

Blessed Are Those Who Wash Their Robes

Revelation 22:12-16

“I’m going to the bathroom to read.” Those are supposedly the last words of Elvis Presley. Marie Antoinette stepped on the foot of her executioner on her way to the guillotine. She said in French, “Pardon me, Mister.” With her family gathered around, Harriet Tubman’s final words were, “Swing low, sweet chariot.” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle turned to his wife in the garden and said, “You are wonderful.” He then clutched his chest and died. Prince’s final words to his fans at his last performance was “Wait a few days before you waste your prayers on me.”

Last words. What will your last words be? Will they be poignant? Ironic? Will they be words of love or some random statement that wouldn’t matter otherwise? What would you say if you knew they were your last words?

We come this morning not only to Revelation’s last words. They are also the last words of the Bible. Revelation’s last words are themselves a collection of last words. There are thirteen distinct sayings in this epilogue. We have last words from the angels, last words from John, and last words from the Spirit and the bride. Most importantly, we hear the last words of Jesus. These are the last revealed words from our Lord and Savior until He returns.

This morning we want to focus on these last words of Jesus. We have Jesus’ words from verse 12 down through 16. Some red-letter Bibles don’t show verses 14 and 15 as being spoken by Jesus. However, we know He is the speaker in 12, 13, and 16, and there is nothing in the text to indicate a change in speaker. So, these are all the words of Jesus.

Just what sort of last words are they? First, they are words of urgency. Four times in this last chapter we are told the time is near and that Jesus is coming soon. Secondly, they are words of promise. When Jesus returns He is not coming empty handed. He is bringing his reward with him. Thirdly, they are words of blessing as the final two of Revelation’s seven blessings appear here. Finally, they are word of warning, as not everyone will experience this blessing.

¹² *“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.* ¹³ *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*

¹⁴ *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

¹⁶ *“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”*

I. Words of Urgency

First, these are words of urgency. For the second time in six verses, Jesus declares He is **coming soon**. The angel also tells John in these final verses that these things must soon take place and that the time is near. There is an unmistakable sense of urgency to these words, and yet their earnest resolve sounds somewhat odd to us all these years later.

How could Jesus tell them and us nearly 2,000 years later that He is coming soon? Let me offer you several suggestions.

A. Prophetic Perspective

Bible scholars talk about something called prophetic perspective. Prophets have a way of viewing events from outside of time. Future events will be discussed as though they have already happened, or as though they will happen tomorrow. Other times events separated by many years will be viewed prophetically as though they happen right next to each other. It's like viewing two mountains from a distance. They may look as though one sits adjacent to another, yet when you get there, you must drive for many miles between them.

For instance, Isaiah 61:1-2 speaks of Christ's first and second coming in the same context. Jesus quotes from part of this text in Luke 4:18-19 to apply to his first coming, but he doesn't read the part that applies to his second coming.

Some believe this is how we should understand these “near” and “soon” references in Revelation. They were “near” and “soon” from within John's visionary perspective, but not from a historical vantage point. However, what we see here in Revelation isn't just how things seem to John in his vision. This is Jesus telling him directly that He is coming soon. So I think there is more to it than this.

B. God Measures Time Differently than We Do

Another point is that God's definition of “soon,” and ours may be different. God doesn't reckon time the same way we do. The apostle Peter reassured his readers with these words:

With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 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. 2 Peter 3:8

Yet, we have the conviction that God revealed His truth to us in human language that we can understand, words do mean something. What we read here in Revelation isn't God's view of time. Jesus is revealing truth to us so we can understand. There is a sense of urgency here for a reason.

C. The Events Were to Begin Soon, but Not Completed Soon

Another sense in which "soon" is soon is that these events were already starting. Revelation envisions cycles of events that began in the 1st Century and continue through today until the end. Seals have already started to open, trumpets have begun to blare, and bowls are starting to pour. From John's perspective, it was "soon" to begin. That doesn't mean that from his perspective, or ours, it would be soon completed.

D. It Could Happen at Any Moment

Another sense in which Jesus' coming is "soon" is that it could happen at any moment. As Jesus warned, "concerning that day and hour no one knows (Mt. 24:36)" Christians are to always be ready (Mt. 25:1-13). Every generation of Christians could be the last, and we are to live our lives as though we are. We have to be ready because it could happen at any time.

E. Our Personal Time May be Soon

There is also the sense that our personal time of reckoning may be very soon. We have no idea how long we have. It is possible this is the last sermon you will ever hear. For you, it won't matter if Jesus comes back tomorrow or in another thousand years. For you, Jesus' return is only a heartbeat or a mere breath away. I remember a bumper sticker a fellow student at OCC had on his dorm window. "Many who plan to seek God at the eleventh hour...die at 10:30." James cautioned, "you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes (Ja. 4:14).

A couple of weeks ago, I had some strong words for those who set dates for Jesus' return, and fan into flames false expectations that current events assure us that Jesus' return is just around the corner. However, that doesn't mean that we kick back and grab a cold one, and

live as though this life is all there is. There is a sense of urgency. We must be ready. We don't know when Jesus is coming, but we know that He is. And we know, it could happen at any time.

II. Words of Promise

Secondly, these last words are words of promise. Jesus says, ***My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.*** The word reward refers to wages or payment. Some think this refers back to the great white throne judgment in Revelation 20 where the books are opened in 20:12 the dead are judged "*according to what they had done.*"

However, Jesus is talking to the church here. This isn't a warning to non-believers. This is a promise to believers. It is my opinion that this promise refers to the idea that believers will receive some sort of reward in heaven for their work on earth. This is something I don't understand completely, and I have a lot of questions, but it is something taught in Scripture.

In the parable of the talents Jesus teaches that our reward in heaven will be based on what we did with the gifts He gave us on earth (Mt. 25:14-30). Paul also teaches that we will receive a reward for the work we have built on the foundation of the gospel (1 Cor. 3:10-15). One common way of expressing this is every believer's cup of joy will be filled, but they will have different sized cups.ⁱ We are all rewarded in heaven, but we don't all receive the same reward. God's not handing out participation ribbons.

What this looks like, how it will work, is unclear. However, we need to understand that this is not salvation by works, for we are saved by grace. We will see the grace side of the equation in verse 14. This is what Paul meant in Ephesians 2:8-10 when he says we are saved by grace so that we may do His good works. (Eph. 2:8-10). We will be rewarded for ministry, our work and how we use our gifts on earth. What goes unseen and happens behind the scenes here will be greatly recognized by Jesus.

III. Words of Blessing

Thirdly, these are words of blessing. Jesus gives two blessings here in Revelation 22. The first, in verse 7, is a repeat of the blessing from chapter 1, that we looked at in the first sermon in this series. Verse 14 is the seventh and last blessing in the book. ***Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.*** Verse 12 was the works side of the equation. This is the grace side. No one enters

the gates of new Jerusalem unless they “*wash their robes.*” Like clothing throughout the book, the robes refer to their lifestyle, their behavior, their actions. The white robes of the saved shows their righteousness.

Their own lives were once a filthy mess. They haven’t always been righteous, for all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory. But their robes are now white. They have washed them clean. Without these white robes they cannot enter the city and eat the fruit of the tree of life that is therein.

The city here is new Jerusalem revealed in chapter 21. In strictly literal dimensions, the city is a massive enterprise. On the present earth, its height would tower beyond the earth’s atmosphere and stretch for 1,200 miles into space. The base of the city would cover from Marshfield to Los Angeles. In Donald Trump terms, it’s Yuuuge.

It is described in terms that represent everything precious and valuable. Its rare gemstones and precious metals are not locked away in some vault, but they are used for decorations on walls and pavement on the streets. The city, on the one hand, is described as the bride of Christ, which leads us to think that the new Jerusalem is not a place at all, but a people, the people of God with God, and it is also portrayed as the Garden of Eden Restored, the place where the tree of eternal life grows and flourishes, yielding fruit year round. This Eden however, is not some untouched primitive paradise, but a picture of all that civilization could have and should have become.

The city has massive gates, but they are never shut for there is no danger to this city. There is no need for the sun or streetlamp, for the city is eternally lit by the splendor of God’s glory. Most importantly, though, this is where God dwells eternally with his people. The blessing is that everyone with their robes washed white has a ticket into the city.

IV. Words of Warning

Finally, these are words of warning. Those who are not washed white in the blood of the Lamb cannot enter the city. They are cut off ***outside*** the city. This means they are forever excluded from eternity in New Jerusalem. Jesus then lists those who will be excluded from entering the gates— ***dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.***

Most of this is self-explanatory, although we might find this reference to dogs confusing. No, Jesus doesn't hate puppies. In the ancient world, dogs weren't seen as pets. They were a nuisance animal and according to one scholar were "scavengers who live outside most of the walled cities of antiquity and eat whatever garbage they can find."ⁱⁱ Jews of the 1st Century used "dogs" as a slur against all pagan Gentiles (Mt. 15:22-28).ⁱⁱⁱ Paul uses the term to describe false teachers (Php. 3:2).^{iv} It was also used to refer to the temple prostitutes who used sex as a part of idol worship (Dt. 23:17-18). It is simply used here as an umbrella terms for all kinds of wickedness.

Here is the importance of this warning for us. Any of these people will be able to come into the city. Any of them will be free to eat from the tree of life, if they only wash their robes white. Their robes represent their actions, their behavior, their lifestyle. They need to wash their sins away.

You can only come in if your robes are washed white, but boy do we have some nasty stains. My wife is known to fuss at us if we don't tell her we've got stains on our clothes. They need to be pretreated. She's got me fairly well trained by now. But there are some stains that Tide can't get out. Some stains pretreating doesn't help.

Our lives are filled with these kinds of stains— dirty, nasty stains, stains that are deeply ground in. Imagine if all your past mistakes and failures were stains on your clothes right now. What would you look like? What if every ill-considered word, every selfish indulgence, every lashing out in anger, every foolish venture wound up as a spot on your clothes. Would both knees and elbows be a discolored mess? Would you have stuff dribbled down your front? I think for most of us, you wouldn't be able to tell what color our clothes really were.

The Dr. Seuss story, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, tells another tale of that troublesome cat. He shows up once again to wreak havoc in the lives of Sally and her brother. The children have been left with chores to do.

*This was not time for play. This was not time for fun.
This was no time for games. There was work to be done.
All that deep, Deep, deep snow, All that snow had to go.
When our mother went down to the town for the day,
She said, "Somebody has to clean all this away.
Somebody, Somebody has to, you see." Then she picked two somebodies.*

Sally and me.

But the cat in the hat comes in and makes a mess of everything. He seems quite innocent and fun at first. But then he leaves a pink slime ring in the tub. As they try to clean up the mess, the stain only spreads. It goes from the tub to mom's dress, from the dress to the wall, and from the wall to dad's shoes. Then we find the stain down the carpet in the hall and as a giant pink spot on the bed. Everything they do just makes things worse. Pretty soon, the pink was everywhere until all the snow outside was pink.

*Oh, the things that they did!
And they did them so hard, It was all one big spot now
All over the yard!*

It turns out the cat had something hiding in his hat. It was another cat in the hat. Under each hat, was another cat. Cat A. Cat B, and Cat C all the way to Cat Z. It was Cat Z, so small you couldn't even see, who had something else under his hat.

*He has something called voom. Voom is so hard to get,
You never saw anything like it, I bet
Why Voom cleans up anything clean as can be!*

The Voom cleaned up every stain, made it as white as can be. There is a parable here for you and for me. This is our story. We let sin into our life. It seems so innocent and fun-loving at first. What harm could it do? Then the fun bubble bursts. We had a good time, but now there's a stain. We tried to wipe it clean or hide it away. Its only spread and can always be seen. We've tried everything, done all we can do. Is there anything that can wash the stain from me and from you?

What can wash everything white again? What is that Voom for our lives? In Revelation 7, John has a vision of God's people. They were wearing white robes just like here in chapter 22, and verse 14 says, **they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb**. Their robes were once covered in stains, but now they're gone. It is only by the free gift of the blood of Jesus that can wash you white. They you can enter city and eat of the tree of life.

ⁱ Guthrie, Nancy (2005) *The One Year Book of Hope Devotional*. Tyndale House. p. 188

ⁱⁱ Fee, G. D. (2011). *Revelation*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. p. 311

ⁱⁱⁱ Davis, C. A. (2000). *Revelation*. Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. p. 391

^{iv} Mounce, R. H. (1997). *The Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. p. 408