

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part one

Sunday, September 24th, 2017 - 6 p.m. - Teaching #1995

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

A LETTER FOR PEOPLE AT THE END OF TIME - OR AT THE END OF THEIR ROPE

Revelation 1:1-20 - "The 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, [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. [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." [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. [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 wool, as white as 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."

We can learn much about this letter by the way it begins. The *structure* of the letter sends a strong message about the *intention* behind the letter. There's no denying the futuristic thrust of much of Revelation. More than any other book in the Bible, it tells of things to come.

But having said that, I don't think the primary purpose of the letter is to engender heated debates about the time of the rapture or the length of the tribulation. This is made clear in the very first verse of the first chapter: **Revelation 1:1** - "The 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...."

True, the letter shows us things to come. But even *before* that is said, we're told this is a revelation of *Jesus Christ*. Not just a revelation *from* Jesus Christ - a revelation *of* Jesus Christ. In other words, this letter isn't just about the *return* of Jesus Christ in the future. It certainly *includes* that. But this letter is about the *person* of Jesus Christ. It's a revelation of His unimaginable glory and majesty and power and promise *right now*.

There is good news here for *everyone* - not just the last generation of people on earth who will witness all these coming events. No, that's not the message. There is good news here for *everyone*. There was good news here for the apostle John. There was good news here for those first local churches addressed so long ago. Like I was trying to say in the title of this message, there's good news here for people at the *end of time* and good news here for people at the *end of their rope!*

I'm going to quickly show you that in just a minute. First, let's take a quick overview of the entire book:

- a) ***The first chapter themes the worship of the saints with a vision of the risen and exalted Christ.*** This chapter has much the same feel as Isaiah's vision of the throne of God in Isaiah chapter six.
- b) ***Chapters 2 and 3 deal with Christ's warning and encouragement to His church.***
- c) ***Chapters 4 and 5 introduce the theme of the Risen Redeemer's authority over the course of this world's history.*** These two

chapters set up the visions to follow.

- d) ***The most lengthy portion of the book (chapters 6 through 19) sets out a detailed discussion of the coming judgment of God on this rebellious world.*** These coming judgments are portrayed under three sets of symbols: the opening of ***seven seals*** (6:1-8:5), the sounding of ***seven trumpets*** (8:6-11:19), and the pouring out of ***seven bowls*** (chapters 15-16).

The most important point to remember here (and we'll consider this in detail later on) is the fact that these three visions don't depict three ***successive*** series of judgments that ***follow one after another***, but rather are three different ways of showing the impact of three aspects of judgment that ***compound and add to each other right up to the point of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ Himself.***

In other words, each of these three series of judgments brings us right up to the Second Coming and the end of this age. I think, in many ways, this is the ***key*** interpretive element to a proper understanding of the rest of the book of Revelation, and one of the most commonly missed.

- e) ***Between the descriptions of the second and third series of judgments there are two "brackets" or "picture-in picture" passages describing how the church fares on earth during these dramatic times.*** These two visions are revelations of the significance of these difficult times ***for the church*** and are covered in ***chapters 10-11, and chapters 12-14.***

Remember, these two passages are pictures of activities that occur ***while the judgments are being poured out.*** They function like the picture-in-picture feature on state of the art televisions.

- f) ***These accounts of the series of judgments are followed by a picture of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the glories of the final Kingdom of God in chapters 19 through 22.***

We'll get to all of those areas of study in this series. But, as I said at the beginning, the book starts, not with a vision of future events, but a great vision of Jesus Christ Himself, right now, as He is at the throne in heaven and in His church. And that vision of Jesus Christ is given to ordinary Christians - Christians living under trying and painful ***conditions:***

This revelation of Jesus Christ comes, first of all, to John. John is in exile. He is alone on a tiny Greek island in the Aegean Sea called "Patmos." Patmos was a Roman penal colony about four miles square. It's not even on many maps. John tells his readers he was on an ***"...island called Patmos"***(9). You only use words like that when you know most people won't know where in the world you are talking about.

This revelation of Jesus Christ, after coming to John on Patmos, is to be carried on to the local church in Asia Minor - ***"...to the seven churches that are in Asia..."***(4). These were all churches - local churches just like ours - that were facing intense persecution and pressure to compromise.

John tries to comfort them by reminding them he too is experiencing the same kind of persecution they are facing - ***"...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."***

Mark those last words - ***"... an account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ."*** Do you ever try to serve Jesus the best you can, only to find life getting worse and worse? Do you ever experience bitterness or mistreatment from others? Do you ever feel you just can't seem to crawl out from under whatever circumstances are on your back?

Then this revelation of Jesus Christ is for you. Please hear me on this point: This revelation of Jesus isn't just for the people who will be alive when Jesus comes again. John never saw most of the events described in the visions he himself received! Nor did any of those original local churches. ***But the point of the revelation was still exactly what they needed to hear!***

In fact, I would argue that the whole point of the revelation of these incredible future events is to provide a frame of reference - a lense through which ***every day*** of life, including my ***present*** life, is to be viewed and considered. The revelation is ***about*** the future. But it isn't just ***for*** the future. It's for ***today***. And it's for ***the next day after today***. And it's for ***every day between today and the day Jesus comes again!***

In other words, it's a revelation for people at the ***end of time***, or at the ***end of their rope***.

Let's look quickly at a few key points from this first chapter - this revelation of the risen, reigning Lord, Jesus Christ:

1) **A SPECIAL BLESSING IS PRONOUNCED ON BOTH THE READER AND THE HEARER OF THE WORDS OF THIS LETTER**

Revelation 1:3 - "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."

Those words describe how this message would be conveyed to these early church congregations. There were no *copies* of this revelation sitting in the pew racks. Someone would have to *read* this message. The Word was so holy and powerful and pure that just the act of reading it aloud was a special privilege and, as such, carried special blessing. Obviously, with no written copy to take back home, how one *heard* these words was very important. The message would be of no use if it weren't remembered. ***A lot was at stake!***

There's something else very precious here: The power of these words was so great that just ***hearing and remembering them***, without any copy being taken along home, would be enough to bring great blessing into the life. Never take for granted the power of God's Word, alive in the mind and heart by the Holy Spirit!

2) **THE DESCRIPTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS DESIGNED TO ESTABLISH HOPE AND COURAGE FOR THE VISIONS THAT ARE TO FOLLOW**

Revelation 1:4-5 - "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...." Just several thoughts very quickly:

a) ***The greatness of Jesus' presence and power transcends any one particular age or season of life and history.***

He is the one who *is*, and *was*, and *is to come*. That means His presence must not be located in or limited to any one moment or era.

Don't we all do that at times? We read the gospels and think how marvelous it must have been to have walked with Jesus. Or we think of some great era of revival or divine presence and look with a kind of nostalgia that would deposit Jesus more in one time than another.

This letter - remember, this letter from *Jesus* Himself - tells us that this is not the case. He transcends any particular moment. Your present struggle is not the last word. His power isn't limited to either past or future demonstrations. ***He is Lord of all ages equally!***

This idea is repeated again in **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." Apparently we need to hear this truth more than once. But there's more in these verses:

b) ***Jesus Christ is the "...ruler of the kings of the earth" (5).***

Think of what that would mean to those who felt their life squished out of them by the strong hand of a brutal Roman empire. And think of what it should mean to the readers of this very prophetic revelation of coming empires and beasts and antichrist and armies.

Listen church, there's a reason this description of Jesus Christ comes ***before*** the unfolding of the other visions in Revelation. This is the Holy Spirit's way of saying, ***"Don't even study the rest of this book until you have this picture of Jesus clearly nailed down in your mind! Whatever struggle is forthcoming, Jesus Christ has gone before it, is in control during it, and will arise triumphant above and beyond it!"***

The message is clear. It is stated at the beginning of everything else that will be unfolded. God is over all. Nothing of His plan and will can be thwarted. You and I are not to ***judge God's ultimate plan by our present circumstances or the prospect of a fearful future.***

c) ***Jesus is the “faithful witness” (5).***

Don't ever doubt the content or reliability of any of His good promise. You and I can't see very far into the future. It sometimes takes great ***faith*** to trust beyond the limits of our own senses. Or, like the apostle John on Patmos, present circumstances can make the witness of the Scriptures seem untrue. That's why we're encouraged to feed our minds on the message of this prophetic book. The words are totally reliable.

d) ***Jesus is identified as the “...firstborn from the dead” (5).***

This is a wonderful phrase. There are people in the Scriptures who, in ways we can't fully understand, never tasted death. Enoch and Elijah were ***translated***. There are others who died and were raised from the dead - like Lazarus. These all ***died again***.

Those translated never ***tasted*** death. They simply had no experience with it. Those who were raised to life only to die again ***experienced*** death, but never ***conquered*** death. But Jesus Christ is described as the ***“firstborn from the dead.”*** That is, He fully ***experienced*** death, and has ***triumphed over death***.

That alone is very good news, but it's no where near all we have to celebrate. Notice Jesus is called the ***first*** born from the dead. Because of His triumph, others will follow in the same victory. That's what ***firstborn*** means. If my mother tells someone that Paul Horban is his ***firstborn***, that usually implies others were born into the family as well.

This is exactly what the title means when applied to Jesus Christ. John will make it even clearer later on in this same chapter: ***Revelation 1:18*** - ***“...and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”***

3) **THE KIND OF REDEEMER WE WORSHIP ON SUNDAY-**

Revelation 1:9-20 - ***“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 wool, as white as 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.”***

Verses 9 through 20 unfold a living picture - like a video clip - of the image of Jesus Christ. John experienced this vision, significantly, on the Lord's Day. Rome celebrated “Emperor's Day,” when all citizens celebrated the emperor's accession to the throne of Rome. How fitting that these Christians quickly found a way to declare the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ over all other rulers of earth by honoring the Lord's Day.

The picture of Jesus Christ that unfolds here is breathtaking. Very quickly, here are some of the ideas these images contain:

- a) ***He is robed, not in the tattered rags of the cross, but in the regal robe and sash of divine authority (13).*** This is not the babe in the manger. He now has all authority in heaven and in earth.
- b) ***His eyes are like a flame of fire (14).*** There is nothing hidden from the penetration of his vision or understanding. Nothing is ***ignored***. Nothing is ***unknown***. Nothing is ***confusing***.

- c) ***His feet were like "burnished" bronze (15)***. Burnished means bronze that has been hardened in the refiner's furnace. Notice, John says those feet still glow from the heat of the firing process. These feet will trample all enemies and opposition. Nothing will stand against His purpose or judgment.
- d) ***His voice was like the sound of many waters (15)***. What a picture of the living, active authority of God's Word above all the din and noise of history and human opposition. Christ's voice is too powerful to ever be finally silenced!
- e) ***Out of His mouth came a sharp sword (16)***. This is the Word of Christ pictured, not in its ***volume*** (like the many waters), but in its ***effect***. It accomplishes its purpose. It cuts through all argument. It destroys all opposition (as the rest of the vision will reveal!).

4) **THE JESUS WE'RE NOT READY FOR OR ACCUSTOMED TO**

Revelation 1:17-18 - "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."

John fell at Jesus' feet like a dead man. This is not, as many people believe, a description of being "***slain in the Spirit***." The context makes it clear that John was simply, as we would say, ***scared to death!*** That's why Jesus told him, "***Fear not....***"

But there is still something very important here. Never forget, the man who fell over at the sight of the vision of Jesus Christ in glory was quite possibly the man who, while Jesus lived here on earth, knew Him better than any other human being in the whole world.

In other words, the man who fell over like a dead man at the sight of Jesus Christ in glory was a man who was no ***stranger*** to Jesus, but a dear, close, loving ***friend***.

I try to remind myself, every time I, like John, come to Jesus on the ***Lord's Day***, that I'm worshiping someone who, if I ever caught a three second glimpse of Him, it wouldn't even fit into my capacity to imagine right now. Like John, I think I do know and love Jesus. But, like John, my ideas are way too small and limited.

That Lord's Day idea is important. We should note that when Jesus is revealed in all of His might and splendor, it isn't just a picture of Jesus sitting on heaven's throne. Notice the implication of the ***location*** of Jesus as John views Him:

Revelation 1:12-13 - "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."

This is a picture of Jesus as He ***walks among the churches!*** This is Jesus Christ ***close up - near to us as we draw near to Him in worship and adoration!***

So, remember, whether you're at the end of time, or at the end of your rope, Jesus is greater than any of us can even fathom. Nothing about our lives isn't in His hand. His plan will never fail. And He's alive for evermore!