

Christ's Message to the Seven Churches

The Prologue of Christ's Revelation

Revelation 1:1-3

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Scripture

Today, I am starting a new series of messages. It is called, "Christ's Message to the Seven Churches," and it is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

These chapters deal with Christ's message to seven churches that were located in Asia (in modern western Turkey). These churches existed in a time of growing cultural opposition, religious intolerance, and doctrinal error. And each church received a message from Christ to remain steadfast and faithful.

The reason I am preaching this series is twofold. First, for many years I have wanted to study and teach Christ's message to the seven churches of Asia.

And second, by studying Revelation 1-3 we shall see what Christ's priorities are for his church today. Noted commentator, John Stott, writes, "Although these letters were written by John, it is claimed that they were given him directly by the ascended and glorified Christ. Although their message is related to the specific situations of those churches, it expresses concerns which apply to all churches. By praise and censure, by warning and exhortation, Christ reveals what he wants his church to be like in all places and at all times."¹

Let's read the prologue of Christ's revelation in Revelation 1:1-3:

¹The revelation 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, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony

¹ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 7-8.

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. (Revelation 1:1-3)

Introduction

Imagine yourself sitting in a theatre. You are chatting quietly with your companion, and there is a low buzz of voices throughout the theatre. Everyone is sitting in expectation. Then the lights dim, and the chatter quiets down. The theatre lights are extinguished, and the music begins playing, softly at first, but building and swelling. As the music reaches a crescendo, the curtains are rapidly drawn aside. You and everyone gasp at the brightly-lit stage. There is an extremely impressive figure standing in the very center of the stage. He begins to speak in a clear and authoritative voice, telling the audience what is about to happen.

The Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible, and it is a difficult book to understand. John Stott writes:

Many Christians fight shy of the Book of Revelation. It seems to them well-nigh incomprehensible. They are perhaps skeptical of some fanciful interpretations they have heard, and cannot easily accustom themselves to the book's bizarre imagery. . . . The whole book appears at first sight to contain a chaotic profusion of weird and mysterious visions.²

However, the fact is that the Book of Revelation is God's word to his people. The opening of the book is like the opening of a play. Jesus is the ascended and glorified Christ who speaks to his servant John and tells him – and us – what he wants us to know about how to live and worship and serve in a hostile world.

² John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 10.

Lesson

In today's lesson, the prologue of Christ's revelation shows us that the Book of Revelation was revealed for witness, which results in blessing.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Nature of the Book (1:1a)
2. The Subject of the Book (1:1b)
3. The Purpose of the Book (1:1c)
4. The Writer of the Book (1:1d)
5. The Witness of the Book (1:2)
6. The Blessing of the Book (1:3)

I. The Nature of the Book (1:1a)

First, let's look at the nature of the book.

The Book of Revelation opens with these words, “**The revelation** of Jesus Christ” (1:1a). The first word in the book is “**revelation**” (*apocalypse*), and a transliteration of the Greek word is “apocalypse.” The word “apocalyptic” has come to refer to violent and catastrophic events, such as natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, volcanoes) or major horrible human actions (genocide, war, holocaust). One commentator said, “In the author's day [revelation] simply meant the removal of a cover from something hidden, and so an unveiling of that which is concealed, as when a portrait is unveiled by pulling back a curtain (or even doing the same to reveal a stage on which a drama is about to be played).”³

So, the Book of Revelation is an *apocalyptic* book. That is, it is a book that reveals or unveils God's truth to his people.

The Book of Revelation is also a *prophetic* book. Revelation

³ George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1421.

1:3a says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this *prophecy*.” It is not so much a book about *fore-telling* the future, although that certainly does take place in the book. It is, rather a book about *forth-telling*. That is, it is God’s word for his people in their own day.

And third, the Book of Revelation is also an *epistolary* book. That is, the book is a letter. It is in the form of a letter, and it is written from John “to the seven churches that are in Asia” (Revelation 1:4).

I should also mention what the Book of Revelation is *not*.

First, the Book of Revelation is not “The Revelation of John.” Although John was the writer, it was not his revelation. Rather, as the opening words state, it is “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1a). That is, the book is a revelation given by Jesus.

And second, the Book of Revelation is not plural. It is not the revelations (plural) of Jesus Christ but the revelation (single) of Jesus Christ. Most Christians incorrectly refer to the book as “Revelations,” when in fact it should be called “Revelation.”

II. The Subject of the Book (1:1b)

Second, notice the subject of the book.

Revelation 1:1b states, “The revelation **of Jesus Christ.**” The Greek in this phrase could read either “the revelation given by or from Jesus Christ” or “the revelation about Jesus Christ.” The context of the passage suggests that the former is more likely. The revelation that is about to be given is not just *about* Jesus Christ, but is given *by* or *from* Jesus Christ.

The Book of Revelation gives us a marvelous picture of Jesus Christ. The second part of chapter 1 reveals to us the ascended and glorified Christ. It also shows us something of his coming in glory. In chapters 2 and 3 Christ wonderfully encourages and gently corrects each of the seven churches in Asia. And then in the

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rest of the book he reveals to the seven churches what is yet to come. One commentator gave the following description of the Lord Jesus Christ:

The first time our Lord came into this world, he came in the veil of our flesh. His deity was covered over with his manhood. His Godhead was hidden by his humanity. Just once in a while did his deity shine through, as on the Mount of Transfiguration, or as in his miraculous works. But most of the time the glory, the majesty, the deity, the wonder and the marvel of the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, were veiled. These attributes were covered over in flesh, in our humanity. He was born in a stable. He grew up in poverty. He knew what it was to hunger and to thirst. He was buffeted and beaten and bruised. He was crucified and raised up as a felon before the scoffing gaze of the whole earth. The last time that this world saw Jesus was when it saw him hanging in shame, misery and anguish upon the cross. He later appeared to a few of his believing disciples, but the last time that this unbelieving world ever saw Jesus was when it saw him die as a malefactor, as a criminal, crucified on a Roman cross. That was a part of the plan of God, a part of the immeasurable, illimitable grace and love of our Lord. "By his stripes we are healed."

But then is that all the world is ever to see of our Savior – dying in shame on a cross? No! It is also a part of the plan of God that someday this unbelieving, this blaspheming, this godless world shall see the Son of God in his full character, in glory, in majesty, in the full-orbed wonder and marvel of his Godhead. Then all men shall look upon him as he really is. They shall see him holding in his hands the title-deed to the Universe, holding in his hands the authority of all creation in the universe above us, in the universe around us, and in the universe beneath us; holding this world and its destiny in his pierced and loving hands.⁴

One commentator rightly notes, "John wants the reader to

⁴ W. A. Criswell, quoted in John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 16.

understand at the outset that the same 'Jesus Christ' who became incarnate, revealed himself in human flesh, died on the cross, and rose again is the one who mediates the visions in this book."⁵

III. The Purpose of the Book (1:1c)

Third, let's observe the purpose of the book.

Revelation 1:1c states, “. . . **which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.**”

God gave a message to Jesus Christ in order **to show to his servants the things that must soon take place**. God did not intend for the message of the book to be a mystery, but wanted to reveal this message so that it could be understood and obeyed.

Note also that this message is not given to non-Christians or unbelievers. It is specifically given to **his servants**. The Greek word here for **servants** (*doulois*) literally means “slaves” (cf. Matthew 22:8; Mark 13:34). In ancient times, these **servants** were a special kind. They served their master out of love and devotion. These **servants**, or slaves, described as follows in Exodus 21:5-6, “But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.” So, the **servants** to whom the revelation is given are those who willingly serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

John went on to say that what is to be revealed are **the things that must soon take place**. The churches in Asia were beginning to experience persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, Caesar wanted people to affirm that “Caesar is lord.” However, a Christian could not affirm that because only “Jesus is lord.” So, Jesus wanted to strengthen his churches to stand firm in the midst

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 52.

of the coming persecution **that must soon take place.**

The Book of Revelation portrays Jesus as the ascended and glorified Christ who blesses believers with his presence. However, it also portrays the judgment of unbelievers. One commentator said:

This is a book of judgments and of doom. The darker side of the picture is never for a moment concealed. God is just. Sin must be punished. Impenitence and rebellion issue in misery and defeat. Here is no sentimental confusion of right and wrong. Here is no weak tolerance of evil. There is mention of “the Lamb that hath been slain,” but also of “the wrath of the Lamb.” There is a “river of water of life,” but also a “lake of fire.” Here is revealed a God of love who is to dwell among men, to wipe away all tears, and to abolish death and sorrow and pain; but first his enemies must be subdued. Indeed, The Revelation is in large measure a picture of the last great conflict between the forces of evil and the power of God. The colors are lurid and are borrowed from the convulsions of nature and from the scenes of human history, with their battles and their carnage. The struggle is titanic. Countless hordes of demonic warriors rise in opposition to him who is “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.” Upon them “woes” are pronounced, “bowls” of wrath are poured out, and overwhelming destruction is visited. A brighter day is to come, but there is thunder before the dawn.⁶

So, Jesus wanted his churches to be prepared of the coming assault. That was his purpose for the revelation.

IV. The Writer of the Book (1:1d)

Fourth, notice the writer of the book.

Revelation 1:1d says, **“He made it [i.e. the revelation] known by sending his angel to his servant John.”** Actually, the

⁶ Charles Erdman, quoted in John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 20.

chain of communication in verse 1 is from God to Jesus to an angel to John and finally to Christians.

The identity of the angel is never given. However, Jesus reaffirmed that one of the links in the communication of the revelation was an angel, when he said in Revelation 22:16a, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches."

Note also that John, the writer of the Book of Revelation, also refers to himself as a **servant**. John did not identify himself here as an apostle, although he was an apostle. He simply wanted to identify with fellow Christians as a servant of Jesus Christ.

V. The Witness of the Book (1:2)

Fifth, let's look at the witness of the book.

Verse 2 says that John **bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw**. This is a difficult expression. **The word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ** are in a parallel relationship to each other. So, what John is saying is that **the word of God** that he has recorded in the Book of Revelation is the message **of Jesus Christ** that he wanted to be recorded and sent to the seven churches.

VI. The Blessing of the Book (1:3)

And finally, note the blessing of the book.

John wrote in verse 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.**"

This is the first of seven blessings in the Book of Revelation. They are wonderful blessings that belong to believers. Let me briefly read them to you:

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- Revelation 14:13: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’”
- Revelation 16:15: (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”)
- Revelation 19:9: And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”
- Revelation 20:6: Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.
- Revelation 22:7: “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”
- Revelation 22:14: 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.

Revelation 1:3 depicts a first-century worship service. Because parchments were so scarce, and also because so few people could read, the letters were publicly read in the congregation in the hearing of the people. John MacArthur quotes Dr. Robert L. Thomas, who explains that “because writing materials were expensive and scarce, so were copies of the books that were parts of the biblical canon. As a rule, one copy per Christian assembly was the best that could be hoped for. Public

reading was the only means that rank-and-file Christians had for becoming familiar with the contents of these books.”⁷

But the main point in verse 3 is that blessing is only for those **who keep what is written in it**, that is, who obey God's word. Commentator G. K. Beale says, “John's witness to the heavenly commentary concerning what God has done in Christ is not intended as an apocalyptic curiosity to tantalize the intellect but to inform Christians about how God wants them to live in the light of recent redemptive history. The book contains information for the mind, but it is information that entails ethical obligation.”⁸

Do you want God's blessing in your life? You know, we often pray for God's blessing, as if we should just sit at home and wait for nice things to happen to us. Instead, John reminds us that God's blessing is given to those who obey God's word.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the prologue to the Book of Revelation, let us live wholeheartedly for God.

Jesus knew that the seven churches in Asia were facing hostility and persecution. He wanted them to be assured that he was alive and ascended and glorified and reigning in heaven, and also that he had a loving concern for them so that he sent them a special message. He wanted them to have a heavenly perspective on redemptive history and live in obedience to his commands.

The same Jesus calls each one of us today to be assured that he is alive and ascended and glorified and reigning in heaven. He still has a loving concern for us. And he wants each one of us to live in wholehearted obedience to his every command. For that is the only way to know his blessing in this life. Amen.

⁷ Robert L. Thomas, as quoted in John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 23.

⁸ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 184.

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Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the revelation of Jesus Christ that you gave to your servant John.

As we embark on this study of Christ's message to the seven churches that are in Asia, will you help us to have a renewed vision of the ascended and glorified Lord Jesus Christ?

And will you also enable each one of us to live in wholehearted obedience to the true and living word of God?

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!