

Look! Listen! - And Overcome!

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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Look! Listen! – And Overcome!
(Do You Believe This?)

Lord's Day Morning
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Pastor Jeff Crippen

me that what we have in these first three verses is what I would call a kind of *divine imprimatur*. God's own endorsement, in other words, that the words of this book are in fact God's words. Look at them again –

NKJ Revelation 1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants -- things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified *it* by His angel to His servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. 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.

I. The Divine Imprimatur 1:1-3

If you pickup a Roman Catholic translation of the Bible, such as The New American Bible, and look inside the title page you will find what is called the "imprimatur." There will be alongside this word the name of some church dignitary – an archbishop, for example. Imprimatur is a Latin word that means "to imprint." And so this imprimatur means –

Let it be printed

It is, in other words, an official license to print and publish.

As we saw last time, this book of the Revelation opens in an unusual manner. It opens as a Gospel (The Revelation of Jesus Christ...) and as an Epistle (Grace to you and peace from Him who is....). And it seems to

- God gave Him (ie, Jesus Christ)
- He sent and *signified it by His angel* to His servant, John
- John *bore witness to the Word of God,*
- And to *the testimony of Jesus Christ,*
- To *all things that he saw*

- Blessed is he who...the words of this prophecy
- For the time is near

Do you see? In other words, these three verses confront us right at the start with this fact –

The Revelation is the Word of God, originating in heaven with God, handed down by God to His Son, to His angel, then to His servant, the Apostle John.

The Revelation is not some flight of fancy by some especially imaginative human being. It is not myth. It is not science fiction. It is, in fact, *apocalypse – revelation*. God, pulling back the curtain, opening up the heavens, so that we might see what lies behind the things we do see in this world. And what do we see?

The Lord Jesus Christ, exalted, glorified, reigning as King, executing perfectly in His power the decree of God in the events of this world.

Now, I need to put a question to each one of us at this point, or really, the Lord puts it before us. The question is this –

Do you believe this?

Do you believe the claims that this book makes for it's divine origin? Do

you believe, in other words, that it has God's own *imprimatur* impressed upon it? Because if you don't, this blessing will not apply to you –

NKJ 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.

In fact, you will be the worse for studying it, not the better. Why? Because there is also *a curse affixed to it* –

NKJ Revelation 22:18 For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.

So here is this question once more –

Do you believe this?

Want to know if you believe that this book is the Word of God? That it is absolutely true and not fiction? Then look to your life as we proceed with it. *Because a man cannot read and hear*

and heed the words of this book and not be radically changed. If you do not see your life, your thinking, your entire outlook on this world and upon yourself and upon your priorities being radically and even frighteningly altered, then you do not believe that this book is what the imprimatur announces it to be.

Fearful Sanctification

Why do I use the word *frighteningly* when, you say, "I thought sanctification and salvation and growth in Christ was a good thing that gives peace and joy and so on?" Well, that is certainly all true. But let me suggest to you that there is also an aspect to sanctification, to having your mind become so transformed by the Word and Spirit, *that increasingly you wonder at how different you are from the world in which you find yourself*. Here are all these throngs of people going that way and you are going the other. Here is John out on that deserted island of Patmos while the rest of the empire moves along without him. He alone – or so it seems.

And I suppose that at the root of this frightening aspect of increasing holiness and Christlikeness is this *aleness* the Christian experiences. Oh, we know we are not alone – that there are all these other believers who stand in the same position as us. And

yet there is *something* – something fearful about *God being at work in us*. Do I see anything as the world does? Well, increasingly the answer we should be experiencing if we are really walking with Christ is – *no*. Sometimes, Christian, not only does the world view you as *mad*, you will find yourself wondering if you are mad – out of your mind. What is wrong with me? Why am I so different?

NKJ John 10:20 And many of them said, "He has a demon and is mad. Why do you listen to Him?"

NKJ Acts 26:24 Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" 25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.

Men and women – do you know anything of this? Anything at all? That is to say, *has the world ever seen you as mad, as out of your mind, as insane?* Ever? This is a mark of the true Christian.

And what is it that we need at those times? We need the very same thing John needed on Patmos - *apocalypse* –

NKJ Revelation 1:12 Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven

golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.

And then we say "no, I'm not mad. There He is. I see Jesus."

The Fifth Gospel is given to such "madmen" so that they might see Jesus and know that not only are they not mad, they have in fact been restored to sanity and soundness of mind.

"To show the things that must shortly come to pass means to reveal them to us in a new light, in their real significance, as a part of God's own program, as a revelation of the coming Lord! We must 'see Jesus' even in the events of the present world. We must have sufficient light to 'hold fast that which we have,' even in the midst of the confusion and darkness and gloom of the picture presented by the history

of the world and of the church in the midst of the world. To enable us to see the events of this present time in light of Christ's coming – that is the purpose of this book." [Herman Hoekasema]

Well then, here is our beginning. We must ask ourselves – *do I believe this divine imprimatur?* Do you want this blessing? Do you want to be so radically changed by this book that the world will begin to call you mad? *Do you want to be able to overcome, to give bold testimony for Christ, to not love your life even to the death?* Do you want to be enabled to see Jesus in everything that comes your way? To see Him exalted, and ruling as King – ordaining all that comes to pass, including the small details of your own life? Because this book promises to do these very things in all who –

- Read (preach the book)
- Hear (listen to it)
- Heed (obey it)

This is God's stamp, you see. Let it be printed, let it be published. And we present it as no less.

II. For the Time is Near

In these very first words of the Revelation, we are introduced to an important hermeneutical principle that is vital to a proper interpretation and

understanding of the Revelation. See the phrases?

- the things which must soon take place (vs 1)
- for the time is near (vs 3)

And we have seen that this same thing appears at the end of the Revelation too –

- the things which must soon take place (22:6)
- for the time is near (22:10)

And then you have Christ's promise –

- Behold, I am coming quickly (22:12)
- Yes, I am coming quickly (22:20)

What is this? Here are some of the questions we meet –

1. How could the Lord tell the Apostle John, 2000 years ago, these things when He still has not come in our day?
2. Did Christ somehow come and were these prophecies somehow fulfilled in the first century (preterist view)?

If the Revelation is approached from the futurist standpoint, which view

assigns the majority of the book to a yet future day – even future to our own – then it is obvious that we run into severe interpretive difficulties with these "nearness" declarations.

But what if – as we are maintaining it means – what if these statements mean exactly what they say? *The time for these things is near. At hand.* Then this understanding will largely define how we approach this book, will it not? It cannot be a book about things entirely future to even John's day, let alone to ours. In other words, we must interpret the Revelation in such a way that is consistent with the things it reveals having begun in the first century.

Now, consider just in general right now. Where did the 4 Gospels leave off? If you consider the book of Acts an appendix to Luke – as it really is – then this is the point at which we were left –

NKJ Acts 1:1 The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 2 until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, 3 to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and

speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

4 And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," *He said*, "you have heard from Me; 5 "for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. 8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

9 Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10 And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, 11 who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like

manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

We will look into this in more detail when we actually come to chapters 4 and 5, but consider now the events of chapter 5, and let me suggest to you that this is a description of what happened in heaven when Christ ascended. In other words, we have the account in the Gospels from the perspective of men on earth looking up as Jesus ascends, but here in Revelation we are very possibly being shown the heavenly scene as the Lamb as if slain comes back and is handed this scroll (which is nothing less than the decree of God for bringing in the kingdom in its fullness.

NKJ Revelation 5:6 And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.

Listen to Hoeksema once more on this
—

*"We may ask, when was this realized?
When did Christ receive the book from*

the hand of Him who sits on the throne? In order to understand this, we must be careful, and not bring the time element into the vision. The Lamb receives the book not at the time when John sees it, in the last decade of the first century...the whole is symbolic, to picture to us forcibly that Christ Jesus has received all power in heaven and on earth and in hell. After He has been slain and is risen from the dead, after He has ascended to the Father, He is exalted to the highest position, and that in the capacity of the Lamb that has been slain. Exalted, He is, to the right hand of God. And this being seated at the right hand of God simply means that to Him all dominion is given in principle, that all power in heaven and on earth is surrendered into His hands. Christ rules His church and His kingdom as it has been spiritually established on earth in the new dispensation. Christ rules the world also; the world, that is, from its evil point of view. He controls all history in the name of Him Who sitteth on the throne. And therefore it is literally true that the Almighty has given to the Lamb the decree that is powerful to its own fulfillment. Christ now controls all history. He is busy in the preaching of the gospel, busy in wars and bloodshed of the world, busy in pestilence and famine, busy in all the social relations of our time. And through them all He works out the decree. He breaks seal after seal, as

we shall see, and brings to pass all that must come to pass in this present dispensation, and all this with a view to the bringing of the glorious kingdom of God. When that kingdom shall have been completed, and the power of opposition shall have been broken, then He shall surrender His absolute power and subject Himself and reign over the completed kingdom under God forever and ever."

And therefore, you see, when John is told these things "which must soon take place," and when he is told that "the time is near," that is exactly what is meant. It has begun. The seals are being broken by the Lamb. King Jesus is on His throne, and He has been working out His kingdom ever since – and He is doing so right now. The Revelation, you see, is not future – it is now. It is an unveiling of what has already begun. So that Christians in all eras – ever since the days of the Apostle John – can take courage and persevere and overcome. No wonder the blessing –

"Blessed is he who reads..."

Because he who hears and heeds will be enabled to *see Jesus as He is, reigning over all.*

Here then, right before your eyes, we have a book which is the written record of visions given by God to His

Son Jesus Christ, which the Son then showed to John by the mediation of His angel. This book, in other words, did not originate in this world.

II. John to the Seven Churches 1:4

We only have time today to introduce the next section which we might entitle "*The Triune and Apostolic Greeting*" –

NKJ Revelation 1:4 John, to the seven churches which 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 from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, 6 and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him *be* glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

We have already seen that the Revelation is addressed to *His bond-servants* (1:1). This is a book fundamentally for *believers*. Here in this greeting, John addresses the epistle to *the seven churches which are in Asia*. When we come to chapters 2 & 3, which contain the letters to these 7 churches, we will say more about each one of them.

For now, however, we take note that the Revelation is addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia – that being modern-day Turkey.

Most of you probably have maps at the back of your Bible, and if you will refer to the one that shows the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys, you will be able to locate these 7 cities in which the 7 churches were located (or at least you can find Ephesus). John will address them in a generally *clockwise* direction –

3. Pergamum/Pergamos

4. Thyatira

5. Sardis

2. Smyrna

6. Philadelphia

7. Laodicea

1. Ephesus

NKJ Revelation 1:10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, 11 saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send *it* to the

seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

Does this have anything to do with main trade routes followed or the fact that the Revelation may well have been delivered as a circular letter? We will try to answer those questions later.

But, seven churches. What is this? What about the other churches? Thessalonica, Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Berea, Jerusalem, Antioch? In fact what is interesting is that of these 7 churches addressed, only one – Ephesus – is one we know that was visited by the Apostle Paul.

It is widely acknowledged that in Scripture, the number "7" is a symbol of completeness. It occurs 54 times in Revelation alone and, as we noted already, in Revelation – numbers count (Dennis Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb). Numbers in the Revelation are symbolic. And in this case, we are surely told that these 7 churches represent the entire Church and all that Christ has to say to His Church. Listen –

NKJ Revelation 1:12 Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. **And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven**

lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.

NKJ Revelation 1:20 "The mystery of the seven stars which 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 which you saw are the seven churches.**

Understand the picture? Christ, the Lord of His Church, is shown in apocalyptic vision to be standing right in the midst of the 7 churches – which vision is plainly to tell us that He is in the midst *of His Church*. These 7 historic and actual local churches encompassed all aspects of His Church that Christ desired to address. In speaking to them, in other words, He is speaking to us. In these 7 letters to these 7 churches we can find ourselves and the commendation and the admonishment Christ would speak to us.

The message however does not begin in chapter 2 – it starts right here in verse 4 –

"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, and from Jesus Christ...".

This is, as we have called it, the Triune Greeting. All 3 Persons of the Trinity are involved. The Father, the Spirit, and the Son. They extend grace and peace to Christ's Church.

And then (and we shall plan to go into more detail on these verses next time), we have this tremendous description in the form of doxology –

- To Him who loves us and
- Released us from our sins by His blood,
- And He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father,
- To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Christian, what is your trouble? What are you anxious about? What are you afraid of? Here is the answer to these difficulties –

"The One Who has risen from the dead, the One Who has spoken to us faithfully and truly, the One Who is the ruler of the kings of the earth – is the One who loves you and Who has released you from your sin. He has made you – who were not a people at all, entirely dead to God – He has

made you a people, a kingdom – holy priests to God in His presence."

Our difficulty is not our difficulties. Our difficulty is that we do not see Jesus. The ruler of the kings of the earth – the King of kings – has set His love upon you and released you from your sins. It is decreed. It is done. It is irreversible. Christian – you have been set free by the King. All legal obligation and debt has been paid by Him.

And this same One, as the Revelation shows us, is the One who reigns over it all. If you have that, then you already have the main message of the Revelation.

"Mary sat across from me, her arms crossed tightly in front of her. 'I'm discouraged, angry, and envious,' she said. She described how her life had come unraveled as she lost her husband, home, and children through divorce.

Mary came from a good church and knew the Bible. But her situation made no sense to her. 'I have no reason to get up in the morning!' She was jealous toward people who seemed to do 'whatever they please' yet all went well with their lives.

Most of all she struggled with anger toward God. 'How can He say that He

loves me?' she cried. 'Is this the abundant life He promised? I really thought that He would meet all my needs, but here I am – with nothing! I can't read my Bible, I can't pray, I can't make it through a church service without tears or anger. I look at my life and at the promises of Scripture, and it just doesn't add up! I'm worse off than the average non-Christian.'

There is no question that Mary is suffering. But the way she looks at her life robs Mary (and many like her) of the spiritual resources she needs to face a major trial. She lacks the strength, wisdom, freedom, and hope that come grasping a basic biblical fact: though Christ does not promise to restore Mary to her former way of life, He does promise to restore HER. What is wrong with Mary's thinking? I would say she lacks a perspective on eternity." [Suffering: Eternity Makes a Difference, by Paul Tripp, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing].

Mary, you see, has failed to look behind the veil and understand – things in this life are not as they appear, and things in this life shall not always be as they are. Mary needs Apocalypse. We need Apocalypse – and it is surely best to see it BEFORE the trial comes.