

The Purpose of Revelation

By Edward Irving

From *Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (1831): *The Authority of the Book*

And now for what end does God give this revelation of His own advent unto Christ?

Revelation 1

¹ ...for to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass.

To Know the Future

Observe here, brethren, that the object of the living God is, to make known to His servants future things according to that office of the Spirit,

John 16

¹³ ...He will show you things to come.

And yet this is our high offense to endeavor to understand the future. It has been rung from the one end of the island to the other, and in the schismatical, heretical, and sectarian magazines, the charge is brought and published against us, that we are a set of blasphemous persons, fools and madmen, because we study what is about to be, and endeavor to know the things that must shortly come to pass. And yet no other reason or object is given by the living God for communicating this book to His church, but that for which we are so slandered.

For this very thing, so shocking in the sight of these blind guides of the blind, God gave it unto Christ, that He might show unto His servants things which are not yet come to pass. Will any man tell me, then, that we ought not to search into that which is future, till after it come to pass? That it is a dangerous thing for me to lead the way, for you to follow after it?

Go tell these self-sufficient babblers, that they speak

against the express declaration of God's word, against the solemnity and dignity of that single end for which this book came to be made known to Christ, and by Christ to us. And they will endeavor to frighten us with the breath of their nostrils! Out upon such ignorance.

How then, say you (oh sons of the wise!), that we are not to look out for the things that are coming to pass, till after they come to pass? They say:

“A prophecy, must remain unknown to us; and was not given to be known until the event, that we might see that God knows the end, from the beginning, and that nothing comes to pass without His having foreseen it.”

I do not think it unworthy of God to condescend to teach us the lesson of His foreknowledge, and this lesson prophecy does clearly teach. But does it teach that only, or is it given to teach that primarily? I deny that it is.

In one passage indeed, I do find God challenging the idolaters to prove their gods by this, that they can foretell future things:

Isaiah 43

⁹ Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and show us former things? Let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, “It is truth.”

And I do likewise find our Lord saying:

John 16

⁴ But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come you may remember that I told you of them.

No doubt this is one object of prophecy, to prove that God has in Him the power to foresee and foretell. But are there no consolations of the church, no judgments of the world, no justifications of His Providence, no ends of His holiness to be attained at the same time? Is it mere power He wants to convince us of? Is it not rather His power to do thus and thus, to

support and deliver His faithful ones, to destroy all who rise up against Him?

A part of the truth is not the whole of it. Neither is he wise who calls a part the whole, but he is schismatical and erroneous.

Now, that prophecy is for the knowledge of things before they happen, let all the prophets testify, who, as distinctly as words could utter it, did tell and describe every judgment, time, place, and person, and effect, before it happened.

Did not Isaiah tell king Ahaz, and Jeremiah king Zedekiah, and Ezekiel and Daniel the captives, what things were to happen in their days? Did not our Lord tell Jerusalem what was to happen? Did not Paul and Peter and John tell the church what was to happen? And here is not the *Apocalypse* written on very purpose to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass?

What do these boasters of themselves mean? What means this confederacy of all orthodox and heterodox, churchman and schismatic, believers and unbelievers, gathered together to put down inquiry into unfulfilled prophecy, as the attempt of heated brains, of insurrectionary and state-troubling men.

Was Lord Napier, the inventor of logarithms, such a one? Was Sir Isaac Newton, the demonstrator of the system of the universe, such a one? Were Mede and Bishops Newton and Horsley such ones? Were Durham, and Fleming, and Johnstone such crazy and despicable fools?

You misguided people, destroyed for lack of knowledge! It is not a confederacy (of what you call enlightened and intellectual men) against *us*, but against the *prophetic word of God*, which you would, in your grossest ignorance of what it contains, represent as a sealed book, as a dark riddle, as an unintelligible hieroglyphic, till after it has been accomplished and is become of little further use to the church. For certain he is

but a poor churchman, aye and a poor Deist, who needs to have it continually proved to him that God does know the end from the beginning.

Nevertheless, as has been said, we allow this to be an end, though a very remote one, of prophecy; but the chief end we assert in the words before us, is to teach unto God's servants "things which must shortly come to pass."

It is an end of prophecy to teach us that He who spake it was inspired of God, according as Christ declares:

John 16

⁴ These things I have told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I have told you of them;

But it is likewise an end of prophecy to give to the Holy Spirit His office of teaching through the word the things which are to come, according as it is written in the same discourse,

John 16

¹³ Howbeit, when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will show you things to come.

Now what are these men who will combine against both the work and office of the Holy Spirit (here declared by Christ), and the purpose of the Father (declared in the first verse of the *Revelation*)? They are scoffers, be they called liberal or evangelical, churchman or sectarian, catholic or schismatic. They are the scoffers prophesied as being about to arise in the last times:

2 Peter 3

¹ This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance:

² That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior:

³ Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts,

⁴ And saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”

But to put this matter still farther beyond all doubt, it is written:

2 Peter 1

¹⁹ We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto you do well that you take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts.

Turn with me also to the *First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*,

1 Corinthians 2

⁹ But, as it is written, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love Him.”

Nothing can be more mysterious than such things; yet hear what follows:

¹⁰ But God has revealed them unto us by His Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, yea, the deep things of God.

And if you would find the root of this matter—the secret cause of this objection to receive the Spirit as the interpreter of things to come—you have it from the mouth of God in the 14th verse:

¹⁴ But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Shortly to Come to Pass

The expressions, “things which must shortly come to pass,” and “the time is at hand,” especially when connected with the frequent mention of Christ’s coming quickly (*Revelation 22:7, 12, 20*) and the solemn command in the same chapter,

Revelation 22

¹⁰ Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand,

These, and such like expressions, puzzle those who will not study Scripture, by comparing spiritual things with spiritual, but must have everything to be conformed to common language, otherwise they call it either mystery or dishonesty in the interpreter.

And I have even heard masters in Israel gravely argue, that something more must certainly be intended by the expression “Christ’s coming” than His personal coming at the end of this age; otherwise the Holy Spirit of truth would never have spoken of it as near at hand. And they find a very convenient event in the destruction of Jerusalem, which they call a “coming of Christ”, and to which they find little difficulty (in their loose way) in referring the various predictions contained in the Gospels concerning the coming of the Lord.

But this subterfuge being cut off in the *Apocalypse*, which, by common belief, was written after the destruction of Jerusalem, I know not how they explain this matter. But I do suppose they leave it with incurious ignorance and sapient indifference, to be explained by the event; as being of that numerous class of things to which none but fools would think of applying themselves.

Incurious and self-sufficient ignorance! The true resolution of this difficulty is, to refer to other parts of Scripture, where the Holy Ghost speaks of the time of Christ’s absence, and see whether it be spoken of as a little while or not. If we find that this is God’s method of estimating it, who are we that we should call it long, because it includes many generations of the sons of men?

He who constituted the ages, is alone able to give their comparative dimensions: and if He calls the season of my Lord’s absence a short season, I must believe that it is short,

compared with the period of His abode when He comes again; that it is a brief season in the reckoning of Him with whom one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

In one place (*Luke 19:11*), by a parable He endeavored to counteract the erroneous opinion which then prevailed that the kingdom of heaven was then to appear, and therefore, as well as for the propriety of the parable, He speaks of His absence as a season sufficient for a long journey, to permit His servants to trade and make gain of their several charges.

Except in this instance (and here also he is guarded against speaking of the time as long, though the distance be called great), we always find the season of His absence spoken of as a short season. I shall quote three instances of this.

The first is *Luke 18*, where by a parable having set forth His church by the similitude of a widow, and her Anti-christian oppressor by that of an unjust judge, with whom the widow by urgency at length prevails, he then applies the parable (verse 7, which should be joined to the preceding chapter; the parable of the widow being only as it were a way of half-hiding, half-revealing the endurance of His church, which needed to be spoken by proverbs, and not plainly),

Luke 18

⁸ And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, shall He find faith on the earth?

That the day of vengeance, and the time of His coming are one and the same event, is sufficiently declared in the discourse of which the parable is, as it were, but an episode (*Luke 17:24, 26, 30*). And He expressly declares that the time from which He spoke, until that avenging of the elect, and coming of the Son of Man to the earth, was a short time, the very same form of expression as is used in *Revelation 1:1*, the

passage now under consideration.

At the same time He calls it long, in respect to the sufferings of the elect, but short when compared with the other season of their reward. Parallel with this also is *1 Peter* 1:6, 7, to which we refer without citing it.

The second passage to which we appeal, in order to prove that it is the common form to speak of Christ's absence as a short period, is:

Hebrews 10

³⁷ For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come and will not tarry:

Although in the verse immediately preceding, looked upon in respect of the trials of God's people, they are said to have need of patience.

So also in the passage quoted in *Hebrews* 12:26 from *Haggai* 2:6, it is there written of the time when both heavens and earth shall be shaken, that it is *a little while*:

Haggai 2

⁶ Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, and the sea and the dry land.

Now the Apostle expressly refers this to the removal of these things, and the introduction of the kingdom and glory of Christ, which cannot be shaken.

The third passage, and, perhaps, the strongest of all, is taken from our Lord's discourse, concerning the duration of His absence,

John 16

¹⁶ A little while, and you shall not see me: and again, a little while, and you shall see me; because I go to the Father.

The "little while" here spoken of extends over all the season of His absence from the church at the right hand of His Father, and not to the little period of absence that was to occur before His resurrection while He lay in the tomb. For, dur-

ing these days, He was not taken out of their sight; He was with them on the cross; and He was with them, in the tomb; and during the forty days He was with them, eating and drinking with them, and therefore to none of these can the “little while” during which they should not see Him, be applied.

This will more clearly appear by observing the reason which He assigns:

“a little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me;”

And why? Because I go to my Father.

Now, I say, that Christ did not ascend to His Father during the time that His body was lying in the grave, for when He was risen from the grave, He said to Mary Magdalene,

John 20

¹⁷ ...Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father...

The ascension to His Father was when He ascended on the Mount of Olives; and here, therefore, we have a manifest proof that the expression “little time” refers to the time of His absence during which His church has not seen Him,—the interval of time that He is with His Father. To confirm this, let us go on with the context:

John 16

¹⁹ Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, “Do you inquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and you shall not see me: and again, a little while, and you shall see me?”

²⁰ Verily, verily, I say unto you, that you shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and you shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.

This duration of the world’s joy is until His coming to judge it. The little while of His absence, which is also the season of the church’s sorrow, according to His answer to the question,

Matthew 9

¹⁴ ...Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but your disciples fast not?

¹⁵ And Jesus said unto them, “Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.”

Then He likens the anguish of His church for His reappearance, to the agony of a travailing woman, because like this, though it has an appointed time, it is ever uncertain.

Matthew 24

³⁶ But of that day and hour knows no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

And so in all the prophets, the resurrection of the saints is compared to travail: *Psalms* 110, *Isaiah* 26, *Hosea* 13 and likewise in *Romans* 8. And the appearing again of Christ with His risen saints unto creation, is this birth of her joyful burden with which she has been so long distressed. And so the Lord himself interprets His own parable:

John 16

²¹ A woman when she is in travail has sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembers no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.

²² And you now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man takes from you.

And so, oh you scoffers, it is not so absurd or uncommon as you think, to speak of Christ’s coming as in a short time, and after a little while; nor do we make God a liar when we so interpret it, but follow the manifest sense of His word. And surely it is a very little time when compared with the eternal age of Messiah’s kingdom which is to follow.

A Blessing to the Early Church

Farther, with respect to the word shortly—shortly come to

pass,—it is a remarkable thing, that in the third verse the nearness of the time should be given as a principal reason for reading the book:

Revelation 1

³ 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.

Seeing, then, the blessing is to come on account of this very thing, “that the time is at hand” we conclude that if God had not known that this book was to be instantly useful, and immediately profitable to the church, He would not have urged the reading of it by the instancy of the time, and the urgency of the events. It is as much as to say,

“You cannot delay it; you must not delay it, because the time it is needed for is close at hand.”

And there can be no doubt, that it was this book which supported the martyrs of the primitive church. And it is observable, that no book of Scripture is more quoted in the writings of the Fathers of the second and third centuries, than this book. And I believe that it was the epistles to the seven churches which supported the hearts of the martyrs.

Of the great attention given to this book in the first centuries of the church, nothing is so clear a proof as that a great part of the heresies of those times arose out of the things contained in it. The heresy, “that there is no resurrection of the dead” (*1 Corinthians* 15:12), “that, the resurrection is past already;” arose out of the leaven even now working in the church, which explains away “the first resurrection,” into the regeneration of the soul, set forth and sealed to the believer, in baptism; and at this door rushed in the heresy of Cerinthus,

“that the believers should enjoy the earth, and make themselves merry with the abundance of its delicacies.”

The Millennium, we know, was so much thought of and

acted on in the first centuries, that Millenarian became a name for a body in the church; amongst whom, even in the fifth century, Jerome says, there were a very great number of the orthodox.

And an earlier father, I think Justin Martyr, says, that those in his time who were altogether orthodox believed in the Millennium, during which Christ's kingdom was to be set up, and Christ personally to reign on earth.

Papias, also, to whom the opposers of the orthodox doctrine of Christ's personal reign are pleased to trace what they call *the absurdity of Millenarianism*, lived in the second century, and was instructed by Polycarp, one of the disciples of John.

All which goes to prove, beyond a doubt, what indeed has never been denied, that this book came into immediate use in the churches, as might well be believed, both from the constancy of the blessing before us, and from the peremptory mandates given to John to send it to the churches. These things are certain.

I will now advance a conviction of my own: that the readiness, the promptness to a fault for meeting martyrdom, was due first of all to the glorious promises of the seven epistles being addressed only to those who should overcome and be faithful to the death; and next, to the most wonderful honor put upon the martyrs blood in the 12th chapter, where no less a consequence is ascribed to their not loving their lives unto the death, than this, that thereby Michael and His angels were able to prevail in battle against the devil and his angels, and cast them headlong out of heaven.

Add to this the assurance given in the 6th chapter, that ever as the martyr's blood was poured out before the altar, his soul clothed in white went in before the Lord, and was partaker of His joy.

I have no doubt therefore, that the repeated mention of “the time being near at hand,” had the effect of bringing forth that “noble army of martyrs,” who won for Christianity its seat and dignity upon the earth.

Why the Book was Obscured

True it is, that when the church began to be leavened with the mystery of iniquity, and to work into the hands of the Roman emperors, and the Papal adultery was consummating, it came to pass that this book, which presents the church as ever suffering from, and ever contrary to Rome, began to fall out of the hands of the preachers, and ministers, and flock of Christ, into the hands of the scribes and the doctors, out of whose hands it has hardly yet been delivered.

And now they went so far as to cast doubts upon its genuineness and authenticity; and to beat down those glorious hopes of Christ’s advent and kingdom on the earth, in the faith of which the first Christians had won the crown of martyrdom. And as the light, and life, and liberty of these glorious hopes waned out with the hiding and sealing of that book from which they flow, there came in the bondage, and oppression, and worldliness of the Papacy; until at length in the Reformation, this book was again unclasped by the preachers and opened to the people.

A Strength for the Reformation

You know well, who are children of the Church of Scotland, that there was no book out of which our reformers took the substance of their preaching against the Pope, more than out of this book. And you may depend upon it, my brethren, that if we are to be roused to make a stand and a demonstration against liberalism, against blind indifference to Papists and Protestants, who in these times are put upon equal dignity and equal trust; if we are to be delivered from union with the confederacy forming against Christ and His church; it must be by again opening this most blessed book, of which it

may be said now, as heretofore,

“Blessed is he that reads it, for the time is at hand.”

Greatly Needed in Our Day

I have undertaken to speak sincerely, without the fear of man, and with an open breast before God. And I tell you all that one of the principal reasons which determined me to expound this book in this metropolis where I received my education, and to which my knowledge is in some way due, was the support lately given here by so many distinguished, powerful, and reverend men, to opinions alike subversive of church and state, and their misguided zeal of liberality towards that false religion which our fathers abhorred.

Now, having a love for these men, as well as a high value for the communications of this book, and, from the study of it, having seen the revolution wrought upon the minds of my people, and judging also from my own experience, who was convinced in my understanding from reading it in faith, long before I was convinced in my heart of the error of liberalism; I resolved to do the same office for this city which I had done for my own flock, and to bring before its thoughtful people the truth of God here declared; to sow the seed of the truth, and endeavor to convince their hearts of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which this book gives to the church.

And I am well assured, that when I am gone away, God will pass it over unto other and abler hands, through whom this book may become the instrument of preserving us, as a church, and as a people, from those false principles and dreadful consequences, which are involved in the grand rebellion of these times, against the prophetic word of God, in favor of human wisdom, policy, prudence, and expediency.