

Letters to Seven City Churches: The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 1:1-8

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on April 27, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ I've shared the story before about Florence Chadwick, the long-distance open water swimmer. In 1950 she gained national acclaim by being the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. Two years later, on July 4th, 1952, she was determined to be the first woman to swim from Catalina Island to mainland California. It called for a 21-mile open water swim through rough ocean waves and shark-infested waters.
 - ▶ It was a chilly day and unfortunately a thick, soupy fog hung over the water. She could barely see her support boats. She strained her eyes forward desperately searching for land but all she saw was fog.
 - Still she managed to swim for 15 hours before she hit her breaking point and asked to be pulled out. It wasn't until she was on a support boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away. She almost made it! At a following news conference she explained why she quit. Listen to her words, *"All I could see was the fog. Look, I'm not excusing myself, but I think that if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."*¹

- ❖ *If only I could've seen the shore.* Friends, do those words ring true for you? **I think a big reason why we find it so hard to live faithfully as a Christian in this world, in this life, is because we don't have a clear view of the shore.**
 - ▶ *Why are some many of us discouraged and lacking in joy? Why do so many of us feel overwhelmed by the high costs of discipleship, of following Jesus – some even on the verge of giving up? Why are we so burdened by the daily struggle of sin to the point that we feel powerless and without hope?*
 - Answer: Because we can't see the shore. The fog of this world, the fog in our lives, has obscured our view. We've lost sight of the shore, and all we can see is fog ahead of us and rough waves around us. So we feel like throwing up our arms and giving up.

- ❖ If only somehow the fog could be lifted, if somehow we could see the shore more clearly, then we'd have the confidence to know that, yes, we can make it. I believe this is what God does for us in the book of Revelation. In Scripture's final book, God begins to clear the fog.
 - ▶ ***And we realize that things are not as they seem.*** That's a running theme throughout Revelation. For the churches that John was writing to, their circumstances looked grim. They were under persecution. They were under pressure to give in and give up the faith. All they could see around them were more trials and more tribulation. It looked bad. And yet things are not as they seem. It looks bad, but the point is that things are not as bad as they look.
 - **This is the longest book in the New Testament, but if I had to sum up its message I could do it in just two words: Jesus wins.** Or more accurately, Jesus has already won. When the fog clears away, we see a throne in the heavens and Jesus is sitting on it.

¹ See online: <http://www.epm.org/resources/2010/Jan/21/florence-chadwick-and-fog/>

- ❖ I'm excited to start a new series in Revelation. We're not going through the entire book. Just the first three chapters. We mainly want to focus on the letters Jesus had John write to seven city churches in first-century Asia Minor. This is in line with our focus this year on becoming **a church for the city**. We're a city church but we don't want to be a church that just happens to be in the city. Rather a church that is actively and intentionally for the city – committed to being and making God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus starting with our surrounding community.
 - ▶ So this morning I just want to consider the prologue of Revelation and ask three overarching questions to give us a better feel for the book. **First, what is the background to this book?** Context is all important. We need to know who, when, and where this was written. **Second, what kind of book is this?** How are we to read it? Revelation is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to interpret, but what helps is to understand its form of literature. What kind of book is it?
 - **Third, what is its message?** The prologue of any book typically gives you a preview of what's to come. It's no different for Revelation. Here in the first eight verses we get a helpful summary of the book's main message.

What is the Background to this Book?

- ❖ So let's begin by considering the book's background. It's historical context. We're told explicitly in v9 that this was written by John during while in exile. He says it's not because he did anything wrong but "*on account on the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus*". In other words, because he was fond of preaching the Word and sharing the Gospel.
 - ▶ The early church father, **Irenaeus**, is the one who confirms that this John is none other than the Apostle John, the one who authored the fourth Gospel and three letters. And Irenaeus says he received this vision towards the end of the Emperor Domitian's reign.² So most scholars would date this book around 95-96 AD.
- ❖ Now **Domitian** was known to be a profoundly insecure man. Suetonius, the ancient Roman historian tells us that he was physically unattractive.³ He's described as always having a festering wart on his forehead that he couldn't stop scratching. He supposedly had a protruding belly, skinny legs, and was acutely sensitive about his baldness.
 - ▶ So to compensate for his insecurities, Domitian ordered everyone to address him as "Lord and God" (*Dominus et Deus*). He changed the name of the Roman Empire to the "Eternal Empire" and called himself the "Everlasting King".⁴ And all citizens and subjects, including Christians, were told to show their loyalty to their Everlasting King by going to the imperial temple, taking a pinch of incense, throw it in the fire as a sacrifice before an image of the emperor, and say *Caesar Kurios*, "Caesar is Lord".⁵
 - Domitian didn't care if you worshipped other gods. You can worship Christ all you want. Just show me this one little act of loyalty and you're good to go.

² G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation (NIGTC)*, 19-20.

³ Jim Hamilton, *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, 29-30.

⁴ Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation*, 23-24.

⁵ Beale, 31.

- ❖ Now for most people in the first-century, this wasn't too much to ask. Most people were polytheists. They worshipped multiple gods. *So what's the big deal with adding one more?* But for John it was a huge problem because only has one Lord, one *Kurios*. He eye-witnessed his Lord's life, death, and resurrection. There was no comparison. So John had no problem honoring the emperor (1 Pet. 2:17) or submitting to his authority (Rom. 13:1). *But worship the emperor? Give him my absolute allegiance?* Never. *Christos Kurios*. Christ is Lord.
 - ▶ John would not, could not, bend the knee to Domitian. And for his insolence he was banished to Patmos, a island ten miles off the coast of modern Turkey where the Romans exiled political criminals, enemies of the state.

- ❖ So this is the background. This is the historical context of Revelation. **Now understanding this is helpful, but it's also confusing. Because the book's background seems to contradict its message.** In v3 John is calling Christians who keep God's word "blessed", and in vv5-6 he launches into a doxology praising Jesus as the king who reigns on the throne. "*To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*"
 - ▶ But according to the background, Christians are being persecuted. Churches are having to operate underground while some are sadly capitulating and compromising. And one of their leaders, likely the last living Apostle, has been hauled off and banished as an enemy of the state.
 - **Persecuted and oppressed people are not normally called blessed. Banished people who lose everything and everyone they know and love don't normally praise God.** *So that's going on here?* Things are not as they seem. There's a fog that needs to be lifted. There must be an unseen reality yet to be unveiled. That's the only way to explain this incongruity between John's dire circumstances and his defiant confidence.

What Kind of Book is this?

- ❖ And that's exactly what Revelation is here to do. It's here to unveil unseen realities. That's the very nature of this book. This leads us to our second question: *What kind of book is this?* Because that'll determine how we ought to read it and how we apply it.
 - ▶ The word we're looking for here is **genre**. It's a French word meaning the kind or category of literature. The Bible is comprised of a number of different genres. You have historical narrative, law, poetry, wisdom books, prophecy, NT letters, etc. And the interpretative method you bring to a book largely depends on its particular genre.
 - ***So what's the genre of Revelation? What kind of book is it?*** Well John actually uses three different terms to describe the genre. He calls it a letter, a prophecy, and an apocalypse.

- ❖ **First, Revelation is a letter.** Like other New Testament letters (epistles), Revelation has a *standard introduction* where the author identifies both himself and the ones to whom he writes (v4a). And a *standard salutation* where you call on the grace and peace of God the Father and the Son, Lord Jesus Christ, to be upon your readers (v4b; cf. Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2).

- ❖ In our case, we've got a reference to the Father in v4 where it says, "*from him who is and who was and who is to come.*" Most people think that's a paraphrase of the divine name of God, Yahweh, the Great I AM (Ex. 3:14-15).
 - ▶ What's unique is that there's also a reference to the Holy Spirit. It says this grace and peace is, "*from the seven spirits who are before his throne*". The number seven is just being used symbolically to communicate completeness or perfection. The Spirit is described elsewhere in the book as one person (cf. 3:6, 13).
 - And of course we see in v5 that this grace and peace are also from Jesus Christ. So unlike other New Testament salutations, this one prays for grace and peace upon its readers from all three persons of the Godhead.

- ❖ So this is a letter. It was written by a specific historical person to specific historical people who were living in a specific historical context. Later on in v11, seven specific churches in seven specific cities are identified. **The point is that whatever is written here must have been intelligible and applicable to its original recipients.**
 - ▶ **Many Christians today day tend to read the book of Revelation as if it were some ancient book of future prophecies.** It's like reading Nostradamus. You're reading something written in centuries past but pointing to realities only to be seen and understood in modern times or in some future age. So the great eagle in chapter 12:14 is a reference to the United States and the beast is Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Iraq, Iran or whoever happens to be our biggest geo-political threat at the time.
 - But if the book of Revelation is a letter written to believers in seven city churches, if John can instruct them, in v3, to read this letter aloud in their worship gathering, to listen and to obey what's in it, then clearly he wrote a letter that was intelligible and applicable to ancient readers. That means we shouldn't treat the book as a collection of futuristic prophecies, which were really written for contemporary Christians to finally decipher.

- ❖ But having said that, we still have to read this as a prophecy because that's what John calls it in v3. The term *prophecy* is used five times to describe this book (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19).
 - ▶ **So Revelation is a prophecy.** But we have to define a prophecy biblically. In the Bible, prophecies sometimes did predict future events. **But generally speaking, prophecies were understood more as *declarations* than *predictions*.** It's the difference between foretelling ("*This is what's going to happen in the future.*") and forth-telling ("*This is what the Lord is saying to you right now.*")

- ❖ So when we call Revelation as prophecy, the emphasis is on the divine origin of this letter. Yes, it was written down with pen and parchment by the Apostle John, but the real author is God himself. **When it says this is a revelation of Jesus, it's not just a revelation about Jesus as it is a revelation from Jesus.**
 - ▶ We see this in v1. God the Father gave a message to His Son Jesus Christ, who sent it along by his angel, who gave it to his servant John, who wrote it down for the servants of God in seven ancient city churches.

- ❖ **But while respecting this as a real letter to seven real churches, we know that these words apply to all churches in all times and all places.** It's safe to say that the number seven is being used symbolically as before and just as it is throughout the book.⁶
 - ▶ At that time there were at least ten known churches in the region of Asia Minor. The churches in Colossae and Troas were the most prominent ones not mentioned. **So to address this book to seven city churches is a symbolic way of addressing the book to the whole Church.** This is a prophetic word for the Church universal.

- ❖ **Lastly, John calls this book an apocalypse.** That's the Greek word we translate as *revelation*. So in v1 it literally says, "*The apocalypse of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place*".
 - ▶ When you read it that way it sounds pretty scary. An apocalypse is a scary word. We immediately think of cataclysmic destruction. We imagine blood moons and fire coming down from heaven. We picture something bad, something scary.
 - **But to John's original audience, when they heard the word *apocalypse* they pictured something inviting.** Because the word itself simply means an unveiling. God is lifting back the curtain and what was once hidden, what was once hazy and unclear now comes into sharper focus.

- ❖ Now apocalyptic literature was a genre in itself. You could identify it by certain features. For example, it tends to use animals to represent people. So in here we encounter a Lamb, a beast, and a dragon. It often refers to historical events in the form of natural phenomenon like an earthquake or flood. And as we've mentioned, it uses numbers symbolically.
 - ▶ **But the most important feature in apocalyptic literature is the way it tries to set our present situation in light of unseen realities – whether invisible realities in the present or imminent realities in the future.**⁷ In other words, you realize that things are not as they seem.

- ❖ So an apocalypse (a revelation) for Florence Chadwick would've been a lifting of the fog so that unseen realities come into view. She would've seen support boats all around her, and she would've seen that the shore was right there in the distance.
 - ▶ She would've realized that she can make it. An apocalypse enables that kind of resolve because now you're seeing things differently. Yes, it looks bad in the present, but it's not as bad as it looks.

- ❖ **So imagine what an apocalypse (a revelation) can do for a beleaguered church under great pressure to compromise or repudiate their faith.** There's so much worldly opposition, so much spiritual oppression. It's so easy to give up. But when the fog is lifted, when the curtain is pulled back, when they're given a revelation – God's people realize that things are not as they seem.

⁶ Cf. seven lampstands (1:12); seven stars (1:16); seven torches of fire (4:5); seven seals (5:1); seven horns/eyes (5:6); seven trumpets (8:2); seven bowls (16:1)

⁷ Johnson, 26.

- ▶ **Yes, there are still skirmishes being fought, but the decisive battle has already been won, and our King has come out the victor** (Rev. 12:7-12). He now sits on his throne (Rev. 4:2) and soon all his enemies will be crushed under his feet. And then he'll return to renew this earth and establish his kingdom forever (Rev. 21-22).
- ❖ If you can see that, if you can believe that, imagine the resolve and confidence it gives you to face a difficult present. This is what the book of Revelation tries to accomplish as a letter, a prophecy, and an apocalypse.

What is the Book's Message?

- ❖ This leads to our final question. If the book intends to set our present living in light of unseen realities regarding our present and future, then what exactly does it have to say about our present and future? *What's the book's overall message?* The prologue gives us a glimpse.
 - ▶ We can sum it up with two verbs: behold and be. More specifically, a) **Behold the priestly King who is coming**, and b) **Be a kingdom of priests for this King's glory**.
- ❖ **First, behold your King.** Forty times in Revelation John says, "*I saw*". In v11 it says this book is a record of all that he saw. Nineteen times we encounter the command to "*behold*".
 - ▶ 1:7 – "*Behold, he is coming with the clouds*"
 - ▶ 1:18 – "*Behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades*"
 - ▶ 4:2 – "*Behold, a door standing open in heaven!*"
 - ▶ 5:5 – "*Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered*"
 - ▶ 7:9 – "*Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, peoples, and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb*"
 - ▶ 19:11 – "*Behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True*"
 - ▶ 21:3 – "*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man*"
 - ▶ 22:12 – "*Behold, I am coming soon*"
- ❖ Notice how this book begins and ends with a call to look and see that Jesus is coming. **Everything else in this book, everything else that John saw, is bracketed by this unseen reality now unveiled. Jesus is coming.**
 - ▶ Look carefully at v7. Let's read it again, "*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.*"
 - It's important to point out that this verse is not just referring to Jesus' second coming. It didn't say Jesus will come. No, it says he *is* coming. Things are already in motion. He's already moving toward us. He's coming!
- ❖ And notice carefully that it says he's coming *with the clouds*. That's significant. There are two Old Testament passages being combined here. One is from **Daniel 7:13-14**. It's where Daniel sees this vision of "*one like the son of man*" coming with the clouds of heaven to stand before the Ancient of Days to receive dominion and glory and a kingdom that shall not pass. By the first-century, Daniel 7 was recognized as a clear reference to God's Messiah.

- ▶ The second Old Testament passage is **Zechariah 12:10**. “*And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him*”. In context, the mourning and wailing of Israel is out of conviction and repentance for having rejected God and his messenger. They have pierced him, but now they’re pleading for mercy.
- ❖ **By combining these two texts, John is bringing together the conquering Daniel 7 Messiah and the suffering Zechariah 12 Messiah.** Both ideas are found in Scripture, but by Jesus’ day most Jews only anticipated a conquering Messiah. That’s actually why so many Jews rejected Jesus. They viewed his crucifixion as antithetical to messiahship.
 - ▶ But John is demonstrating that everything that happened to Jesus and the fact that even the nations – all the tribes of the earth – are repenting and wailing in conviction of sin is all a fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures.
- ❖ **The fact is that you can’t have a conquering Messiah without a suffering Messiah.** For it’s by his suffering, by the shedding of his blood, that he liberated a people to make into a kingdom where he reigns as king.
 - ▶ Look back at v5. Jesus is called “*the faithful witness*”. He gave witness to the truth when he stood before the Roman authorities. He didn’t buckle under pressure. He didn’t cave in to compromise. It says in 1 Timothy 6:13 that he made the good confession in his witness before Pilate.
- ❖ And it’s because of his good confession that he ended up on a cross. But Jesus chose this path because, as it says in v5, he loves us. He laid down his life for you because he loves you. Like a good high priest, he made a sacrifice of blood for the atonement of your sins. **But like a great high priest, he sacrificed himself and shed his own blood to free you from sin.**
 - ▶ He died and yet he didn’t stay dead. No, he triumphed over death. It says in v5 that Jesus is the “*firstborn of the dead*”. That is, he’s the first to rise again in resurrection life. And he ascended on high to the Father’s right hand where he reigns as “*ruler of the kings on earth*”.
- ❖ Friends, no matter how bad your circumstances are right now. No matter how much opposition and pressure you’re facing to tone down your faith, to privatize your beliefs, to hide your convictions. No matter if it looks like Christianity has been defeated in our society.
 - ▶ Behold, things are not as they seem. Behold, your great prophet who made a faithful witness. Behold, your great priest who shed his blood for your sin. Behold, your king who reigns sovereignly over all earthly powers and authorities. Behold, your priestly king who is coming on the clouds.
- ❖ That’s the first part of the message. **The second is to be a priestly kingdom for your King’s glory.** It says in v6 that Jesus, “*made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*”

- ▶ There's actually a reference here to **Exodus 19:6** where God says he chose Israel from among all the peoples of the earth that she might be to him a "*kingdom of priests*". As a kingdom of priest, Israel's role was to mediate God's blessing and truth to all the kingdoms of the earth.
 - But now the role has been given to us – to the faithful in Christ, to those whom he loves, to those whom he has liberated from sin. We have been made into a kingdom of priests.

- ❖ Friends, if you call yourself a Christian, then let me ask you: ***Are you living like you belong to the kingdom of Jesus?*** Does your life demonstrate that Jesus has dominion over you? Does your life itself confess *Christos Kurios*, that Christ is Lord? Or does the way you live suggest otherwise? That money is Lord. That love and marriage is Lord. That your career is Lord. That your kids are Lord.
 - ▶ ***And are you living like a priest?*** Is your life centered on the worship of God and the joy of mediating God's blessing and truth to others? Are you helping others to know Jesus – to know his love and the freedom from sin, which he accomplished by his own blood?

- ❖ Friends, we are living in a culture that grows everyday more and more hostile to Christianity and its unique truth claims. Christians were once a **privileged majority** in this country. But now, like first-century believers, we find ourselves in the position of a **prophetic minority**.
 - ▶ We don't have any privileges. We don't hold a distinguished place in society or in the eyes of our neighbors. Things are looking pretty bad these days. But then again, things are not as bad as they look.

- ❖ Let's conclude by looking at v8. Friends, our Lord God is the Alpha and the Omega. He's the A to the Z. The beginning and the end. **In other words, you have no reason to fear when someone says that you better change your beliefs or you'll find yourself on the wrong side of history. I don't worry about that because my God is the creator and the completer of history.** I serve him alone, the Alpha and the Omega.
 - ▶ "*Who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*" This is actually out of chronological order. Elsewhere in Revelation is usually puts "who was" first (cf. 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). I think it's trying to say that the Almighty God of the past and the future is still Almighty and still sovereign over your present – even though it may not seem like it right now. Take comfort in the revelation that things are truly not as they seem.