



When Will These Things Be?

Revelation 6-20

We have been working our way through the book of Revelation. This morning we come to Revelation, chapter 6. Before we dig into the verses of chapter 6, I thought that it would be helpful for all of us to take a step back, and look at the big picture of Revelation. I say this because I really haven't said anything controversial yet through my expositions of the first five chapters of Revelation. But, the controversy begins in chapter 6. The controversy begins because of how you interpret the text. This is the question that I have received most often from those outside the church.

When talking with a Christian friend at another church, they often ask how church is going. They ask what I'm preaching through, and when I tell them that I'm preaching through Revelation, 4 out of 5 times, the next thing that comes out of their mouth is a series of questions? "What are you? Are you pre-trib? Are you post-trib? Are you pre-millennial? Are you post-millennial?" It's like the first thing that people want to know about preaching Revelation: "How do I view the end?"

Now, for some of you this morning, you may not even know what pre-trib or post-trib means. For others of you, you may not quite understand the differences of the Millennial views. Others of you may have some strong convictions about these things, and my preaching in Revelation chapter 6 might just ruffle your feathers. So, before we dig into Revelation, I want for us to understand some of the different ways that people look at Revelation. I feel like this message will set the tone for the next few months as we work our way through the rest of Revelation.

My message this morning is entitled, "When Will These Things Be?" Because, that's fundamentally the question that many people are asking when they ask about when they ask about the tribulation and the millennium.

Curiously, this is the exact question that Jesus was asked by his disciples. So, let's begin this morning, not by looking at Revelation, but by opening our Bibles to Matthew, chapter 24.

The chapter begins with Jesus and his disciples leaving the temple, where Jesus had just condemned the Pharisees as hypocrites (Matthew 23). As they leaving, the disciples pointed out to him the beautiful buildings of the temple. Jesus said to them, Matthew 24:2 "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." Jesus prophesied of the destruction of the temple. which, we know, came in A. D. 70, when the Romans surrounded Jerusalem and destroyed everything that was on the temple mount. But, they didn't know that.

Now, after Jesus and his disciples had crossed the Kidron Valley and arrived at the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him with a few more questions. We read in Matthew 24:3, "As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" This question is the title of my message this morning: "When Will These Things Be?"

Jesus responded to this question by totally ignoring it! If you read in the rest of the chapter, you will see Jesus describing the signs that will take place before his coming. Jesus describes the many false Messiahs that will arise (verse 5). Jesus describes how there will be wars and famines and earthquakes (verses 6-8). Jesus describes the persecution that will take place against the believers (verse 9), the lawlessness that will come. He spoke about the need to flee Jerusalem (verses 16-20) because things will be so much worse than anything has ever taken place (verse 21). Jesus described his coming as comparable to the lightening that flashes across the sky (verse 27). All we see and know when he returns! (verse 28). Jesus describes the sun darkening and the stars falling from the skies (verse 29). "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, [who comes] on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (verse 30). Jesus describes how the angels will gather up the elect (verse 31). But in all of this, Jesus didn't say a word about "when" these things would take place. It has been 2,000 years, and Jesus still hasn't returned.

I think that there is a lesson to be learned here. Sure, there are signs to behold before the coming of Jesus, but silence when it comes to when it all will take place. In fact, later in Matthew 24, Jesus says, "Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36). Then Jesus continues his discourse by describing how many will be surprised when he returns. Like in the days of Noah, when the flood came and took away many people who were unaware of his coming. He said, "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:40-42).

In Matthew 25, Jesus gives three parables that teach us to be ready for his coming. The parable of the ten virgins, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and goat judgments. In each of these parables, you have some who were faithfully serving their master, and ready for his return. You have others who were foolish, and were not ready for his return. When Jesus was asked about his coming, he said, "stay awake" (Matthew 24:42), "be ready" (Matthew 24:44), and "watch" (Matthew 25:12). "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44). If you're expecting him to come, he's not coming. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13). When it comes to the return of Jesus, he tells us to anticipate his coming, watch for it! Wait for it! Not, "figure out when it will be." If anything, he discourages us from that. He doesn't answer the question. If he was to, he'd say nobody knows, and to not concern yourself with the answer. This is significant in approaching the book of Revelation.

Let's look at Acts chapter 1. The context of this chapter is Jesus with his disciples after his resurrection. "He presented himself alive to them

after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). They were all together and the disciples asked Jesus a question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6)? Listen to the reply of Jesus. "He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Instead, you will be busy being my witnesses. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This is the theme of the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit would come and empower the disciples to be witnesses for Jesus, first in their home setting of Jerusalem. Then they would witness in the surrounding regions of Judah in the south, Samaria in the north, and then to the end of the earth.

When we preached through the book of Acts, it was thrilling to see the apostles preach Jesus crucified, dead and buried, but risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and seated at the right hand of God. It was thrilling to see many people repent of their sins. I exhorted you week after week to follow their example, and be a witness for Jesus! I find it super-instructive here, that when the apostles asked Jesus, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6), Jesus directed them away from the "when" question, and unto the work of the ministry. He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). But, instead you will be filled with the Holy Spirit. and you will be my witnesses. In other words he is saying "Don't concern yourself about when the kingdom will be restored to Israel." "Concern yourself with spreading the gospel."

Jesus said, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons." Yet, there have been many who have defied the words of Jesus and have predicted the timing of his return. Note here that Jesus wasn't telling the disciples that it wasn't for them to know the date of his return. It wasn't for them to know "the times or seasons." That is, the general "times or seasons." That is, the "years" or the "decades" of his return. Yet, there have many who have done just this very thing.

Perhaps the most famous from our day is Hal Lindsey. He wrote a book entitled, "The Late Great Planet Earth." The subtitle says it all: "a penetrating look at incredible prophecies involving this generation." It was originally published in 1970. It was the "#1 bestseller of the decade." It went through more than 30 printings, .. and sold more than 28 million copies.^[1]

In the book, he laid heavy emphasis upon Israel, after 2,000 years of exile, becoming a country again on May 14, 1948. He then quoted Jesus, who said, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). He says, "What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs—chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then withing forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so."^[2] That made 1988 the year that Jesus would return.

Lindsey followed this book up with a book in 1981 entitled, "The 1980's: countdown to Armageddon." He wrote toward the beginning of the book, "The goal of this book is not merely to show which prophecies have been fulfilled since [The] Late Great [Planet Earth] came out in 1970, however. Even more important, it is intended to analyze what will occur in the decade we have just entered. During the 25 years I have been studying prophecy I have seen incredible events forecast 3,000 years ago happen right before my eyes. Especially in the past 10 years, I have watched current events push us toward the climax of history the prophets foretold. I believe many people will be shocked by what is happening right now and by what will happen in the very near future. The decade of the 1980's could very well be the last decade of history as we know it."^[3]

Near the end of the book, Lindsey again quoted Matthew 24:34, speaking about the generation that won't pass away until all these things take place. Lindsey wrote:

WE ARE THE GENERATION HE WAS TALKING ABOUT! I say that because, unmistakably, for the first time in history, all the signs are coming together at an accelerating rate. What do I mean? Look around you and see:

- Earthquakes are increasing in frequency; the greatest period for quakes in history is forecast for 1982.
- Famine spreads as population explodes.
- Pollution threatens our survival.
- Israel has been miraculously reborn as a nation.
- The U. S. is fading as a superpower.
- The Red Chinese continue to build their awesome army.
- Arabs and all the world's Moslems threaten a war that would destroy the State of Israel.
- All the world's powers appear ready to involve themselves in a Middle East war because of their need for oil.
- The European community of 10 grows stronger and beings to doubt the effectiveness of the U. S. as an ally.
- Nuclear holocaust seems more possible every day.

All these signs, and many more which are just as visible, point to the fact that this generation is the one that will see the end of the present world and the return of Jesus Christ.^[4]

These books sold well in the 70's and 80's. But as time has passed, and as Jesus hasn't returned, these books aren't selling so well today. Hal Lindsey has been shown to be a false prophet. He isn't the only one. There have been many people down through the years who have predicted this. Edgar Whisenant wrote a book entitled, "88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be in 1988." Harold Camping wrote a book entitled, "1994?" In that book, he predicted that Christ was returning on September 9, 1994. When Jesus didn't return that day, he adjusted and said that Jesus was done with the church on that day. His later calculations came to May 21, 2011 as the day that Jesus would return. Later, he would calculate that October 21, 2011 was the date. He thought that the third time would be the charm, but Jesus hasn't yet returned. Jesus is still building his church. These men are false prophets.

Many more could be added to the list. Jerry Falwell said in 1999 that the end of the world would probably be within 10 years. Jack Van Impe pointed to 2012 as a date for the second coming. Movements have been founded on the return of Christ. William Miller, who was instrumental in the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church predicted the return of Christ in October 22, 1844. When Jesus didn't return that day, it was called, "The Great Disappointment" among many of his followers. Henry Emmons later wrote, "Henry Emmons, a Millerite, later described his experience, 'I waited all Tuesday [October 22] and dear Jesus did not come;—I waited all the forenoon of Wednesday, and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o'clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for 2 days without any pain—sick with disappointment.'"^[5]

Jehovah's Witnesses today claim that 1914 marked the beginning of the "invisible presence" of Jesus, when the signs of Matthew 24 began to occur. It all comes back to this question: I believe that we err when we try to set any sort of time frame for the Lord's return. I know that there are many in our day and age, who look to Israel, who read current events, and read the newspapers with eager anticipation that the Lord will return in our lifetime. I say, "Maybe! But maybe not!"

Many times, in their zeal for these things, it slips into their evangelism, they tell their non-Christian friends about how they have been reading in the Bible and looking at what's taking place in the world, and are convinced that Jesus is probably coming back in our generation, therefore, "Repent and turn to Jesus!" When Jesus doesn't return this year, or next year, or in the next decade, they think to themselves, "If my friend was so sure about the return of Jesus in our generation (and he hasn't come), how can he be so sure about other things in the Bible, like the resurrection? Or the need to repent!" Thus, the delay of Jesus' return, gives reason for them not to believe. Not because the return of Jesus is wrong, it's that the confidence of the timing of his return is wrong.

In 2 Peter 3, we read Peter talking about the second coming of Jesus. He says, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" (2 Peter 3:9-10).

In other words, the delay in the return of Jesus, should be a call to repent! Because, Jesus will come like a thief in the night! He will destroy the earth, and will catch many off guard! But we err when we place time-frames on his return, so that the unbelieving is not lead to repentance, but led to question the truthfulness of his return, and the need to repent! Because we have proven ourselves to be false prophets, in predicting some time-frame of his return, that never comes. Our unbelieving friends mock his return rather than repenting.

Now, we need to be careful, because he may return in our lifetime! We should not deny that. We are to eagerly wait for his coming! Paul told Titus that the people of God are "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). For 2000 years, God's people have been doing this. They have been waiting for the "blessed hope" of the return of Jesus, only to die without seeing him come in their lifetimes. That may be our experience as well. Or, we may see the return of Jesus, when the sun is darkened, and the stars fall from the sky, and the powers of heaven are shaken and Jesus appears for all the tribes of the earth to see his coming "with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30).

What a day that will be! We may see it in our lifetime, and we may not! Many generations of God's people have lived with the hope of the return of Jesus without seeing it. We may be one of those generations. So let us not set dates, or times or seasons when it might take place. Oh, we believe in the return of Jesus! We simply don't know the time.

God's time is not our time. When talking about the return of Jesus, Peter said, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). His time-frame is his time-frame. God doesn't call us to know or guess or figure out when he is coming. God tells us not to predict the times or seasons because, his time-frame is different than our time-frame. We may miss his coming by a thousand years! But, we need to be ready for his return. In coming to Revelation, we need to keep this in tension, ready for his return, aware of the things that will take place (Rev. 1:19). Though, we need not set a time-frames for his return.

Now, our difficulty in America is that we live in a culture that reads Revelation futuristically. What I mean by this is that our culture has been so influenced by Hal Lindsey and the Left Behind books, that the default way to read Revelation is through the futuristic lens that begs us to interpret Revelation in accordance with our current news to discern the times and to know when Jesus is returning. I believe that this can easily cultivate within us an unhealthy perspective of the book Revelation. We read the book looking to figure out when Jesus will return, when Jesus himself has told us that's not to be our focus. Did you know that there are other ways to read the book of Revelation?

Futuristic

Our default in America right now is to read it with a futuristic lens. Everything from Revelation 6 and following is all describing the future events of the world. I don't need to say much about this, because this is the common view of America. Though there are other ways to read the book.

Preterist

You can read Revelation with a "preterist" lens. That simply means, looking at it from a "past" perspective. That is, much of Revelation has already taken place (with the exception of chapters 21 and 22). Most of his happened regarding A. D. 70 when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.

To our ears, this all sounds so strange. It's because we are so steeped in the futuristic understanding of Revelation that we can't see this. But there are parts of Revelation that describe the past, particularly chapter 12. Chapter 12 gives us a vision of the birth of Jesus. Further, there is reference to ancient Babylon in chapters 17 and 18, an event that took place in the past.

It still may sound strange to you, but there are men who we respect greatly who hold this view. R. C. Sproul held this view. Ligonier Ministries promotes this view. They believe this not because they are liberal, but because they think it's the best way to understand the book of

Revelation. They take the words of the very first verse seriously, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1). The events described in Revelation must have taken place soon after it was written.^[6] There is another way to read Revelation.

Historical

You can read Revelation with a "historical" lens. That is, the book of Revelation describes church history. To the first century readers, it was future. But to us, it is history.

Again, this might sound strange to our ears, but this was the view of those during the Reformation. and many Puritans embraced such a view. There is another way to read Revelation.

Idealistic

You can read Revelation with a "idealistic" lens. This take on Revelation embraces the apocalyptic literature, understanding that it is highly symbolic. This view takes Revelation to be teaching principles of God's kingdom, not literal fulfillment. It takes Revelation to be teaching the ideals of God's kingdom, a philosophy of how to look at history and the future. Again, those who take this approach don't do so because they are liberal. They look at Revelation this way because they look to the genre of the Scripture and embrace the nature of apocalyptic literature.

Now, what is helpful to know about all of these approaches is that they are not exclusive. That is, you don't have to land in one (and only one) of these camps. In other words, you don't have to say that everything in Revelation is in the future. Nor do you have to say that everything in Revelation happened in the first century. Nor do you have to say that Revelation is only symbolic of the ideals of how God's judgment works. That's why there is a fifth way to look at Revelation:

Combination

You can read Revelation with a combination of these lenses. Let me read from a statement that Daryle Worley gave. Daryle is the pastor of Grace Church of DuPage, that planted Kishwaukee Bible Church, that planted Rock Valley Bible Church. He said this:

Revelation must be interpreted in a manner consistent with other biblical prophecy. Isaiah can be used as a helpful example. It is certainly anchored in contemporary message historical events which we must know about in order to understand his (6:1) [Preterist]. It leaps forward at times to the end of the age, the final and cataclysmic Day of the Lord (13:6ff) [Futurist]. It makes explicit prophesies about things like the return from exile or the coming of Christ (7:14→Mat. 1:22-25; 9:7→ Luk. 1:32-33) [Historicist]. And whatever part you read, you understand that he is speaking of things that are universally relevant even apart from the historical setting in which they take place (25:1-4) [Idealist]. The point is that the prophets blend and weave these different interpretive schemes together so that no one of them covers the whole book. They are all knotted together. It is as though in their prophetic consciences time collapses; they interpret all events from God's point of view (Clements).^[7]

I would encourage you to embrace such a reading of Revelation. Understand how Biblical prophecy works. It is anchored in time of the author, but directed toward the future. It prophesies of things in the future that, from our perspective, have been fulfilled. It sets forth universally relevant principles of how God's judgment works. D. A. Carson said it this way, "Revelation must be interpreted in light of the first century understanding, with a view to the end of history, sensitive to the principles that are true for all time."^[8]

So, as it comes to the book of Revelation, I do not believe that we should approach the book trying to figure out when it all will take place. We simply need to be ready for his return. My hope in preaching through Revelation is that it would stir within you a longing for his return! My hope in preaching through Revelation is that you would embrace the good news of his coming judgment. My hope in preaching through Revelation is that you would trust in the Savior. My hope in preaching through Revelation is not that you will know everything about the timing of his return.

So, "When will these things be?" "When will Jesus return?" Jesus gives us an answer. Turn to the last chapter of Revelation, chapter 22. Jesus tells us when he will return. He says it several times. Look at verse 7. Jesus says, "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book" (Revelation 22:7). When is Jesus coming? He is coming "soon!"

Now, to those in the first century who first received the Revelation, "soon" meant at least 2,000 years. For us "soon" may mean another 2,000 years. We simply don't know. But, must long for the return of Jesus. Until then, we will be blessed when we "keep the words of the prophesy of [the book of Revelation] and by so doing, we will be blessed (Revelation 1:3).

In case we missed it, Jesus says it again. Look at verse 12, "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done" (Revelation 22:12). Jesus is coming "soon." When he comes, he will come with justice, repaying everyone for what he has done. To those who have rebelled against the Lord, judgment. To those who have trusted in the Lord, salvation. If this weren't enough, the same message comes in verse 20, "He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon" (Revelation 22:20a). That's why we cry out with John! "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20b)! Do you recognize this? It is the theme of Revelation. When is Jesus returning? He is returning soon. Let us rejoice in this.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 13, 2023 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Late_Great_Planet_Earth.

[2] Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 54.

[3] Hal Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 7-8.

[4] *Ibid.*, 162-3.

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Disappointment.

[6] <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/preterist-approach-revelation-unfolding-biblical-eschatology>.

[7] <https://www.gracedupage.org/sermons/2022/7/17/understanding-eschatology>.

[8] This quote came from someplace in the 26 lecture series on Revelation that he gave at Elmbrook Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin. You can search for the lecture series on <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org>.