechariah see Christ coming to judge the entire world. It is simply impossible to accommodate the description of Revelation 1:7 to the preterist reading, since John says that “every eye” will see Christ and “all the tribes of the earth” wail for him.

A second approach to this verse does not downplay Christ’s return but adds to it the present coming of Christ through the preaching of his gospel. Under this view, the mourning over the pierced Christ takes place by those who hear the gospel, realize that Christ died for their sins, and are saved through repentance and faith. This view fits the original message of Zechariah 12:10, which undeniably looks forward to salvation through faith in Christ. Zechariah said that God will pour out “a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him.” There is no question that Zechariah was foreseeing the grace and mercy of God bringing salvation to those who see Christ pierced and believe on him for their own forgiveness. This view is made all the more clear by the passage that follows: “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1).

Zechariah’s message reminds us that “those who pierced” includes more than those who were physically present at his unjust execution, since Jesus died for the sins of all his people. Likewise, “all tribes of the earth” refers to believers from all over the world who grieve over what their sins did to Christ. In his Gospel, John quoted Zechariah’s prophecy as having been fulfilled by the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus and then apparently repented and believed. The young John was himself a witness of Christ’s piercing, and wrote: “these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled...: ‘They will look on him whom they have pierced’” (Jn. 19:36-37).

These citations show that John saw Zechariah’s prophecy fulfilled when sinners see Christ pierced for them, believe in his gospel, and are saved. This shows that the right way to respond to the Bible’s teaching of Christ’s suffering for sin is to mourn over our own guilt that caused God’s Son such suffering. This grieving for sin should

cause us to call on God for mercy through Jesus, so that we might be forgiven and, as Zechariah went on to say, so that “a fountain [is] opened... to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1). If we have never come to Jesus for forgiveness, we should see him now through God’s Word, grieve for our sins, and call on him whom who was pierced to save us by his blood.

It is most likely, however, that in Revelation 1:7 John writes of Jesus’ Second Coming as an event that catches most people unprepared and unforgiven because of their unbelief. Every eye will see his return and will look upon the One whom they pierced in mockery and rejection, “and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Rev. 1:7). The scene is Christ’s judgment on unbelieving humanity, which experience sorrow without repentance and mourning over the realization that there is no longer an opportunity to believe and be saved. Such mourners will no doubt lament the lives they led, and seeing the grace of Christ for believers will make the anguish of judgment all the more keen. James Ramsey said: “Christ rejected, an offered salvation neglected, a day of grace wasted, this is the thing that will give the lost sinner his keenest anguish, and wring from him at the last a bitterer wail than devils ever uttered.”⁶

John concludes verse 7 with a brief but definite response: “Even so, Amen.” These words mean, “Yes, so let it be.” John notes how fitting it is that Christ should come to judge those who hated him, rejected his gospel, oppressed his people, and crucified him in unbelief. What John marks as certain then, however, is now still yet to come. Surely this realization urges us all to ensure that we confess our sins and come to Jesus for salvation. Barnhouse warns: “At His first coming, [Jesus] dealt with sin; at His second coming, He will deal with sinners. We must live either in verses five and six, freed by His blood, or in verse seven under His coming judgment... If you will not let Him deal with you in love, He must come to you as your Judge.”⁷

⁶ James Ramsey, *Revelation: An Exposition of the First III Chapters*, Geneva Commentaries (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 56.

⁷ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 24-5..

BEHOLD, HE COMES!

For the Christian, John's announcement is the most exciting news we could ever hear. John prompts our excitement when he begins with the word, "Behold" (Rev. 1:7). Since "every eye will see him," behold, we will ourselves witness Christ returning in glory. Does this not give excitement to our lives? Does this not prove that we are personally involved in the grand story of the Bible? The prophet Isaiah foretold Christ's birth: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). None of us, however, were privileged to witness Jesus' birth. Angels came later and told the disciples about Jesus' resurrection: "Come, see the place where he lay... behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mt. 28:6-7). These are great events we read about but did not witness for ourselves. Yet when John writes, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds," he is speaking to us as witnesses of this future event. The return of Christ in glory is not only one of the great events of redemptive history, but it is the ultimate and consummate saving act of our Lord Jesus and all people will see it. His coming is the end of the world of sin and unbelief and the beginning of an eternal age of glory in the light of God's love. Surely this event, which we all will witness, is something to be excited about!

Not only should we be excited about Christ's coming, but we should be preparing ourselves for him who comes. Sports fans who are excited about the beginning of the football season immerse themselves in facts about their team. If we are excited about the coming of Christ, we will make it our daily passion to know him better, primarily through the prayerful study of his Word. Brides prepare themselves for the long-awaited wedding day by making themselves as beautiful as possible. We, too, anticipating the soon return of Christ, should be making ourselves daily more spiritually beautiful by laboring to remove sin and prayerfully seeking the spiritual graces – faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13); righteousness, peace, and joy (Rom. 14:17) – that make our hearts lovely before the Lord. Finally, those who know that an important political election is coming will seek to persuade others of the important issues of our day. The Christian, realizing that Christ will soon come to save his people and judge those who persist in unbelief, will busy himself

bearing testimony to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who offers salvation to all who hear and believe.

“Behold, he is coming with the clouds!” Are you ready to meet the him, the holy Son of God and sovereign Lord over all history? Are your sins washed clean in the blood of his cross? Have you been justified through faith in his gospel? The apostle Paul once addressed a man who understood the urgency of his situation. The man asked him, “what must I do to be saved?” Paul answered: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). He is coming soon, to gather his believing people and to judge the world in its sin. There is nothing more urgent for anyone than to believe in Jesus Christ, trusting him as Savior and surrendering to him as Lord. For then, when he comes, you will see him who was pierced for your sins, and you will be saved.