

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

A SERMON

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“Blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written there; for the time is at hand.” Revelation 1:3

How in the world, how in the name of all that is in earth and in heaven, can we keep the things which are written in this book if we do not know what those things are? And if the blessing lies in understanding the things and in keeping the things, then it fairly implies that this Book of the Revelation, as well as every other book of the Bible, was given by divine inspiration, and was intended to be profitable and to be instructive, and therefore to be understood. But if we pervert God's truth, and take the whims and fancies of men to the dying hour referred to in the last clause, for it is a relative term, “the time is at hand:” this is true of every generation of Christians, because life is always short; therefore at all times in this relative sense the time is at hand when the matter must be finally decided: if we take with us delusion, then our seeming wheat will turn out at the last to be only chaff, and it will be a harvest, a heap of grief and of desperate sorrow. Hence you read of some that wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction. We also see that a great many men of great minds, great learning, and great industry, and of great earnestness, have most egregiously erred in their comments upon this Book of the Revelation. They have pointed to certain periods in which such and such things were to take place; but those periods have arrived, they have passed by, and no such things have taken place; and so, their prophetic lamps have gone out, because they had not in them the oil of truth. Whereas the prophets of the Old Testament, their predictions have in them the oil of truth, and so those predictions will continue to be burning lamps, and will never go out, but will go shining on in all their truthfulness and reality to all eternity. It is a mercy, then, to be delivered from delusion, and to have the oil of truth in our religion; for if we have not the oil of yea and amen truth in our religion and in our souls, wrought there by the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of God, “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts;” and, as another scripture says, “You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden parts you shall make me to know wisdom;” if we have not this gospel truth in our souls, if our faith be not in God's truth, then just when we want our religion our lamps will go out, our hope will be but a spider's web, and we may plead what we will, but the answer from the Bridegroom will be, “Depart from me, I know you not.” “But they that were ready went in with him to the marriage.” They had received God's truth, they had bought the truth, and the man that knows the value of that truth is willing to buy it at any price, but not willing to sell it at any price, nor to sell it at all. These are

they that shall find acceptance at the last. Then, again, you will perceive that this verse is exceedingly encouraging to us to search this book; for “blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein; for the time is at hand.” What an authority this is to search the book! We should not be led by the old nonsensical Jewish notion. Why, the Jews held the notion that no man ought to read Solomon’s Song till he was thirty years old, the fools! just as though the Holy Spirit could not teach an infant as well as an adult. A child is never too young, if it can read at all, to read the Bible. And there are ministers now that say young ministers ought not to meddle with the Book of the Revelation; it ought to be left for old ministers. But then, old men are not always wise men, neither do the aged always understand judgment. It is not the age of the man, it is the teaching of the Holy Spirit that makes a man wise, whether the man be young or whether he be old.

Now I shall not, this morning, notice precisely the words of our text, but rather deal with the book itself in general. And in so doing I will notice, first, *the structure of the book itself*. Secondly *the notes of time*, or the periods which are marked in this book. Thirdly, that *this Book of the Revelation should be read in the light of the Old Testament*.

First, *the structure of the book*. This is a matter essentially important for us to understand. And you must not suppose that I am going to be merely speculative; you will find as we go along in noticing the structure of this book that there is a living and vital sympathy between the soul of the regenerate man and the things here presented. Now the general notion is that the things recorded in this book were to take place in successive ages, one after the other, that the trumpets, because they are spoken of after the seals, were therefore to take place in some future ages after the things meant by the seals were accomplished; and as the seven vials of wrath follow the trumpets, that they belong to some yet future and distant age. Thus, they make all these things successive, one following the other in the order of time. Whereas such is the structure of the book that those things which people think to be successive are all the time synchronically: they all occur more or less at the same time, as I think I shall be able clearly to show. It would take all our time to quote one half of the authors who have written volumes, which have all come to nothing, taking up that idea, that the things of this book, instead of being viewed synchronically, should be viewed successively; that is where they have erred. Hence you will recollect, when the last Russian war (1853) broke out, a very ingenious man discovered from the Book of Revelation that we were then to have a fifteen years’ struggle, a general European struggle: and he wrote a book, and almost everybody believed it; but what did his prophecy come to? You see it came to nothing. How true are the words of the poet, that “fools rush in where angels fear to tread”!

Let us then look for a moment at the structure of this book. I will first have a word more upon the 20th chapter, where the thousand years are spoken of. Now there are several reasons why I believe that chapter to mean simply the gospel dispensation. One reason is that we assigned last Lord’s-day morning that in the beginning Satan is bound. And so, Satan was conquered, bruised, and limited when the Savior died, when the Savior rose from the dead, and when the Holy Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost; for if Satan at that time had not been restrained more than he had ever before been restrained, if he had not been bound more closely than he had been before, such a number of souls could not have been unbound; for he is the strong man that keeps the palace until a stronger than he shall come, namely, Christ Jesus, and cast out the prince of darkness, and let the light of the gospel into the soul. Until this is the case, Satan is not overcome. So, then, if he

had not been bound, you would not have been unbound; if he had not been limited, you would not have been delivered, the light of the gospel would never have reached you. I take this, therefore, as one proof that that 20th chapter is expressive simply of the gospel dispensation. Then the second reason is what follows. You read immediately of “thrones, and they sat upon them;” and of course those that sat upon them were the apostles; they sat upon twelve thrones, and they remain enthroned to this day, that is, officially speaking; for their writings will go down to the end of time. Then, also, a little further on in that 20th chapter, I read of “the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus;” the martyrs. Here is the deadly persecution that follows immediately upon the resurrection of Christ and the preaching of the gospel. I find a succession of generations whose souls are like unto the souls of martyrs, reigning with Christ down to the end of time. This is the second reason, then: first, because at the beginning of this dispensation Satan was bound; secondly, those conversions were brought about that are hinted at in that chapter; and then thirdly, that during the whole of this thousand years, that is, the gospel dispensation, the world is full of ungodly people. Where is your millennium then? Where is your earthly crown, your earthly reign? Where is your old Jerusalem? Why, the world all this time is full of ungodly people, called Gog and Magog, “the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.” And I ask this assembly this morning, how are matters now? Is it not just so? Is it not still true that “strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads unto life, and few there be that find it”? Just as that chapter represents, so it is. At the end of that chapter, you get the judgment day. Then the 21st chapter, although it is given in statement after you have an account of the judgment day, is not expressive of another dispensation, but the 21st chapter goes back again to the beginning of this dispensation, and John says, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.” Now by the Lord Jesus Christ we have a new heaven, a heaven that will last forever, in contrast to the Jewish heaven, that was to last but for a little while; by Jesus Christ we have a new earth, an inheritance like himself, incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away. Thus, John saw that by Christ Jesus here are the new heavens; God himself the sun, God himself the light thereof; “and there was no more sea,” meaning there was no more trouble, for the sea is there introduced as a figure of trouble, tossed about, as the Psalmist said; and again, “The wicked are like the troubled sea.” The sea there represents trouble. But by Jesus Christ there is no more trouble. Our troubles can be terminated only in and by Christ Jesus; it is by him there is no more sea, no more trouble. The new heavens and the new earth, in that 21st chapter, mean nothing more, nothing less, than the New Testament dispensation, which, of course, reaches not only through time, but stretches on into eternity. “For the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.” It is true men bring the old Jerusalem back again, and the old dispensation back again, that is, they do so in theory; but it will never come; the old Jerusalem is gone forever; for these old heavens and this old earth shall not be remembered nor come into mind.

But I will come more particularly to this matter of the structure of the book. I observed last Lord’s day morning, but there was not room for the remark in the eight pages, that the subjects contained in the Book of the Revelation are ranged in parallel columns, side by side; that is the structure of the book; so that the writer has not written in the order of time, but has made the subjects themselves his guide in writing. Lest I should be misunderstood, I will illustrate my meaning by a very familiar figure, or circumstance, which you are all acquainted with. A man undertakes to write the history of a country; he takes up the political history of that country down to a certain time; he then goes back and takes up the ecclesiastical history of that country down to the same period; he then goes back and takes up the military history of that country down to the same period;

he then goes back and takes up the scientific history of that country down to the same period. Now you will at once see that this writer is ranging his subjects' side by side; you see that they do not succeed each other in the order of time, but the writer means that they are all existing at one and the same time. Just such is the structure of the Book of the Revelation. Now let us come to the book itself. In the sixth chapter you have four equestrian seals opened. "I saw, and behold a white horse; and he that sat on him had a bow, and a crown was given unto him; and he went forth conquering, and to conquer." You will at once see that this is taken from the 45th Psalm. None of us, I think, doubt that the white horse and his rider are intended to represent Jesus Christ in his going forth conquering poor sinners and bringing them to his feet. And when did that begin? At the commencement of the gospel dispensation. Then the next horse you have there is a red horse, "and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another; and there was given unto him a great sword." That horse represents deadly persecution. Now did not that red horse set in at the same time? Was the gospel scarcely preached until that persecution was brought about? Thus, then the white horse goes forth, the red horse follows upon it; they are not successive, one after the other, but synchronically, they both go forth at the same time. Then comes the black horse, not a war horse, but representing a dark, deep scheme, that shall seek to rob the people of God of God's truth. "And he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand." I very much prefer the translation of those learned men that render the Greek word there translated "balances," by the English word "yoke;" "having a yoke in his hand." Popery, Puseyism, Mahometanism, are all very good illustrations of this. Now when this dark scheme to rob the people of God of the truth was set on foot, John said, "I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures," that is, in the presence of God, "say, A measure of wheat for a penny;" meaning, Mr. Blackhorse and your rider, with all your schemes my people shall have their daily bread; "and three measures of barley for a penny;" my people shall have their daily bread; "and see you hurt not the oil and the wine." The oil the symbol of God's grace, and the wine the symbol of the blood of the everlasting covenant. These dark and deep schemes cannot deceive God's elect. Why, this black horse set out before the apostle Paul died. This black horse, with its plan to get the truth away from the people, and put something else into its place, the apostle Paul met with it at Galatia, and at other places as well. Now see what a happy position the real Christian is brought into. There is no scheme, there is no plan that can by any possibility rob you of the truth. As Luther said, "They take our wives from us, they take our children from us, they take our goods from us, and they take our reputation from us, and represent us as the offscouring of all things, and take our liberty from us, and take our life from us, but they cannot take the truth from us, they cannot take the Holy Spirit from us, they cannot take the Christ of God from us, they cannot take the kingdom of God from us, they cannot take eternal life from us." Those were days in which men appreciated more deeply than we do that advice given, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust does corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." Thus, then, you plain, simple Christians, that are utterly ignorant of ecclesiastical history, if you will but view this book in the light, as we shall presently see, of the Old Testament, you will understand it without the help of any human author whatever, and you will find that you can apply the words of the poet to this book as well as to others,

"God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain."

Ah, but, say you, the red horse does not exist now. Yes, it does, in spirit, and God judges' men, not so much in what they are, but in what they would be. The Pope would be a European murderer now if he could; and we see they can hardly forbear from their tyranny among their own people in their horrid convents. They have been so accustomed to tyranny, bloodshed, and murder, that the red horse still exists in spirit, though, bless God! not in power, and never will again until just before the end of the world. Then comes the pale horse, and what is that? "His name that sat on him was Death," and what is that? Why, a dead religion. What is a dead religion? Why, a dead religion is where a man is a mere professor; he has undergone no change; he is a mere formalist; and he is led by this pale horse, he thinks it is a white horse, it is pale; it is something approaching to white, a little bit of pale morality; and his religion amounts to this, "As it was in the beginning, so it is now, and ever shall be" these rounds of formality to the end of the world. That is death, and he kills the people with hunger. Oh, how many followers this pale horse has! But when such an one hears a man that has a living religion, and who comes down to show what real conviction of sin is, and when the Lord brings home the word with power, what a revolution it brings about in the soul! how it darkens that man's heaven, turns his moon, as it were, into blood! all his brilliant prospects fall to the ground and become darkened, and the man becomes distressed, he flies to God for mercy, dreads the thought of having a name to live while he is dead, and thus flies from the dead horse. If the dead horse does not exist now, I am very much deceived. I am sure the pale horse is very well known to the people of God. I was a follower of the pale horse for a little time, until I found myself to be in the congregation of the dead; and I left the congregation of the dead and tried to find the congregation of the living; and I have found the spiritual congregation of the living, the living in Jerusalem, who can live only by the faith of the Son of God, who loved them, and gave himself for them. So much for the four seals; they do not succeed each other. Ah, but these prophets say they do succeed each other. They do in revelation of necessity, but not in practice; they all go on together and belong to all ages. All the things spoken of in the Book of Revelation belong to all ages, more or less; that is, to all ages of the New Testament dispensation.

Then, passing by the fifth seal for the present, we come to the sixth, and what was the sixth seal? A tremendous revolution, and men were startled and alarmed; they ran here and ran there and did not know what to do. What does this revolution mean? It means the conversion of a number of souls to God that no man could number. John in vision saw them all; we see a conversion only now and then; and they are few in our day in comparison with the apostolic age. "I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and lo, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood," and men hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains. Ah, say some, that means at the end of the world. Well, but at the end of the world there will be no dens or rocks to run to; that will not do at all. Then you come to the 7th chapter, and there you find a number sealed. Ah, say you, now I see what the revolution means. There you find a number that no man can number, standing before God's eternal throne. How did they come there? Just as you and I must; they underwent that revolution. that conversion, that blasted every fleshly hope, darkened, and put out every false light, and made them feel for the first time that they were in darkness, in ignorance, alienated from God through the ignorance that was in them; then they began to seek the Lord, and did not seek in vain. And when did that take place? At the beginning of the gospel dispensation, synchronically with the equestrian seals. Then comes the seventh seal, containing the trumpets; and these trumpets are simply expressive of the judgments of God on the one hand, and the mercies of God on the other; and they all sound forth simultaneously. Are you going to tell me that one part of God's word speaks today, and another

part speaks tomorrow? Why, it always speaks; these trumpets are always sounding; they have been sounding over since the New Testament dispensation began; of course, I could go further back than that, but that will suffice to answer our purpose now. The threatening's and the promises of God have been sounding, the Lord has been giving life to these trumpets over since the gospel dispensation commenced. And then there were three woe trumpets, but they were not woe trumpets to the people of God. These woe trumpets are associated with the locusts, to which Mahometanism very well answers, but that I will not enter into now. When the seven trumpets sounded under the walls of Jericho, they were not woe trumpets to faithful Rahab and those that were with her, they rejoiced at the sound, because the trumpets meant her deliverance, and the deliverance of them that were with her. They were not woe trumpets to the Israelites, they sounded forth the coming victory which the Lord would give to the Israelites, and the display he would make of his interposition on their behalf; they were woe trumpets only to the enemy. So, then, "Woe to the inhabiters of the earth", not of the heaven, but of the earth, "by reason of the other voices of the trumpet of the three angels which are yet to sound;" not but they were sounding then, as though he should say, "because of the other testimonies that I have to bring forward." Again, the seventh trumpet sounded. Oh, what a deal of prophecy has there been upon that! What is the seventh trumpet? Nothing else but the gospel in the completeness of it. And what took place when it sounded? Why, "the kingdoms of this world became the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ;" not savingly, but subserviently. When Christ rose from the dead, and sounded out the completeness of his work, then commenced the Savior's universal dominion. "All power in heaven and in earth is given unto me." There is the seventh trumpet. And now notice one thing; it is not said when the seventh trumpet sounded, that "the kingdoms of this world became the *kingdom* of our Lord and of his Christ." Mind this, you must mind what it does not say as well as what it does say. If it had said that it would make a great difference in the meaning, because Christ's kingdom is but one and if it said that "the kingdoms of this world became the *kingdom*, mark that, the singular, "of our Lord and of his Christ," that certainly would be expressive, not of mere subservience and subjection, but would be expressive of conversion and salvation. But it does not say so. "The kingdoms of this world became the *kingdoms* of our Lord and of his Christ." Why, hell is a part of Christ's territory. Don't say that, say you. It is. He said to John, "I am he that lives, and was dead and, behold, I am alive for evermore; and have the keys of hell and of death." So that now the seventh trumpet, expressive of the completeness of my work, is thus sounded out, it sounds out my universal dominion, that all flesh is subservient to me, and that all dominions and kingdoms shall serve me. My enemies shall serve me subserviently; I will make them lick the dust; my friends shall serve me willingly. Thus, the seventh trumpet is nothing else but a declaration of that universal dominion of Christ which commenced with the beginning of the gospel dispensation. Where is your succession? You see they all go together. Here is the white horse, representing one thing; the red horse, representing another; the black horse, another; and the pale horse, another; then the trumpets, to represent another scene of things; then come the vials of wrath, and they all go side by side; and these vials of wrath, all seven of them, were first poured out upon Jerusalem, then they have been pouring out ever since, and will by and by be poured out in their entirety when the end of Babylon's destiny shall come, when the end of the world shall come: then all these vials shall concentrate upon the head of the wicked, and shall be poured upon them, for they shall then drink the dregs thereof.

Go to the 12th chapter, there is a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, upon her head a crown of twelve stars. What is that? The beginning of the gospel dispensation. Go to the

13th chapter, the beast rising out of the sea; what is that? A mighty enemy of God's church. Go to the 14th chapter, and there is a number standing upon Mount Zion; what is that? Why, the same people the apostle speaks of in Hebrews. "You are come unto mount Zion;" there it is. Go to the 15th chapter; there you get the song of Moses and the Lamb, the beginning of the gospel dispensation again. Then go to the 16th chapter, there you get the same thing; go to the 19th and 20th chapters, there you get the same thing. Thus, then, the equestrian seals, the trumpets, the vials, all these circumstances synchronize, they all take place side by side. Such is the structure of the book.

Secondly, a word upon *the notes of time*. Are we to understand the forty and two months, which is the same length of time as the thousand two hundred and sixty days, are we to understand the 1260 days literally or mystically? Are we to understand the three days and a half literally or mystically? Are we to understand the thousand years literally or mystically? If you understand the thousand years literally, and can ascertain when they began, then you will know when the end of the world is. Now Jesus Christ as man did not know the day in which Jerusalem would be destroyed. In the 13th of Mark he says, pointing not to the last day, but to the day of judgment upon Jerusalem, "Of that day and that hour knows no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." There are two things the Lord has made clear but has hidden from us the time when they shall take place. The first is, the day of our death; none of us know that, and yet there is nothing more clearly revealed and more certain than that we must die. The second is, the day of judgment; there is nothing more certain than that that day must come; but when it is to come, if the Savior be true (and it seems a terrible idea to suggest anything to the contrary), we know not; for he himself said, "It is not for you to know the times and the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power." In treating upon these notes of time, then, let us see if we can get a guide at the beginning of the book, 2nd chapter; "Fear none of those things which you shall suffer; behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days." Are we to take those ten days literally, or are we to take it figuratively, expressive of a limited period of trouble to the people of God? I am sure there is not a sober-minded man or woman here that would take the ten days literally; you must take them mystically or figuratively, expressive of a limited time of trouble. It is the opinion of most men that the ten days there refer to the ten great persecutions of Rome pagan. I have no objection to that idea. Let us try the ten days by that rule. Most of you know, of course, that Nero was the first great and universal persecutor of the Christians; and that Diocletian, being succeeded almost immediately by Constantine the Great, was the last emperor that was a public persecutor of the Christians. Now how long a period was it from Nero to Diocletian? Well, speaking in round numbers, we will call it 250 years. If then, the ten days refer to the ten pagan persecutions, those persecutions lasted 250 years; so that you must there take the ten days in a very extended and expanded sense. I have no objection to that idea. I think it applies well; but I have an objection to the words applying to that only. I think they apply to every Christian. Are you in trouble? When your ten days are over, God will come in, and turn your trouble out, and deliver you from your captivity. Our times are in his hands. Now, as in the very beginning of the book we meet with a note of time namely, ten days, that cannot be understood literally, but must be understood mystically, we have got a key to the whole book upon this question; we must understand the other times in just the same way. The 1260 days, therefore, mean a period in which the enemy should reign to a certain extent; but still there is a limit, the Lord alone knowing when that limit is ended. And the witnesses are to prophesy in sackcloth all this time. And, say you, have the ministers or the gospel, in accordance with your

idea of things, prophesied in sackcloth ever since the gospel dispensation began, and do they do so now, and will they do so to the end of time? My answer is, yes, in the figurative sense there intended. "I was with you," said the apostle, "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling." God and the minister alone know what the minister undergoes. I have double and treble the grief, the sorrow, the burdens and cares that I had before I came into the ministry. I knew nothing of griefs, burdens, and troubles compared with what I know now. I look back at the old Surrey Tabernacle. and no doubt some of you think that I have the most pleasing reminiscences of that place. Well, in one sense I have; but I have suffered so much one way and the other, and have undergone so much in my own soul and mind, that were it not for the infinite importance of the work, and were it not that I feel the Lord has put me into it; were it not that the Lord is with me, and the great good that is done, and the kindness that I meet with, endure such a life I could not; but, bless the Lord, it is well worth enduring. So, then, they do prophesy in sackcloth. And I believe my most useful sermons are when I am most clad in sackcloth; when I am cast down, and I feel like a weaned child, and come into the pulpit and care for nothing but the welfare of the souls of the people and the glory of God, and care nothing about what they think of my gifts, or grammar, or logic, or rhetoric, or anything else, but come simply with the testimony of the blessed God, not in the wisdom of words, but in the power of the eternal Spirit; when favored to do so, these are the times generally in which the souls of the people are profited and God is glorified. So, then, I for one bear testimony that ministers prophesy in sackcloth in the sense there intended; no, I even wish to do so, I even pray to do so. I would rather have true sorrow than false joy; I would rather have godly sorrow than carnal joy; I would rather come into the pulpit overwhelmed with trouble and grief than come into the pulpit in a light, frothy, and careless state of mind, as though the pulpit was a sort of plaything, and as though the souls of the people were to be dealt with as hardly worth laboring for. I do like the words of Mr. Hart, "Put our souls in frame."

When the Lord is pleased to do so. how much we profit by his truth from what we do when they are not in frame! Now this period of forty and two months means all that period the length of which lies with God.