

Church At The End Of The World

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

(Revelation 1:7 ESV)

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

(Revelation 2:10 ESV)

One Like A Son Of Man

September 25th, 2016

Revelation 1:9-20

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Revelation 1:9; that's on page 1028 in your pew Bibles. I mentioned last Sunday that we have started a new series in which we will be looking at what Jesus says to the 7 churches in Asia Minor, focusing on chapters 1-3 in the Book of Revelation. Our interest in this text is partially motivated by the fact that these people were operating in a cultural context that bears remarkable similarity to our own. The Book of Revelation was written around AD 93. There was no formal persecution of Christians in Asia Minor at this time but these people were starting to feel marginalized and excluded. They had been kicked out of the Jewish synagogue in AD 70 and now they were starting to find themselves on the outside looking in with respect to the Roman cultural context as well. According to church history Emperor worship started to become very prominent in Asia Minor right around this time. In order to curry favour with the Emperor in Rome the government in Asia Minor began incorporating Emperor worship into almost every civic function. You couldn't even get your licence renewed by your trade guild unless you offered incense and worship to Domitian as a god. Obviously this was a serious problem for Christians. How could you say that Domitian is Lord when the essential Christian confession is that Jesus is Lord? These folks were starting to figure out that the demands of their culture ran contrary to the demands of their faith in Christ. That seems to be the situation that we are facing increasingly in our culture today. There are certain phrases, certain beliefs, certain gestures which are now required and if you refuse to make those gestures and to affirm those beliefs than you too can find yourself on the outside looking in. So we are eager today to hear

what Jesus is saying to these churches.

We are in the second half this morning of John's introduction. I mentioned last week that it might be helpful to think of Revelation as a package with a movie and a letter inside. The letter introduces the movie. Chapter 1 is that introductory letter. We pick it up at verse 9. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 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. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 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.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. 19 Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

(Revelation 1:9–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

In this little paragraph, in this little section of the text, John is telling us two very important things about the Book of Revelation as a whole. He is telling us first of all that:

1. It is a revelation to the church of Jesus Christ

John includes himself among the recipients. He is an apostle, but he is also and more importantly part of the church of Christ. Look at verse 9:

I, John, your brother and partner **in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance** that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Revelation 1:9 ESV)

I am with you in this – and what are in? We are in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus Christ. Now that is a very interesting phrase. I mentioned last week that this movie – this series of visions – covers the entire time period from the ascension of Christ

to the return of Christ. All of that time period is properly understood as the last chapter of human history. That's why the title of this series is "The Church At The End Of The World". The whole time period from Christ's ascension to his return in the Bible is understood as THE TRIBULATION.

Now some of you have been raised on Timothy Lahaye books and the Schofield Reference Study Bible and you have been trained to think of the tribulation as a 7 year period just before the return of the Lord. Now, I'm not going to get into the specifics of any particular brand of eschatology this morning, and I'm not going to argue for or against any particular interpretation. In fact most systems of eschatology understand some heightening of tribulation immediately prior to the return of Christ – some folks call it "Satan's Little Season" others call it "The Great Tribulation". Whatever you call it, just understand that it is presented in the Bible as a more extreme version of that which is NORMATIVE throughout Christian history. Meaning that we are ALWAYS IN THE TRIBULATION even if there is a more intense season of TRIBULATION still to come.

Now, you can't really argue with that because Jesus said:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

Not at some point briefly at the end, not for one unfortunate generation thousands of years from now – no this will be the normative experience for my people in this fallen and hostile world. In this world you will have tribulation. Period. Tribulation is the normative experience of the church and John says – I'm in it with you. I'm in the kingdom of God therefore I'm experiencing tribulation in the world. I'm in PATMOS – I'm in prison for my testimony to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I'm in it with you but with you and for you I am receiving grace and help so as to patiently endure until the end. This is how Jesus strengthened me, John says, and now I'm going to share that with all of you.

And he goes on to speak about how the Lord came to him and ministered to him in a vision on the Lord's Day. Do you hear that? On the Lord's day – Sunday - when Christians everywhere gathered together to worship Jesus as Lord – Jesus came to John with something for Christians gathered everywhere. He came to the church IN WORSHIP. Specifically, John says that this message, this encouragement was to be sent to:

the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.” (Revelation 1:11 ESV)

Now there were more than 7 churches in Asia Minor so why are these 7 singled out for particular mention? Most commentators over the years have understood this to mean that in some way what John was writing was for 7 real churches and ALSO simultaneously for all churches everywhere, John Stott says for example:

“The seven churches of Asia, though historical, represent the local churches of all ages and of all lands.”¹

So these churches are real churches and they are also representative of all churches in all places across all ages. They are described under the symbol of seven lampstands. We’re on solid ground here because Jesus says that in verse 20. He says the seven lampstands are the seven churches. Now once again this picture is painted in colours borrowed from the Old Testament, specifically from Zechariah 4. In that passage the prophet is awakened by an angel and is shown a vision. The angel asks him:

2 “What do you see?” I said, “I see, and behold, **a lampstand all of gold**, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. 3 And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.” (Zechariah 4:2–10 ESV)

That vision in Zechariah is about how God will re-light the witness of his people after a long period of exile and decline. The lampstand in Israel was a symbol of the covenant community’s witness to the world. Jesus said the same thing to his disciples:

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16 ESV)

So light has to do with WITNESS. Now of course we notice that there is a switch here from 1 lampstand to 7. What is that about? William Hendrikson answers that question saying:

“In the Tabernacle there was one lampstand with seven lamps; here in Revelation we have seven lampstands. The reason for the difference is that during the old dispensation there was a visible unity, the Jewish state-church, whereas the churches of the new dispensation find their spiritual unity in Christ who is present and active among

¹ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 13.

them in and through his Spirit.”²

So putting this all together, John is saying that the Book of Revelation is TO THE CHURCH IN ALL THE WORLD. It is to the church united in her witness to Jesus Christ. That’s what the church is – we are diverse – but we have ONE LIGHT – the light of Christ and we shine that light all throughout a dark and hostile world.

Now it appears that we have some help in all of this. This letter is written to churches but it is also in some way written to the angels of the churches. Jesus is talking to the churches but in verse 16 it seems that he is talking to the stars, which in verse 20 he tells us:

are the angels of the seven churches (Revelation 1:20 ESV)

So what does that mean? A few commentators think that the “angels” here are symbols for the pastors of the churches. Hendriksen for example says that:

“Angels must be taken in the sense of pastors, ministers.”³

However that is a minority position. Most take it to mean actual angels, meaning that each church has a sort of guardian angel that in some sense is also responsible for the witness of the church. G.K. Beale for example says that:

“there is some sense in which the angels are accountable for the churches, yet the churches also benefit from the position of the angels.”⁴

I think that is closer to the truth. In the Old Testament there are angels assigned to specific groups of people. In Daniel for example there is an angel who is in some over all the people of Persia and then in Daniel chapters 10 and 12 we are told that Michael is the angel assigned to the Jewish people. An angel speaks to Daniel about Michael in chapter 12 and refers to him as:

Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. (Daniel 12:1 ESV)

So in the Old Testament specific angels were assigned to specific groups of people, therefore it

² William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 58.

³ *Ibid.*; 58.

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 217.

only makes that in the NT there would be angels assigned to specific local churches.

Obviously we don't want to be too dogmatic here where good scholars disagree but I like the idea of there being an angel who is assigned to First Baptist Church, Orillia. I like the idea that over the course of our 145 year history the same angel has been whispering in the ears of various pastors who are praying and labouring over sermons. I like the thought of that. Maybe that explains in part why this church has enjoyed such a consistent witness. Either way, the point here is that everything in the Book of Revelation is for the benefit and the help of the witnessing church throughout the world.

The second thing that John is telling us about the Book of Revelation in this little introduction is that:

2. It is a revelation of the person and work of Jesus Christ

We call it the Revelation of John but it is really the Revelation of Jesus Christ. That's what John sees. He sees Jesus and he shares what he sees with the church. The first thing he sees is that:

i. Jesus is attending to our witness

The lampstands represent our witness to the world and John sees Jesus making an inspection. He says in verses 12-16:

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 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. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 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 ESV)

This is Jesus exercising his authority as our High Priest. Whose job in the Old Testament was it to tend the lamp of God? It was the priests' job and so here is Jesus our High Priest moving through the churches and rebuking everything that obscures our witness and encouraging everything that brightens our witness – that's what these next two chapters are about! John wants us to understand that Jesus our PRIEST is concerned about our WITNESS.

But this Jesus isn't just our priest – he is also our KING. All of the colours that John uses to describe Jesus in this vision are borrowed from the Book of Daniel. Listen to some of the words that the Old Testament prophet uses to describe the Son of Man, he says:

I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. 6 His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. (Daniel 10:5–6 ESV)

In Daniel 7 this person is given a kingdom by the Ancient of Days:

13 “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. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; (Daniel 7:13–14 ESV)

So this priest who attends our witness is also our everlasting KING! But that's not at all – John also describes him using words that Daniel applied to the Ancient of Days. In Daniel 7:9 it says:

“As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. (Daniel 7:9 ESV)

What is it that John said about Jesus in verse 14?

The hairs of his head were white, like white wool (Revelation 1:14 ESV)

Jesus is our Priest, Jesus is our King and Jesus is our GOD! In case you missed the inference, Jesus makes that point explicit in verse 17. He says:

I am the first and the last (Revelation 1:17 ESV)

That is from Isaiah 44:6

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. (Isaiah 44:6 ESV)

So take it from John or take it from Jesus - Jesus is God! He is priest, he is king and he is GOD and he is moving through the churches to inspect their light and witness.

The second things he sees is that:

ii. Jesus is holding the keys of death and hades

That is the very next thing Jesus says to him in verse 18. He says:

I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Revelation 1:18 ESV)

Keys are a symbol of authority. Jesus is saying that he has the power to send people to death and to Hades or to deliver them unto eternal life. John comes back to this theme again at the end of the book. In chapter he sees a vision of the final judgment.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11–15 ESV)

At the beginning and at the end of this book John is reminding his people that Jesus is Sovereign over life and death. He receives people into eternal life and he condemns people to eternal death. Therefore whom shall we fear? Why would you care about the approval of your trade guild? Why would you care about the censure of the synagogue? Why would you care even about incurring the wrath of Caesar? You should care about the one who can send body and soul into hell. Jesus said that:

do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

That's the message of this book! John is saying, why would you care what the culture thinks about you? Why would you care about what Ceasar thinks about you? On his BEST DAY with his FULL LENGTH OF CHAIN and permission all our enemy can do is hasten our entrance into glory. Therefore WHOM SHALL WE FEAR? We should not fear Caesar, rather John says, we should fear the one who holds the keys of death and Hades – we should fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. We should fear the one who can write your name into the book of life and can write your name OUT OF THE BOOK OF LIFE. Don't take word on that, that's what Jesus said to one of the seven churches.

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. (Revelation 3:5 ESV)

You should only care about that, John says. You should only be concerned to get on the right side of that. Jesus Christ is moving among his churches and he has brought his sword to judge.

Conclusion:

Every one of these visions has a message to the witnessing church. I think the message of this vision is pretty obvious. John is telling these people that now is not time to panic. You are not the first people to be in this place. You will not be the last church to face the headwinds of cultural opposition – this is what it means to follow Jesus in an increasingly hostile world. This is bigger than you – you are part of something larger and older and longer than you know.

That is one of the major messages in the Book of Revelation – this idea that behind all of our local and immediate conflicts there is one great constant conflict. John Stott said it well when he wrote:

“Behind the outward situation is the Asian churches an invisible conflict raged between Christ and Antichrist, between the Lamb and the Dragon, between ‘the holy city’ Jerusalem (the Church) and ‘the great city’ Babylon (the world).”⁵

There is a war going on, there is a constant battle and a recurring conflict between the Seed of the Woman and the Seed of the Serpent. Each episode – each local flair up – serves the purpose of God in separating all people into one camp or the other. This is the great OVER ARCHING THEME of human history – C.S. Lewis spoke about that. He said:

"God is always getting better and bad is always getting worse: the possibilities of even apparent neutrality are always diminishing." (C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*)

Middle Earth is disappearing! God uses these conflicts and battles to separate all people everywhere into two distinct groups – the people of the lamb and the people of the beast. It is neutrality that is being assaulted – AT THE COMMAND OF GOD!

⁵ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 14.

You see that's what happened to the church in North America – we drifted into the middle! Now we are being assaulted by the enemy with the permission of the Savior so as to force us to **DECLARE!**

This book – the entire Book of Revelation – is about how God's people conquer the attempts of the enemy **SIMPLY BY NOT COMPROMISING. We WIN BY STANDING. We OVERCOME** by staying in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We conquer by **SHINING** the same old Gospel message as of old.

That is the message of Jesus Christ as he moves among the churches.

To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life (Revelation 2:7 ESV)

To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna (Revelation 2:17 ESV)

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations (Revelation 2:26 ESV)

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. (Revelation 3:5 ESV)

The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. (Revelation 3:12 ESV)

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Revelation 3:21. ESV)

We're going to get home the same way he got home – by walking this road faithfully all the way to the end even through death on a cross.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:22. ESV)

Even so, come Lord Jesus. Let's pray together.