

THE BEATITUDES OF REVELATION

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My wife, Fiona, and I were recently going through a study on some of the 'hard sayings' of Revelation (no shortage of them) but 'in passing', one of the commentaries made mention that the verse we were reading followed straight on from one of the Beatitudes of Revelation. I had never even heard the phrase before. Yet here they are. Scattered throughout what is normally seen as the dark, foreboding, fearful book of Revelation, there are these "jewels of challenge and responsibility – wrapped in encouragement".

Probably the most readily identifiable sign of what we term as a 'beatitude' is a phrase commencing with the words : Blessed are those, or are you, or are they – the word 'blessed' is the signpost.

Jesus and John use the same word; "markarios" and it can mean either "happy or blessed." Scholars tell us the word has a sense of finality that rings through it. Markarios suggests one is "supremely blessed," "very happy," or "fulfilled." And, of course, speaking of fulfilment, we find that there are no less or no more than 7 beatitudes throughout Revelation. The number 7 represents completeness; finality.

John, like other Bible authors, often communicates more than is on the written page by using this number and that is certainly the case in this book. There are seven churches, seven lampstands, seven Spirits of God, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, seven angels, seven heads on a very strange beast and, now, seven beatitudes. All of these indicate that John is writing about events that will, just like the seven days of creation, find fulfilment, completion and finality in the victory of God.

John himself, in the first beatitude of Revelation, says to us:

- 1. Revelation 1:3 - Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.**

John sets the scene very early in the piece here in only the third verse of the book with what I see as a call for bravery – stick with it, even though the time is near when things are going to get ugly.

In John's time, the principle access to any prophecy was through the reading of the few scrolls they would have had in the synagogues and home churches. So John addresses this both to those privileged few who were able to read these words out loud, and to those who had the opportunity to listen and hear them.

It is interesting that there is a blessing to be had for simply 'reading' or 'hearing' the words of God too. Clearly though, John quickly goes on to add that keeping those things that are contained in these words is also vital.

Between the first beatitude and the second one in Revelation 14:13, John has greeted and addressed the 7 churches, the throne-room, the scroll, been through the seals, the trumpets, the 2 witnesses, the woman, the child and the dragon, the beast from the sea, the Lamb and the 144,000 and then in the midst of all this we encounter the second beatitude. It is not John's words here, but he recounts a voice from heaven who says:

2. Revelation 14:13 - Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on that they may rest from their labours, and their works follow them.

God only ever views physical death in this life as resting. He knows it is not the end, it is only a stage in the plan that God has for everyone but note the stated fact that "the works of those who die in the Lord – will follow them." They won't be forgotten or for naught.

An illustration cited in support of this tells the story of psychologist Walter Mischel, who conducted an experiment on a group of four-year olds. Each child was offered a marshmallow, and was told that they could have it now, or if they could wait several minutes, they could have two. Some children grabbed the marshmallow on the spot but many of them were able to hold off.

The interesting part of the study was that Mischel followed up on the children as adults and he discovered that those who didn't eat their marshmallows that day were generally more self-motivated, successful in school and considered more emotionally intelligent. On the other hand those who simply couldn't wait generally in later life had lower self-esteem and had suffered in school, branded by both their teachers and parents as being stubborn, envious and easily frustrated.

This illustration and this beatitude is telling us that the real reward is in the delayed gratification. This applies in so many areas of life of course. John is telling them/telling us that giving in may have some level of reward but it is hollow and short-lived. Real joy, real happiness, real blessing on the other hand, is found when we take the long look; when we look past the immediate pressure to the calm that promises to reside afterwards.

We are now in the very midst of the Bowls of the Wrath of God and God Himself interrupts here to reassure us by stating:

3. Revelation 16:15 - Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame.

In reading up on this verse, there was an interesting note that in all manner of cultures and times throughout history, among those who live with so much less than we have ever experienced, the first thing often stolen by the truly poor was a person's garments. Often, these were what the person stealing was seeking. Worth a few quiet moments of contemplation to imagine yourself living in a place in a time when the one garment you wrapped around yourself was the single most valuable thing you had.

It also begs the question, do we view the cloak of righteousness that God provides us – covering our past and our true nature – with the same level of importance that these people would have regarded their simple physical garments?

God encourages us to take advantage of the early warning system that is His Word, His Spirit and the very events that He is listing either side of this verse that helps spell out how history will roll out in front of us – who take the time to read and attempt to understand?

God reminds us that the storm may erupt at any moment and He encourages us to be properly equipped with that cloak or garment of righteousness at a moment's notice.

Another interesting side note to this, is that there is a joy and peace in preparedness. A blessed or happy life cannot be fully lived without it. There is a sense of well-being that cannot be explained or over-estimated. Fiona and I are working closely with our son, Rhys, at the moment to help him get a better grip on the concept of planning today for tomorrow with his school work. I know I sleep much better at night if I have a plan in place for the morrow – and this is part of what John is telling us here.

The bowls are now complete, we have met the scarlet woman and beast, Babylon has fallen, and as Heaven exults over this we hear the fourth beatitude. John again quotes the voice from heaven who now states:

4. Revelation 19:9 - Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!

It truly is a blessing to be called during this age - to have the opportunity of not only a future of living for eternity with our God, but to live a far more fulfilling, meaningful and blessed life now.

The wording of this blessing or this verse, can lose something in translation. It can easily be read as if it is wishful or hopeful thinking. It could be read as if it says, "lucky are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." but it is not an accurate reading.

It's more accurate to read this with a sense of certainty; with a sense of expectation and anticipation. Remember Paul's confidence that he had run the good race, that a crown was laid up for him.

This is not presumption or "Once saved always saved". We know we are on the invitation list! We are family! You should know that you are going to be there on that big day and that should not only motivate us, but it should overwhelm us in appreciation and admiration and frankly love for the one who made it possible and who has invited you and me. It should of course, make you ... blessed (happy).

We have now witnessed Jesus on his white horse defeat the beast and his armies, Satan has been bound and the first resurrection has taken place when John now interjects to give the fifth beatitude:

5. Revelation 20:6 - Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

This again should fill us with confidence, boldness and conviction to face whatever is ahead. I refer specifically to the fact that if we can overcome till that first resurrection, then anything, everything that happens after that is pure money for jam.

There are those who believe that the priesthood and reign with God is only offered to those who truly give their physical life as a martyr for their God. Even if that were to be true then I am with the sons of Korah who state in Psalm 84:10 that I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

After this the final Satanic rebellion is then crushed, the Great White Throne judgement held, the New Jerusalem has descended and we have seen the River of Life – all this dangled before us and God Himself once again steps in to reminds us who are still stuck here in the 'here and now':

6. Revelation 22:7 - Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

The idea of “keeping” the words of this book is now what is being stressed. Keep here comes from the word “tēreo” and means to heed, guard, or maintain, It is not a one-time act; it is an active, ongoing obedience. It is a chosen lifestyle. God tells us that such a lifestyle has a great reward – “happiness or a state of being blessed. There is reassurance as well in the statement – I come quickly!

Jesus speaks again, telling us He is coming with His rewards with Him, He is “the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (do those words give anyone else the goosebumps they give me every time I read them?....) and John interjects one last time to offer the final beatitude:

7. Revelation 22:14 - Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.

And so the end of God's Word returns to where it all began at the Garden of Eden – in the presence of both God and the Tree of Life! But what a story – what a plan, what sacrifice it has taken to pull all this back together!

But there is another intrigue in this final beatitude. John's use of the word “right”. He certainly seems to be wanting to make a point. Between the Gospel he wrote and this book he uses it 25 times. In John 1:12: for instance he states: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the RIGHT to become children of God—”

The word is “exousia” and it means: “power of choice, liberty of doing as one pleases; the power of authority, influence and privilege.” Only His people have the “right” – the privilege and authority to partake of the benefits of his Kingdom.

John is saying, “You want to be happy? You truly wish to be ‘Blessed’? Being in God’s presence will make you happy! Being given free access because you are a citizen of the Kingdom will make you happy / blessed”.

Now, in a final retrospective look back over these 7 beatitudes we discover one final all encompassing thought:

From the first we hear of reading/hearing and keeping (Rev. 1:3); faithfulness as far as death (Rev. 14:13); readiness for the Lord’s coming (Rev. 16:15) and the fullness of divine blessing that results from that response and rest from our labours (Rev. 14:13); invitation to the Lamb’s marriage supper (Rev. 19:9); participation in the first resurrection (Rev. 20:6); and finally – access once again to the tree of life and entry into the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:14).

And so we find that in these seven short but beautiful beatitudes we have an abridged summary of the whole of the Book of Revelation’s message.

The simple message that encourages us to read, hear and keep the words of this entire book and keep our eyes and our focus on the future of entry into God’s city and to the incredible reality of meeting the one who made this whole wonderful future possible.