

Letters to Seven City Churches: The Lord Among His Churches

Revelation 1:9-20

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on May 4, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we began a new series in the book of Revelation that focuses on the first three chapters, specifically on the letters Jesus sends to seven city churches. I know some of you were hoping we would go through the whole thing. I have to admit that I'm not sure if I'm ready to preach the whole book. There are parts of it that are really tough to interpret.
 - ▶ But I think I can handle the first three chapters. The really crazy visions don't show up until chapter 4. In chapters 4-5 John looks through a door open in heaven and things get wild. There he sees this unspeakably beautiful throne room with twenty-four elders around a majestic seated figure. John sees four living creatures that look like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle with six wings each and full of eyes. And he witnesses an exchange between the seated One and a bloody Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes that is worshipped by angels numbering myriads of myriads.
 - That's just chapters 4-5, which is still pretty tame compared to what comes next. **This book is chocked full of imagery and creatures and numbers and word pictures all intending to symbolize unseen (unperceived) realities in the immediate present and the imminent future.**

- ❖ Now last week I explained how Revelation falls under the category (*genre*) of **apocalyptic literature**. It starts off in chapter 1:1 stating that this is, "*The revelation (apocalypse) of Jesus Christ.*" And we said that calling something apocalyptic doesn't mean it's about something bad that takes place at the end of world. Unfortunately, the word now carries a negative connotation. So an apocalyptic book sounds like a book about how everything is going to be destroyed by a meteorite or nuclear war or an act of God.
 - ▶ But an *apocalypse* simply means an unveiling, a revealing. So an apocalyptic book is just a book that unveils (reveals) truth that was either hidden or just unperceived. **As we've said, it uses symbolism and word pictures to set our present-day situation in light of unseen realities in both the present and the future.** So even though at times Revelation does point to future realities, it reveals them for the purpose of present day application.

- ❖ **One New Testament scholar suggests that apocalyptic literature should be read more like a political cartoon.** His point is that the imagery and symbolism you encounter in Revelation are directed not just at your *intellect* but your *imagination* – in order to evocatively communicate a message about unseen present-day realities.

- ❖ Here's an example¹:



¹ Image found in Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation*, 36-37.

- ❖ This cartoon shows an elephant with its trunk in the shape of a noose. *Pretty intriguing but what does it mean?* Would it help if I told you its historical context? It was published in the *L.A. Times* back when Republicans were threatening to impeach Clinton. Now does it make sense? Do you see how much more powerful an image is compared to writing an article accusing Republicans of trying to hang a Democratic president?

- ❖ Here's another example²:



- ❖ This one shows a terrifying dragon swallowing a whole city. Would it help if I told you that it was published on July 1, 1997, the day the British handed Hong Kong over to Communist China? Now did the newspaper editors expect you to interpret this literally? That Hong Kong was literally under attack by a Godzilla-like creature? No, like with any political cartoon, it's just trying to communicate a powerful message through imagery.
 - ▶ Well in a sense, this is what Revelation is trying to do. That's why it would be a mistake to read a book like this full of word pictures and try to interpret everything literally. **You have to take seriously its literary features and its historical context if you want a proper interpretation of its message.**
- ❖ And like these cartoons, the message in Revelation has a political bent. Last week we said the Apostle John likely wrote this in 95AD during the reign of **Emperor Domitian**. Domitian was an extremely insecure man who tried to compensate by requiring all his subjects to address him as "Lord and God" or "Everlasting King".³ You would show your loyalty to him by taking a pinch of incense and throwing it in the fire before an image of the emperor, and saying *Caesar Kurios*, "Caesar is Lord".⁴
 - ▶ For most people this was no big deal, but for a Christian this was a nonstarter. There's no way a Christian can say *Caesar Kurios*. We have only one Lord – *Christos Kurios*. Our allegiance is to Christ. We have no problem with being good citizens and rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but in the end Jesus is our king.
- ❖ So there *is* a political bent to this book. It's a call to not bend the knee to the secular state, to not bow before any earthly power. **Everywhere first-century Christians looked, they couldn't help but see visuals and images of Caesar's claim to rule and reign over their lives.** Statues, icons, temples, coins – they were all designed and crafted to evocatively communicate one thing: *Caesar is Lord and God over you.*

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 23-24.

⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation (NIGTC)*, 31.

The Need to See Jesus

- ❖ That's the dominant image in their day. Christians couldn't go a day without encountering it. That's why John is trying to give his readers another image to gaze at. **What they need, more than anything else, is to see Jesus.** They need a new image, a new vision that counters what the world is dishing out, that unveils true reality.
 - ▶ **They need an evocative image of Christ Jesus reigning as their King – not just in the future but in the here and now.** They need to see King Jesus. They need to see the unseen realities of their present. That's what apocalyptic literature tries to do.

- ❖ John says back in v2 that he bore eyewitness to Jesus, which empowered his witness for Jesus. But now here in v9 he says that's how he ended up on Patmos. It's an island that Rome used to banish enemies of the state. John says he's there "*on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus*". In other words, it's because he wouldn't compromise the Gospel or his own integrity. So Rome responded with persecution, or what John calls "*tribulation*".
 - ▶ And he says in v9 that his readers are "*partners*" in this tribulation. They will, if they haven't already, face something similar. They'll have to live out their discipleship to Christ under a similar threat of exile or martyrdom. There are no exceptions.

- ❖ He says they're partners in "*the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus*". That means all three are yours when you become a Christian, when you're found in Jesus. **You get the kingdom (the crown) but before that comes the tribulation (the cross).** That was the pattern our Lord Jesus set for us. First the *cross*, then the *crown*, and along the way *patient endurance*.
 - ▶ **Friends, just close your ears if someone offers you Jesus and his kingdom but leaves out his tribulation.** Close the book or turn the channel if someone says you can bypass the cross for the crown. Tribulation is a given for Christians. 2 Timothy 3:12 says that, "*all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Not "*may be*" but "*will be*".

- ❖ That's why all of us will need the patient endurance that's found in Jesus. That's what John is trying to strengthen in his friends. Now in v10 he says he was in the Spirit one Lord's day, one Sunday. I think that means he was worshipping in the Spirit. When he suddenly he hears a voice behind him telling him to write down what he's about to see in a book and to send it to seven city churches in Asia-Minor.
 - ▶ Look at this map. **[SHOW MAP]** Notice the order: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. There's a clockwise order because Revelation was likely a circular letter intended to be passed along and read aloud to each church in their worship gatherings.
 - So John is writing to beleaguered churches, persecuted Christians. Their businesses, their homes, their very lives were likely being threatened. *So what does the Lord have to offer? What does the Lord give to the Apostle to pass on to his suffering people?*

- ❖ Does he give him instructions to on how to fight a culture war? A strategy to get Christians into key positions of cultural and political influence? Or does he tell them to bunker down, separate yourself from this sinful world, and just focus on your families? Does he offer them a church program or a new bestseller that includes a forty-day church-wide campaign?
 - ▶ **No, the Lord Jesus gives his people who are suffering and oppressed the one thing they need most – a vision of himself.** They need to see Jesus. Now there are so many mental pictures of Jesus that you can come up with. You can picture baby Jesus in a manger, Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus feeding the five thousand, Jesus washing feet, or Jesus hanging on the cross. Those are all helpful images.
 - But in their situation – filled with fear and tribulation – John and his readers need more. As do we. **We need to see Jesus as he is *right now*.** We need the curtain pulled back so that a clear vision of King Jesus comes into view.

- ❖ There's a sense in which seeing is believing. **A sight of Jesus will strengthen the kind of persevering faith you need to patiently endure tribulation.** The more you see the more you believe that being *in Jesus* is worth the suffering, that he really is coming on the clouds for our deliverance.
 - ▶ *Seeing is believing.* Now I realize that phrase usually means I only believe what I can literally see and touch and examine with my five senses. So if you need to see Jesus in order to patiently endure tribulation, then the common response is going to be, "*Tough luck. He's invisible. You can't see him.*"

The Way to See Jesus

- ❖ That leads to our second point. ***How do we, in our present day, see Jesus?*** I know for those of you who are still seeking God, this is the hardest part. You're friends are telling to you believe in Jesus – to trust him, to love him, to have a relationship with him – but you can't see him. Trusting your friends, loving your friends, having relationship with your friends makes sense. They're right in front of you. You can see them. ***But how do you follow an invisible god?***
 - ▶ My wife was putting my three-year-old to bed the other day. She was scared of being in her room alone, so Theresa tried to comfort her by saying, "*Don't worry Jesus is with you.*" To which my daughter responded, "*Where? I don't see him.*" As a parent, sometimes the brutal honesty and simplicity of our kids really forces you to reflect on your own beliefs.

- ❖ I want to see Jesus. I know if I expect to patiently endure the tribulations of this life, I need to regularly see Jesus. ***But are we talking about seeing him with physical eyes? Or is this just something that goes on in my head?***
 - ▶ In John's case, we know his vision of King Jesus was not just in his head. He really saw him while sitting there on the shores of Patmos. Notice how he says in v10 that he heard a voice behind him, and then in v12 he says he had to turn to see the voice that was speaking to him. **If this was just a mystical experience in his head, there would've been no need for him to physically turn his body around to look.**

- So John must have had a real vision of the Risen and Reigning Jesus. Just as the Apostle Paul had a real vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Both men would've insisted that they literally saw the Risen Lord.
- ❖ Some of you are wondering why Jesus doesn't just do the same today. "If you show yourself, Jesus, then I'll have no trouble believing in you. I'll have no trouble patiently enduring tribulation, if I could just see you with my own eyes."
 - ▶ *But are you sure about that? **Because there are accounts in Scripture of skeptics actually seeing the Resurrected Jesus and still not being sure.*** In Matthew 28, Jesus gathers disciples to him in Galilee. He's going to give them the Great Commission before he ascends to the Father. Now it says in v17, "*when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.*" **Some see the Risen Lord in all his resurrection glory and worship. Others see the same Jesus and doubt.**
 - That tells me is that sin has so pervaded and corrupted our bodies and minds that you can even trust your own senses. You can look upon a man who has risen from the dead, but if you don't want to believe it to be true, you'll come up with all kinds of excuses to explain it away.
 - ❖ You're *not* better off if Jesus were to just walk into this room right now. At least according to Jesus. He told Thomas that you believe because you've seen me, but "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" (Jn. 20:29) So you're blessed to not physically see Jesus and yet believe.
 - ▶ **Seeing God in front of you with the eyes of your head is not more advantageous than seeing God in the Scriptures with the eyes of your heart.** Jesus said so. He said in Luke 16 that if people don't listen to Moses and the Prophets (to Scripture), then they won't be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead (16:31).
 - Jesus is saying if you want to see him, just look for him in the Bible. Scripture is sufficient. Your sight is not. **Because if the eyes of your heart are closed to the biblical Jesus, it won't make a difference if you saw a bodily Jesus.**
 - ❖ Jesus wants us to see him, but notice he doesn't tell John to write a set of instructions on how to have your own personal, ecstatic vision of him. Instead he gives John alone a unique vision of himself and then instructs him to write it down for others to *read*.
 - ▶ **So we're supposed to see Jesus by reading of Jesus in Holy Scripture**, in this case in the book of Revelation. According to Paul, in Ephesians 1, you can only see Jesus when, by God's grace, the "*eyes of your heart*" are opened and enlightened by the "*Spirit of wisdom and revelation*" (1:17-18).
 - ❖ If you still think you'd easily believe in Jesus if you could just see him in person, that just demonstrates that you have too high a view of yourself, too low a view of sin and its affects on your senses, and too little of a felt need for God's grace.
 - ▶ The truth is that no one can see Jesus for who he really is – whether in Scripture or in person – unless God, in his grace and by his Spirit, opens the eyes of your heart.

The Sight of Jesus

- ❖ So let's turn back to our passage and catch a sight of Jesus. Now last week we mentioned how Revelation is filled with Old Testament allusions. And in this chapter, references from the books of Daniel and Zechariah are strung together.
 - ▶ So here in v12, the vision of seven golden lampstands is a clear reference to a similar vision found in **Zechariah 4**. Those were post-exilic days when God's people attempted to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple but faced heavy resistance.
 - Amidst the strife, Zechariah receives a vision of, "*a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.*" (4:2-3)

- ❖ We're basically told that the lampstand represents Israel, and the olive trees represent two figures anointed by God to serve Israel. They're revealed to be Joshua the high priest (3:1) and Zerubbabel (4:6) a descendant of David and the rightful king of Israel.
 - ▶ **So this vision in Zechariah 4 was intended to strengthen Israel's resolve to finish rebuilding the temple despite heavy resistance, to build up their patient endurance by giving them a sight of God's anointed High Priest and High King.**
 - Well the same intent is here in John's vision, but now instead of just one lampstand we have seven. That suggests true Israel is no longer limited to one nation but now encompasses all the peoples of the earth. And furthermore, here in Revelation, the High Priest and the High King have been joined into one role, one person.

- ❖ So from one angle, in our glimpse of Jesus, we see **a High Priest tending to his churches**. In Moses' day, a golden lampstand was constructed and placed in the tabernacle before the table of Presence (Ex. 37:17-24). The light that emanated from its lamps represented the presence of God. Being in the light is like being in God's presence.
 - ▶ Now we're told directly in v20 that these seven lampstands represent the seven churches John is writing to. **The analogy suggests that the church's primary mission is to shine God's light in a dark world.** But with all the tribulation blowing against them, their flame could be snuffed out. These churches and their witness to God's presence looks to be extinguished.

- ❖ *But what does John see in the midst of these lampstands?* One like a son of man wearing what appears to be priestly garments. Now a priest's job was to tend to the lampstands. Priests would trim the lamps, remove old wicks and oil, refill with fresh oil, and relight lamps that go out.
 - ▶ *Do you see why this is the exact image of Jesus that a church under the threat of tribulation needs to see with the eyes of their hearts?* **They need an image of Christ tending to his churches to ensure that they continue shining light in a dark world.**

- ❖ So a High Priest to his churches is the first image John sees. The second is **a High King ruling over his churches**. Look back at John's description here of "*one like a son of man*".
 - ▶ We noted last week that this phrase comes from **Daniel 7** where "*one like a son of man*" comes with the clouds to be presented before the Ancient of Days. This messianic figure is then given dominion, glory and a kingdom that shall not pass away or be destroyed (7:13-14).
 - So that's a clear allusion to Daniel 7 but there's more. Keep your finger in Revelation, but turn to Daniel 7:9 and 10:5. I want you to see the connections.
- ❖ First let's read 1:12-16 again, "¹²*Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and 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. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶In 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."*
- ❖ Now look at **Daniel 7:9**, "⁹*As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire.*"
 - ▶ Turn to **Daniel 10:5-6**. Here's another vision of a heavenly being, "⁵*I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude."*
- ❖ The similarities are striking and significant. **Jesus is being compared to this messianic figure in Daniel who ends up with dominion, glory, and a never-ending kingdom.** And with the hair as white as wool comment, Jesus is actually being compared to the Ancient of Days! I think this is a clear claim of Jesus' divinity, of his oneness with God the Father. But again the point being stressed here is his kingship.
- ❖ Now let me point out what might appear to be a minor detail but is rather significant. Notice how the figure in Daniel 10 has a belt of fine gold around his waist. But then in Revelation 1 it's described more as a golden sash around his chest.
 - ▶ *What's the significance?* Think about it. **A belt around your waist is a work belt.** It means you've still got work to do. **But a belt around your chest is a victory sash.** You would only wear it that way if the work is done and if you came out on top.
- ❖ So if Jesus is walking around among the lampstands with a golden victory sash, then I take that to mean that this King has defeated his enemies and established his kingdom rule. That's a comforting image to have when you look at our culture today and it looks like Christianity is losing. Churches look defeated. Christians are being marginalized and oppressed.

- ▶ You might feel like giving up. That is, until you see your king walking around with his victory sash and then you remember, “***Oh yeah, Jesus has already won!***”
- ❖ And that leads to a third image of Jesus as **the Living Hope of his churches**. Let’s keep reading in vv17-18, “*17When 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, 18and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”*”
 - ▶ So John falls at Jesus’ feet in holy fear, in utter reverence. But he tells John not to fear. You don’t have to be afraid. Now by extension, the command to “*fear not*” is being directed at John’s readers. Fear not, the tribulation you’re in. Fear not, the persecution you face. Fear not, the threats and insults you must patiently endure.
 - *Why? Because Jesus is the first and the last. He is the everlasting God.* He stands sovereign and above all things, all times, all cultures, all circumstances. You might fear our society is eroding and the church is powerless to do anything. But take one look at this Jesus in the Scriptures and you’ll remember, “***Oh yeah, he’s the first and the last. He’s got this.***”
- ❖ Now the fact that Jesus is the first and the last isn’t the only reason we shouldn’t fear. Jesus goes on to remind us that he’s also the living one. “*I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*” (1:18) To have the keys of Death and Hades means he gets to decide who stays in and who gets to come out. He’s the Judge and the Jailer.
 - ▶ So if you’re facing tribulation, if your very life is being threaten with harm or even death, the one thing you need most is an image of Jesus with a set of keys on his hip. *Christian, what’s the worse they can do to you? Kill you? Take one look at this Jesus and you’ll remember, “Oh yeah, he’s got the keys to Death and he has promised to let me out because I trust in him. So I wont stay dead. I’ll rise just as he rose and I’ll be alive with him forevermore!”*
- ❖ Around 150AD, an early Christian wrote a letter to a man name **Diognetus** about how Christians can inexplicably endure tribulation with such patience. Listen to what he writes, “*They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. They are unknown, yet they are condemned; they are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are glorified in their dishonor; they are slandered, yet they are vindicated. They are cursed, yet they bless; they are insulted, yet they offer respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as though brought to life . . . and so Christians when punished daily increase more and more.*”⁵
- ❖ ***How is this kind of reaction to such suffering even possible?*** It must be that the eyes of their hearts were opened, and they have a clear sight of King Jesus as he really is right now.

⁵ *The Epistle to Diognetus*, 5:11-16; 6:9b