

FGBC: The Rider and the City: The Time is Always Near

Revelation 22:6-21

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Dan Hoffman

Hey everyone, welcome to Lighthouse/Fort George. Just in case you are wondering my name is not Mr. T, it's Dan. I'm just sporting my first Corona-cut. The guard on the buzzer fell off and this is what you get. At that point my options were staying Mr. T or going full on Mr. Spencer, and Mr. T won in the end.

So have you had your Corona-cut yet? If you have, and if you are watching live, then go ahead and fire into the chat how it turned out. Are you laughing at how much money you saved, or are you looking forward to the day you get to tip your hairdresser like never before?

I'll just use this moment to give a shout out to Liza at Tommy Guns in the mall and say: "Get ready because when my hair grows and this is over I'm coming back!"

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Alright, now that the commercials are done we can get on with the program. So go ahead, grab your Bible and open up to the last page – Revelation 22.

If you've been with us I think you would agree, it's been quite a ride. It is one I've enjoyed. And I trust that you see, like I do, that Jesus is speaking through this book. If you look out at the world it is obvious that things are happening that prove Jesus is up to something God-glorifying; the time is near. Amen?

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So today we are going to land the plane of Revelation on this idea – that the time is near. And I want to do that because this is what the angel who is talking to John says in this passage, and this is what Jesus says in this passage.

Actually, if you've got a red letter Bible you will notice Jesus talks a lot in this passage, and that's significant because He hasn't said more than two verses since chapter 3. But what He says here, 3 times, is "I am coming soon."

So with that in your mind stop brushing your teeth, stop worrying about your haircut, and look with me at Revelation 22 starting in verse 6.

Would you stand with me for the reading of God's word?

[Read Revelation 22:6-21]

When I was a kid my parents had a bookshelf in the office. And on this bookshelf, there were a pair of book ends carved from some kind of brown stone in the shape of hands. And so if you put them together they would look like you were praying. And to me as a child I imagined that all the books between these two bookends were books about Jesus. It just seemed that would be appropriate between these praying hands.

Well it turns out Revelation is encased between a pair of bookends. So right here at the end the angel tells John “The time is near.” And way back in chapter 1 he said the same thing. There we read:

God blesses the one who reads the words of this prophecy to the church, and He blesses all who listen to its message and obey what it says, for the time is near. (Revelation 1:3)

And these two bookends hold Revelation together – the time is near. But the question I want to unpack today is “What does near mean?”

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I think this is a fair question because we are now in the third millennium which seems a little more like far than near – remember Grover from Sesame Street? NEAR... far... Near and far are markers of perspective. And so for people who live 80 or 90 years it’s hard to imagine near being thousands of years later. So what’s up with near?

Well, this isn’t the only passage in the Bible that mentions this. In fact “near” language is all over the place such that no matter who your favorite author is they cover this.

So maybe you are like the people I met at university who connect with the level-headed apologist of the New Testament. If you love that you can be both brilliant and full of faith at the same time, then perhaps you resonate with Paul. And Paul told the Romans:

This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. (Romans 13:11-12)

Paul thought the time was near. But maybe Paul’s a bit intimidating for you. After all he says some stuff that’s hard to understand. And so maybe you are someone who gravitates towards the more emotional side of faith. You just love Jesus and He’s changed your life. If that’s you then John’s your guy and he told his church:

This world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever. Dear children, the last hour is here. (1 John 2:17-18)

John thought the time was near. Now both those guys are great, but perhaps neither the ethereal or the emotional are your thing. Maybe you just want to forget the fancy talk and say it like it is. If that’s you Peter’s your man and he put it like this:

The end of the world is coming soon. (1 Peter 4:7)

Isn’t that awesome? Have you got a favorite Apostle? And what is it about him that connects with you? Throw it into the chat.

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As you're doing that I'm going to go out on a limb and say the right answer is Peter. You can disagree with the pastor if you have to, but someone who tastes his foot before he decides it needs salt makes sense to me. Like Paul waxes eloquently about how he is the chief of sinners, but Peter is like "hey, talk is cheap, I'm going to prove it with my actions." I love Peter.

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Here's the point, when it comes to looking forward to the return of Christ every author of the New Testament agrees that the time is near.

So where did they get this idea from? They didn't make it up. With all due respect Peter would have had a hard time making his way up out of a paper bag. But none of these guys made this up, they got it from Jesus.

Jesus repeatedly taught at the time was near. But He did this holding two different ideas in tension.

So first, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry He defined His mission and His message for people. And Jesus' message was the gospel – the good news. So in Mark 1 He says:

"The time promised by God has come at last!... The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:15)

The "Good News" is the "Gospel" – that's what it means. And Jesus says its near. And by near here He means that you can reach out and touch it now – it's close by, it's right here. And we use this idea to talk about the "already" of the kingdom. And this is good news.

It's good news that you don't have to wait for heaven to start living, right? I mean Satan wants you dead, but Jesus offers you abundant life that starts right now.

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Now I should say the "abundant life" Jesus spoke about doesn't refer to big houses, sports cars and health into your 90's. Some people think that when Jesus said "Ask anything in My name and I'll give it to you" this is what He was talking about. But that's baloney.

And we know this because Jesus' promise has to be just as true for wealthy Canadians as it is for the 25,000 people who will starve to death today.¹ God doesn't just meet our needs according to the riches of His glory,² He meets all of our needs. And if this is true then abundant life can't mean stuff.

¹ <https://www.creditdonkey.com/world-hunger-statistics.html> (Accessed April 29, 2020)

² Philippians 4:19

Now Jesus does care about your physical needs so pray for your daily bread. But the fact is that 1000 years from now you aren't going to care whether you lived in a mansion, a townhouse or a cardboard box. All you are going to care about is whether you met Jesus. And it isn't going to matter whether you lived to be 100 or died of cancer in your 20's, what is going to matter is whether you met Jesus. And you will look back on the moment that happened as the beginning of your abundant life.

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So the good news of Jesus' gospel is that abundant life in God's kingdom is near. You can reach out and grab what God has for you. That's what Jesus taught.

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But, towards the end of His earthly life Jesus spoke about another reality, and that was that after His death He would be coming back for us. And He used the same word "near" to talk about this. For example, at the end of Matthew Jesus says:

Just as the gathering of vultures shows there is a carcass nearby, so these signs indicate that the end is near. (Matthew 24:28)

Jesus says if you are paying attention then you are going to be able to see the signs and know that the time is near. And so if you have your eyes half way open you are probably aware that something is incredibly broken in the world right now. We've got plagues and wars and natural disasters and all sorts of things. And Jesus talks about all these things so you have to know that the time is near.

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That's true. But it's important to remember that this has also been true for every generation since the writing of Revelation.

So the French bishop, Hilary of Poitiers, announced that the end of the world would happen in 365AD. That year there was a massive earthquake off the coast of Crete that resulted in a huge tsunami and massive death around the Mediterranean. Plus it was year 365 which is how old Enoch was when he was taken up to heaven. It just made sense.

Then, in the late 900's all sorts of Christians predicted the end of the world to happen in 1000AD – this was the millennium. But when that passed there was another push in 1033 because people thought well maybe Jesus would return 1000 years after His resurrection.

Pope Innocent the 3rd predicted that the world would end 666 years after the rise of Islam which made year 1284 significant. Then Martin Luther looked at his day and concluded the end would occur no later than 1600.

Christopher Columbus claimed that the world was created in 5343BC and would last 7000 years, so it would all come to an end in 1658. John Wesley did the math and looked at the signs of the times and concluded 1836 would be the year. And Wikipedia has a list of hundreds of other predictions along this bent, many of them made by godly Jesus followers.³

The fact is every generation of Christians for the last 2000 years has read Revelation and looked at the things that were going on in their day and concluded “the time is near.”

Now here is what this means: either Christians for the last 2000 years have been reading Revelation wrong – and if human history goes on for another 100 years then anyone who thinks the time is near today is reading it wrong. Or the point of Revelation is not to tell us when the end is going to happen, but to get us to live ready because the end is always near.

And living ready for the end every day is called discipleship – it’s called following Jesus. And this is why Jesus concludes all His teaching about the end of days saying:

No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son Himself. Only the Father knows...

So you, too, must keep watch!... You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected. (Matthew 24:36-44)

Friends, living ready for Jesus’ return is the point of the entire New Testament. And so when every generation of Jesus follower has looked at this text they haven’t been wrong to see Jesus at work in their world and conclude He is coming soon – they’ve been right. And that’s because John, Peter, Paul weren’t wrong when they spoke of the time being near. Ever since Jesus spoke these words the time has always been near.

So 2000 years ago Jesus’ message was not “Get ready for an event that is coming thousands of years from now – that would have been a hard pill to swallow. Instead His call has always been for His children to live every day expecting it to be the last. The time is always near.

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So what do we do with this? In broad strokes what are we supposed to take away from Revelation? Well, the main thing we are supposed to take from Revelation is what Revelation has been telling us from the beginning.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events (Accessed April 29, 2020)

So most books in the Bible give themselves their titles which tell us what they are about. For example the book of 1st Peter begins “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” – it’s the Peter book about Jesus. And Colossians begins “To God’s holy people in Colossae” – it’s the letter to God’s people in Colossae.

And Revelation is the same. It starts with the words “The Apocalypse or Revelation or ‘drawing back of the curtain to show what is behind’ ‘of’ Jesus Christ” – that’s chapter 1 verse 1. And I think this bears repeating – this book is from Jesus and about Jesus. And any book about Jesus is meant to produce one primary product.

Now there are all sorts of side things you can get out of it too, but to focus on any of these and miss the main point this would be a tragedy.

Here’s what I mean, if your thing is Middle Eastern archeology then the Bible is a phenomenal resource. If you were to study this period without referencing the Bible your history would be severely deficient. But the point of the Bible is not history.

Or if your thing is sociology and you love studying about how society functions then the Bible is one of the foundational works you need to look at. There simply isn’t a better document on human nature. And yet anyone who thought the point of the Bible was sociology would be sorely mistaken.

And similarly if your passion is prophecy and eschatology – that’s the study of the end times – then the Bible and specifically books like Daniel or Revelation are incredibly important. But the point of the Bible is not to study end times.

The point of the Bible is about how a gracious God calls broken sinners into a relationship with Himself. The point of the Bible is about learning to follow Jesus so we can image Him better. The point of the Bible is discipleship.

And so any reading of Revelation that doesn’t leave you on your face worshipping the Creator who holds everything together and is working out His plan, is a reading that has missed the mark. So the goal of Revelation is to get us to worship Jesus. Don’t miss the forest for the trees.

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So let me ask you, have you gotten what Jesus wants you to get from Revelation? Do you see Jesus as glorious? Have the windows of this book gotten your heart humming? In the first window we saw that Jesus isn’t far off, He is right in the middle of His 7 lampstands; His churches. He is close by. This means He sees what is going on in your life and He cares. That should lead you to worship.

Next Revelation pointed us to the good news that the throne of the universe isn’t up for grabs, Jesus is on it. He’s in control. There’s no contest. No matter how crazy the chaos gets He’s got this. Does that make your heart leap with worship?

Then we saw the temple opened and caught a glimpse of the war behind all wars. There was a woman, and a Son was born to her. And the dragon tried to destroy Him but failed. And now in his defeat he makes war with the other children of the woman.

The invitation is to see Jesus' fingers in your circumstances. So yes, chaos seems to reign. Yes, sin seems to be winning. It's dark out there. But Jesus says "Look behind the curtain and see that all of this is working according to My plan, and the devil has already lost."

Friends, Christians for 2000 years have grabbed hold of this and kept going. This doesn't mean it hasn't been difficult, but when we see Jesus' hand we know that ultimately the night has been defeated by the Bright Morning Star. If you are filled with hope for the morning then you are reading Revelation right.

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The fourth window confirms that Jesus is keeping track and evil will be called to account. Every wrong will be righted by the Just Judge. Do you long for that? Do you long for justice to reign? If you do you're reading right.

And then the final window opens and we see the Rider on the white horse – we see Jesus. And we know for certain that all of history is His story.

Friends, Jesus is awesome! He is the Lion who is the Lamb who was slain. He is the Alpha and the Omega, He was before the beginning and He will be there after the end. He is huge and powerful and He lovingly extends undeserved grace to us, to you, because He wants you to have the abundant life He created you to enjoy.

And so He says – verse 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.

So the call is out: respond to Jesus, not by predicting the day He is going to show up, but by washing your robes. He says the time is near, I'm coming soon. So choose to live a life of obedience in response to the incredible gift of grace He offers. His offer extends to anyone who is thirsty – come. His offer is for anyone who wishes to take the free gift of the water of life – come. And the hearts of the Spirit and the bride swell with love and worship. And we respond "Yes, Come Lord Jesus!"