

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)

To The Seven Churches

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Revelation 1:1-8

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Revelation 1:1; that's on page 1028 in your pew Bibles. We are starting something new this morning. I had thought about doing a short vision series to kick off our ministry year. Sometimes it can be helpful to look into the future and to take stock of the cultural landscape in order to refocus and reprioritize. That can be a very helpful thing and these are very complicated times. We haven't been here – with respect to Christ in culture – for a very long time. All our maps – all our models – were based upon a cultural situation that no longer exists and so Christian people are feeling disoriented. For the first time in living memory Evangelical Christians do not occupy a privileged position in North American culture. In fact a recent public opinion poll¹ said that Americans would prefer an openly gay President to an openly Evangelical President. That's a new reality – that's a change in the culture and it necessitates a change in our thinking. We're not in Kansas anymore. The culture isn't tipping in our direction – quite the opposite, all of the sudden we feel outside and under suspicion and in some cases even under attack.

The Book of Revelation was written to people living in a similar situation. Sometimes we think that Revelation was written in the fires of deadly persecution – but that's not true. It was written most scholars believe somewhere around AD 93-95. It was written to Christians living in Asia Minor – what is today modern Turkey. There was NO FORMAL PERSECUTION of Christians

¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183713/socialist-presidential-candidates-least-appealing.aspx>

happening at that time. There had been some persecution of Christians in Rome in the mid 60's but that was localized to Rome. So it had happened somewhere else, but it hadn't yet happened here – at the place where this letter was read. These people had heard rumours of past and far off persecution but it hadn't yet come to them.

These people were however starting to feel marginalized and excluded. They had been kicked out of the Jewish synagogues around AD 70 and now they were starting to feel the pressure from the outside world as well. According to church history Emperor worship started to become a pretty common thing in Asia Minor right around this time. In Roman paganism the Emperor was considered a minor deity and the government of Asia Minor wanted to curry favour with the Emperor in Rome so they started integrating Emperor worship into almost every civic function. You couldn't get your licence renewed by your trade guild unless you offered incense and worship to Domitian as a god. And as a Christian, how could you do that? How could you say that Domitian is Lord when the essential Christian confession is that Jesus is Lord? Christians in this place at this time were facing the reality that the demands of their culture ran exactly contrary to the demands of their faith and they were asking John “what should we do?”

What should we do? Should we cross our fingers behind our backs and say what needs to be said in order to maintain our place in the culture? Some of their teachers were saying that very thing. Should we compromise? Should we be silent? Should we be contrary? What should we do?

It was to people like that John wrote this. And so it seemed to me that this letter would be particularly helpful to us in our efforts to get our bearings in this new cultural context that we find ourselves in.

My intention is to look at the first 3 chapters over the next several weeks. I want to read what John says to these churches in chapter 1 and then what Jesus says to these churches in chapters 2-3. This morning we will be reading verses 1-8 of chapter 1. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

1 The revelation² of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

² To me: as you read explain “revelation” = “apocalypse”.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,
5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 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.
8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”
(Revelation 1:1–8 ESV)

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

Now in terms of style or genre, Revelation is like no other book in the Bible – its like no other book in the ancient world. One scholar put it this way, he said:

“If a letter, it is like no other early Christian letter we possess. If an apocalypse, it is like no other apocalypse. If a prophecy, it is unique among prophecies.”³

There are parts of Revelation that are filled with apocalyptic imagery and there are parts of Revelation that are straightforward prose. It is part letter and part prophetic vision. Therefore it might be helpful to think of it as a package that Jesus sends, via John to the church in Asia Minor. In the package there is a letter and a movie. The letter introduces the movie and it is the letter part that we are looking at this morning.

Just like most of the other letters in the New Testament this letter has a meaningful prologue and a Gospel foundation for all of the great commands and encouragements that follow. Let’s talk first about the prologue, we find it in verses 1-3.

The Prologue:

John begins by asserting that this message comes from Jesus. Everything in these pages IS FROM JESUS. It came to John via an angel FOR the church at the end of the world. As the story unfolds we are going to discover that from the perspective of Jesus everything that happens between the time of his ascension into heaven and his return to the earth from heaven is properly understood as the end of the world. This is the long delay that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24.

³ J.R. Michaels as cited by G.K. Beale in *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 39.

45 “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. (Matthew 24:45–46 ESV)

Jesus said that there is going to be a long delay and some people are going to fall asleep and some people are going to get distracted, some people are going to be deceived; don't be like that, Jesus says, live wisely in the long delay.

And so this movie that John is introducing describes things that are going to take place SOON. The movie is about to start! The movie covers the entire period from the time of writing to the time of Christ's return. It covers the last chapter of the world. Now, there is no indication in the text as to how long this chapter will be. Jesus said:

“But concerning that day and hour no one knows... (Matthew 24:36–39 ESV)

The one question this movie doesn't answer is WHEN WILL JESUS RETURN? We don't know and Revelation doesn't tell us.

We don't know that, but we do know this: God is large and in charge. Notice that John says that he was shown what MUST take place – not what might take place, but what MUST take place – what God has determined will take place. This is the PLAN OF GOD, John says. This is how God will bring this chapter to a close.

You are going to be blessed when you read about this, you are going to be blessed when you hear about this. This is going to help you live wisely and faithfully during the long delay. That's the message of the preamble.

Seeing God:

Verses 4-8 give us the heart of John's introductory letter. It is laid out in fairly typical epistolary form. There is a brief introduction where he gives his name and identifies the recipients. We'll speak about the seven churches in detail next week. This week I want you to see what John says about God. He presents his thoughts in a typically Jewish way. He makes use of something

called an inclusio – meaning that there are brackets and there are related thoughts in between. This is a very Jewish way of thinking and you will spot it immediately. Look at verse 4:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come (Revelation 1:4 ESV)

Now look at verse 8:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:8 ESV)

That’s the same message! Those are the brackets! He begins and ends by talking about who God is. And in between he zooms in as it were and he adores the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. So he says, “The first thing you need to see in order to survive the long delay is God. You need to see who God is and more specifically you need to see who God is in the person and work of Jesus Christ. You need to see that before you see anything else.” That’s the message and so we’ll start with the big picture view. We’ll start with what John says about God.

John says twice in this passage – in both brackets – that God is the God:

who is and who was and who is to come (Revelation 1:4 ESV)

What does that mean? Well, first of all to say that he is the God who IS – is to say that he is over and outside of all space and time. He is the Great I AM. He is Yahweh – over all.

He is also, John says, the God who was. That is to say he is the God who invaded history at a particular point and time. He is the God who took on flesh – Jewish flesh! - in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the God who said things and did things in space and time that forever changed the course of history. Jesus revealed God – he spoke for God, he was a faithful witness – he SAID THINGS and DID THINGS that forever changed the world. He is the God who was.

Furthermore he is the God who is to come. He is the God who in Christ will one day return and reign over all things to the glory of the Father – FOREVER. He is that God. He is and he WAS and he IS TO COME and he is EVEN NOW, John says, engaged with the world and connected to

his people; that seems to be the meaning of what John says in verse 4 when he talks about the seven Spirits who are before the throne of God. G.K. Beale writes that the expression is:

“a figurative designation of the effective working of the Holy Spirit.... The Spirit is what empowers the church to be effective as a burning lamp of witness in the world.”⁴

So, John seems to be saying here in these brackets that God is over all but he is also IN ALL with his people through the Holy Spirit. The whole TRIUNE GOD is the God over history and IN HISTORY towards which all OF HISTORY is ever moving. Thanks be to God. That’s who God is.

Adoring Christ:

Now, in verses 5-7 – INSIDE THE BRACKETS – John zooms and he speaks now more specifically – more doxologically about the person of Jesus Christ. He mentions 4 marvellous things. He says first of all that:

1. Jesus loves us

Look at verse 5:

To him who loves us (Revelation 1:5 ESV)

You know we learn that in Sunday School but it never stops being AMAZING. No matter what else you learn you will never learn anything more important than this. Jesus LOVES US. Jesus is GOD reaching down in love to us. That was probably the first verse you ever learned:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 ESV)

You will never learn a better one.

Karl Barth was perhaps the most significant and prolific theologian of the 20th century. He wrote a lot of books about God. I don’t agree with everything he said – but the man knew and said a lot

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 189.

of things about God. Near the end of his life a reporter asked if he could summarize what he had said in all the many volumes of theology that he had written.

“Dr. Barth thought for a moment and then said: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”⁵

You could live a thousand years and write a thousand books and never discover anything more important than this. Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. That’s an important truth, that’s a necessary truth. You’re going to need to see that and remember that in order to live wisely during the long delay.

The second thing John says about Jesus is that he frees us from our sins.

2. Jesus frees us from our sins

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood (Revelation 1:5 ESV)

When Jesus died on the cross – when he shed his blood – he PAID the debt that we owe God. He didn’t die for his own sins – he didn’t have any – he died for our sins. His blood was the price of our freedom. Jesus said that at the Last Supper, he said:

this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:28 ESV)

Jesus knew what he was doing when he came. He knew that he was coming to die and to shed his blood for the remission of sins. He was coming to set us free. Thanks be to God.

The third thing that John says in this zoomed in adoration of Christ is that:

3. Jesus restores us

Look at verse 6; John says Jesus:

made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father (Revelation 1:6 ESV)

⁵ http://www3.telus.net/st_simons/cr9311.htm

That sounds kind of like what Peter said to his people in 1 Peter 2:9. He said:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9 ESV)

That is the certainly the same idea even if it is not exactly the same words. John seems to be saying that through his life, death and resurrection and through his gift of the Spirit – through everything he has done– Jesus has made us a ROYAL PRIESTHOOD. We are, right now, in some way, kings and priests before God.

Now if you read your Bible then you know that this is exactly what we were created to be. In the beginning God said:

“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion ...
27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:26–27 ESV)

Human beings were intended to be LIKE GOD, UNDER GOD and OVER EVERYTHING ELSE. We were supposed to be Kings and Queens under our Creator and over EVERYTHING ELSE. That’s what we were made for and according to John that is what we are saved for. Salvation is really about Jesus giving us back all that we lost through our fall and through our sin. In Christ, God restores all that the locust devours. In the end, John says, the devil has to give it all back. You will be everything God made you to be. Because Christ has invaded the devil’s stronghold, he has plundered his possessions and he has set the captives free. That is salvation! That is what Jesus has done for you and me.

And then in verse 7 praise becomes prophecy. John says:

4. Jesus comes for us at the end

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)

Jesus is coming! John is excited about it even though he knows that it will be a time of judgment and exclusion for those who rejected Christ. He knows that. A Christian is eager for Christ to come – he LONGS FOR HIS APPEARING. The Apostle Paul said:

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:8 ESV)

All true Christians LOVE the APPEARING OF JESUS CHRIST – we LONG TO SEE HIS FACE, we LONG for him to wipe away every tear and upend every evil system and to ESTABLISH true justice and mercy upon the earth – we LONG FOR IT even while we shudder to think of what that will mean for all those who have refused his grace and mercy.

All of the parables of Jesus that speak about his coming have that sense of mixture, don't they? We read the one from Matthew 13 where Jesus says:

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, 42 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Matthew 13:40–43 ESV)

That sounds AWESOME and HORRIBLE all at the same time. I want to shine like the sun in the kingdom of my father – I want to be free from the presence of sin forever – but I am staggered by the thought of friends and neighbours thrown out of the kingdom and into the fiery furnace, away from God, away from joy, away from me forever. You can here that mixture of reactions in John's prophecy in verse 7:

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)

The second coming of Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God's love for his people. It is simultaneously the ultimate expression of his wrath and judgment upon those who remain outside.

Conclusion:

Now why would John want us to read that before we see all the visions that follow? What's he trying to say? I think the point here is that the most important thing we need to see in order to live wisely and faithfully during the long delay is JESUS. More than the DETAILS of the plan we need to see the GOD OF THE PLAN. We need to see God in his MAJESTIC

SOVEREIGNTY and also in his love and mercy. We need to see Jesus. If we can see all of who God is and all of what God has done in Christ for us then we should be able to carry on. We should be able to walk through the fire because we know who is with us in the midst.

We need to see Jesus. We need to behold our God seated on his throne and DYING ON THE CROSS. If we see that then we have seen it all. This is the God who is over us, this is the God who is for us, this is the God who is IN US – therefore, who can stand against us? I think that's what John is saying and I think we need to hear it again. Let's pray together.