READINGREVELATIONRESPONSIBLY, PARTTHREE:

Reading Revelation Responsibly, Part Three: “The Heavenly Man”

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, September 10, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 1:1-16; Daniel 7:9-14; Exodus 20:18-20; Zechariah 12:10; Exodus 3:14; Ezekiel 1:26-28; Psalm 104:1-3; Isaiah 45:22-23
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:07:34 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Revelation does not open with a schedule of coming events. It opens with a face. And every feature of that face — the trumpet voice, the white hair, the burnished feet, the clouds — is lifted straight out of the Old Testament, so that churches under the boot of Rome would recognize who was standing in front of them: the God who broke Egypt, the Ancient of Days who holds an everlasting kingdom, and the one they pierced.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Revelation is a call to be and remain faithful to Jesus regardless of circumstance. The engine behind that call is not a preview of the future; it is a revelation of who God is.
- Strange biblical imagery almost always comes with a plain explanation attached. The explanations are sensible enough that a child could follow them — you do not have to be a genius or a prayer warrior to read this book.
- God uses shocking images the way Nathan used a story with David: not to show off, but to get through to people who have eyes and do not see.
- “The ruler of kings on earth” is not decorative. It was written to people losing their legal protection, their standing in the economy and their place in the community because of Jesus.

- John describes Jesus in the exact language Exodus and Daniel use for God — including the divine name itself, deliberately misspelled in Greek so you would catch the reference.
- The glorious figure of Revelation 1 is the same one who conquered by meekness, obedience and death. That is not a footnote to his victory; it is the method of it.
- In Zechariah the mourners are Jerusalem. In Revelation they are all the tribes of the earth — the very nations who gathered against the rock now receive the grace that his death bought.
- The comfort on offer is not that things will turn out fine. It is that he cannot be taken, and neither can you.

▶ 1:07:34

Matt restated the premise of the series before doing anything else, because the premise is doing all the work. We are reading Revelation because it is a call to believers to be and remain faithful to Jesus regardless of circumstance — and the engine behind that call is a revelation of who God is and what he is like. "I don't think it's a comfort based on giving you a sneak peek of what's going to happen play by play," he said. "Instead it's an encouragement to stay faithful to him because of who he is."

Where the first two weeks landed

▶ 1:08:56

Two weeks ago the room read through a pile of strange biblical images: cows coming up out of the Nile, baskets on a man's head, dreams of statues and trees, a woman sitting in a basket. The pattern held every time. The weird image means something, and once the Lord explains it, the meaning is plain. Nobody needs to know what species of cow Pharaoh saw or which stretch of the Nile it came from; when Joseph gives the explanation, it is years of plenty and years of famine (Genesis 41). "The explanations are sensible and easy," Matt said. "Even a child could follow it."

Last week asked the follow-up question: why would God do bizarre things at all? Not to show off how creative he is, or how slow we are. He does it to get our attention, because there is a spiritual dullness that can settle over people who have eyes and do not see. David knew the commandment against adultery perfectly well. He was not listening. It took Nathan telling a story about a poor man's lamb to get his heart engaged sideways, and only then did he feel the weight of what he had done (2 Samuel 12).

1. The letter is addressed to us too

▶ 1:11:45

Today's reading was the description of Jesus in Revelation 1 — which is not only the opening of the book but the launching pad for all seven letters that follow. Each one reaches back to this heavenly man as the reason the churches should do what he asks.

> "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place… Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."
>
> REVELATION 1:1–3 ↗

That blessing is not restricted to the seven congregations named later. Anyone who hears this and keeps it is blessed — which means we are not merely eavesdropping on somebody else's mail. Everything Jesus says to them applies to us, and so does this description of him.

2. "The ruler of kings on earth"

▶ 1:13:45

John greets them from the one who is and who was and who is to come, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. Matt slowed down on that last phrase, because it lands very differently depending on who you are.

Rome had no great love for Judaism but did respect its age, and that bought Jews certain exemptions in the empire. Early on those protections covered Christians too, simply because no provincial governor was going to sort out which subgroup of a subgroup anybody belonged to — they were all Jews to him. But as Jewish leaders distanced themselves from the Christian movement, Rome eventually caught on, and the tolerance was withdrawn in tandem with expulsion from the synagogue. John himself is writing from exile on a prison island (Revelation 1:9–11). Many of the people hearing this letter were feeling the same pressure economically and socially. For them, who actually rules the kings is not an abstraction.

3. Dancing around the divine name

▶ 1:16:07

"Who is and who was and who is to come" is how God speaks of himself through Isaiah when he challenges the idols: "I am the first, and I am the last." But Matt pushed further. John is doing something deliberate with grammar.

> "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel: "I AM has sent me to you."'"
>
> EXODUS 3:14 ↗

Greek-speaking Jews rendered that name a particular way. John reuses their exact wording in Revelation 1:4 — in a sentence where it is grammatically wrong to do so. "He spelled it wrong on purpose," Matt said, waving off the technical detail. That is the whole point: Jesus is the one who is.

4. A voice like a trumpet

▶ 1:21:22

Why a trumpet? Not a drum, not simply a loud voice. Because there is one place in Israel's memory where a trumpet blast keeps getting louder and louder while a mountain smokes and God answers in thunder — Sinai, after he has brought his people out of slavery (Exodus 19:16–19).

> "Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.'"
>
> EXODUS 20:18–20 ↗

▶ 1:23:23

The same logic runs through the other sounds. When Ezekiel watches the glory of God return to the temple, the sound of his coming is like the roar of many waters, and Jesus has that voice here and again in Revelation 14:2. Matt made sure nobody pictured something pleasant. "Have you ever been next to a really big waterfall? It's not a nice trickle. It's scary — you think, man, if I got under that it would crush me."

Every one of these echoes points at the same credential. The God being described is the one who has already proved he can get his people out from under an empire. That is exactly the résumé these churches needed to read. And Matt was careful about what it does and does not mean: "It's not that God wants to crush Rome, because remember, he wants to save the centurion."

5. The Ancient of Days, in a human body

▶ 1:27:43

> "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."
>
> REVELATION 1:12–16 ↗

We have already met the God of the Exodus in this chapter. Now comes a second portrait, aimed at a different kind of ache — people who feel alone and in exile. Read the description beside Daniel and it stops looking like decoration. Daniel 7:9–10 gives the Ancient of Days clothing white as snow, hair like pure wool, a throne of fiery flames with burning wheels, a stream of fire issuing out from before him, a thousand thousands serving him and ten thousand times ten thousand standing before him while the court sits in judgment and the books are opened. John hands those same features to Jesus. "Daniel's description of the Ancient of Days matches John's description for Jesus," Matt said, "which makes you want to pause and think about that." He is being shown as the one who rules, the one who has authority, the one attended by many. And in Daniel the two are separate characters:

> "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And 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."
>
> DANIEL 7:13–14 ↗

He looks human, which is why he is called a son of man — and he rides the clouds, which, as Matt put it, "in the ancient Near East meant you're a God." The gleaming-metal body comes from Ezekiel's vision of a figure with a human appearance seated above a throne like sapphire: from the waist up and the waist down, fire, "and there was brightness around him like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain… such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face" (Ezekiel 1:26–28).

▶ 1:33:49

One more, and it is the psalm that gives him both the splendor and the chariot:

> "Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment… He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot."
>
> PSALM 104:1–3 ↗

Exodus and exile, stacked on top of each other — two seasons when God's people were owned by someone else or had no home at all. God has a reputation in both: he can care for his people when they are oppressed, ruled over and harassed, and he can care for them when they are lost, without a place to call home, without any power at all, afraid and abandoned. Which is precisely how the seven churches felt. "The mission isn't called off," Matt said. "It never was. It never had to be."

6. How this King actually won

▶ 1:32:19

So he received dominion and power and a kingdom. How? Watch the life. He conquered through meekness, obedience and death. Matt would not let the glory and the method come apart: "We serve a Lord who is not only lamb but lion, meek but mighty. When all things culminate we will see his dominion and glory established forever, it will never be taken, he is the actual conqueror — but to remind you, here's how he won."

That matters for people being harassed, because it tells them what kind of war they are in. "He's not going to win by sending the tanks against Rome. He's going to win through his meekness, through his blood, by saving people from the clutches of darkness." And when he invites you into his victory, Matt said, "you also know that we wage war the way he does too." The reassurance underneath it is blunt: if he has you in his grasp, the powers of darkness cannot take you. He is the one who directs kings and kingdoms, and he can tear down, plant, uproot and build as he wishes.

It also clarifies what he is rescuing them from — and Matt made the pressure concrete before answering. The persecution in view is not only personal; it is threats and physical violence reaching your mother, your sister, your children. So the churches need to remember that the one they serve is able and mighty to save, and then be told exactly what he saves from. Not inconvenience. Not even suffering. What he saves them from is their own sin, the powers of darkness, the clutches of the enemy. He can say that because of what he says about himself:
he died, and behold he is alive forevermore. And some of these churches are told plainly that they will follow him into death. They know, Matt said, that inconvenience was never the thing on the table.

7. The ones who pierced him

▶ 1:36:10

This was the part Matt clearly enjoyed most. In Zechariah 12:2–4, Jerusalem becomes a cup of staggering and then a heavy stone; all the nations of the earth gather against it, and everyone who tries to lift it hurts himself. The rescue in that chapter is aimed deliberately at the weakest people in it: the Lord saves the tents of Judah first, so that no one's glory outstrips anyone else's, and "the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David" — with the house of David like God, like the angel of the Lord going before them. Then God says how the rescue will actually look:

> "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem 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, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."
>
> ZECHARIAH 12:10 ↗

Read the grammar slowly. God is speaking. They will look on *me* — on *him* whom they have pierced. Matt kept asking the room the same questions rather than answering them: who is talking, who are they looking at, why are they mourning — did he die? And how on earth is a death the great rescue? All that power in a stone too heavy to lift, and he is pierced.

▶ 1:41:04

Now watch what John does with that prophecy. In Revelation 1:5–7 — "to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" — he is coming with the clouds, every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and *all tribes of the earth* will wail on account of him. In Zechariah the mourners were Jerusalem. In Revelation they are everybody. "The very enemies who rallied against this rock are now the beneficiaries of his death," Matt said. Repentant Gentiles are the ones fulfilling the prophecy of grace and mercy. It is not the Gentile oppressors God wants to destroy; it is precisely them he wants to pour grace and mercy on. Which means the Romans pressing down on these churches are not finally their enemies at all — they are the people God intends to redeem. And that decides how these believers fight for their families and endure the trial: by beholding the glorious Lord who conquered through his meek death, and walking with him.

8. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth

▶ 1:43:25

> "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'"
>
> ISAIAH 45:22–23 ↗

John blends Zechariah's prophecy with this one, and the reach of it is the point. All the ends of the earth — "that includes centurions, that includes Babylonians, oppressors, the powerful and the weak." Matt refused to let anyone grade the rescue: "There's no rescue for the powerful that's different for the weak. There is only one rescuer; there is no other." Then the application, quietly: "You can hold that in your heart as you feel weak, depressed, oppressed, lonely, excluded, threatened."

What this asks of us

▶ 1:45:48

Two things came out of the message. The main one: behold this Lord of glory, and let what encouraged an oppressed church encourage us — especially when we feel powerless, or hopeless about a nation we would rather God simply blew up. "Really," Matt said, "we want him to save the centurions, to conquer through his meekness and grace and mercy." The secondary one, which he ranked lower but plainly loves: notice how much Old Testament is packed into these sixteen verses, and assume it is deliberate. "In my opinion the best context for the Book of Revelation is the Old Testament, not necessarily the news."

▶ 1:46:35

He closed on the surprise at the center of it. God knew the nations would gather against the rock. What nobody saw coming — not even the powers of darkness — was that he would use the death of an only child to bless those same nations with grace and mercy. "God is clever, he's tricky, but he's good. He's powerful — remember, the voice of a trumpet — but he's also meek and gentle, and he overcomes the way he wants to. He's the original life-from-the-death overcomer."

Which makes the encouragement of Revelation something sturdier than optimism. It is not "don't worry, everything's going to turn out fine." It is: be and stay faithful regardless of what happens, and you will get a crown of glory, walking in the footsteps of a master who conquered by dying. Nobody can take those dominions and glories and powers from him, because he is the actual King over all — and that is the story we are living in, Matt said, not the story of mankind, one army against another army, this is how things work. Or, as he put it in the last line before he prayed — stick with Jesus no matter what things look like. It is worth it. We need to remember that too.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Genesis 41
- 2 Samuel 12
- Revelation 1:1–3
- Revelation 1:4–5
- Revelation 1:9–11
- Isaiah 48:12
- Exodus 3:14
- Exodus 19:16–19
- Exodus 20:18–20
- Ezekiel 43:2
- Revelation 14:2
- Revelation 1:12–16
- Daniel 7:9–10
- Daniel 7:13–14
- Ezekiel 1:26–28
- Psalm 104:1–3
- Revelation 1:17–18
- Revelation 2:10
- Zechariah 12:2–4
- Zechariah 12:8
- Zechariah 12:10
- Revelation 1:5–7
- Isaiah 45:22–23

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What have you assumed Revelation was for? How does reading it as a call to faithfulness rather than a preview of events change the way you would approach it?
2. The seven churches were losing standing, income and safety. Where do you feel something comparable — smaller, but real — and what does "the ruler of kings on earth" say to that?
3. John describes Jesus using Sinai, Daniel's Ancient of Days, and Ezekiel's glory. Which of those pictures is hardest for you to hold together with the Jesus you normally imagine?
4. Matt said God wants to save the centurion. Who is the centurion in your life — the person or group you would rather God dealt with than redeemed?
5. If Jesus conquers through meekness, obedience and faithfulness, what does fighting his way look like for you this week, in one specific situation?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Q2FVXdeK20&t=4054s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.