
The Christ of the Churches

Revelation 1

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How many of you could find Ephesus or Sardis or Thyatira on a map? That leads to a question: why study these obscure churches today?

They are personal letters from Jesus to His church. They express His love and concern for the community of believers as they represent Him in the age just before eternity.

They are written to those within every congregation who want to overcome – whose love for God and His kingdom motivates them to strive ever upward even in failing churches.

Through them we today can evaluate the dangers and duties that characterize our congregation.

Various approaches have been taken to this opening portion of Revelation:

Closed approach - The message to these seven churches is so unique that we can only draw very general lessons from them. This view feeds itself on the references to obscure heresies and groups. After all who are the Nicolaitans and why do we care?

Historicist approach - Each church is representative of a succeeding age in church history. This is a very popular view that has only surface justification from Scripture. But it is reading history back into the Scripture. All versions of this view see our own day as that of the last church. The major problem with this view is that it does not account for the presence of all the churches *in the very generation in which it was written*.

Practical approach - Each church represents one of seven major types of churches indicating their characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses.

We will take this last approach.

How do the messages relate to chapter one? Is it possible to go immediately into a study of the letters to the seven churches without connecting it with what has gone before? No, that is not possible. We must know the Christ of the churches, first.

The great letters from Christ and to his churches comes through the experience and pen of a man just like us. He is John. Now John has been a follower of Christ, a disciple and now an apostle. His ministry resume included a long pastorate of the church at Ephesus, the gospel of John as well as 3 smaller epistles. He lived to see the terrible defection of some of their elders, an event Paul warned them about in Acts 20:29-30 and which John alludes to in 1 John 2:18-29. He has been arrested for his faith, thrown in prison, possibly boiled in oil and now banished to the tiny Isle of Patmos. Here is a man like us. He knows what it means to be married, to have a family, to do ministry and to train others. He has tasted the bitter fruit of error and seen the wolves slinking about in sheep's clothes. He has watched the fabric of his beloved church torn apart by doctrinal error with the bitterness and hatred that accompanies it. He has suffered immense physical pain. Now, he contemplates the rest of his life, separated from his brethren who are also suffering.

The truths of Revelation 1 come to us from God through John, not to exhaust or frustrate or even bore us. But in the grist mill of life and ministry, it comes to give us perspective, purpose, and power.

The Vision: From God to the Church (v.1-3)

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, **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.

At the beginning of the Olympic games, the torch is brought from Greece to the host country in a long chain of runners. These runners take the lit torch and hand it in a long relay. The highest point of the opening ceremonies comes with the entrance into the stadium of the Olympic torch. There, in grand style to the crashing chords of a stirring anthem, the final runner takes the torch up the stairs. In a moment of climatic pause, the torch is lifted then lowered and the Olympic flame is lit.

There is just such a chain in these opening verses. The torch of the revelation of Jesus Christ is handed from God the Father who gives it to Christ. He communicates it to the angel who shows it to John. John, in a moment of grand climax, brings his pen to the paper. We now have those words which we read or hear. O, our souls flame up as we treasure and heed the unfolding of Christ.

The first of the seven Beatitudes (blessed are those) of this book comes to those who:

Read - that is they read it out loud. This would have been the common practice in that day due to widespread illiteracy;

Hear - we may hear this text with our ears or with our eyes;

Heed - we treasure and obey what we hear.

God has brought the flame of the revelation of Christ from His throne through His servant and now it is put into your hands – your ears and eyes: what are we going to do with it?

When we put on a program or a play, we usually want to have props and backgrounds and scenery. Daniel 7:13-14 is great prophetic backdrop against which what follows is set. Imagine the heavenly scene that Daniel painted.

¹³ “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Now let us turn to the scene in Revelation 1.

The Vision: God in His Greatness (v.4-8)

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.”

John is writing to the church. This revelation is to bring us enabling grace and a calming peace.

God and His Throne (v.4-5a)

The key word here is *from*. Here is His *position*. The nature and character of God makes His grace and peace significant. He is the exalted King from whom this grace and peace comes. What we are to see is His Preeminence.

Suppose you received a letter from our President that opened with wishing you power and calm. Such a message would probably cause most of us deep concern. What is about to happen to me? But God wants us to see that this grace and peace comes from the very Presence on the Throne of Heaven.

The revelation of Jesus Christ and the enabling grace and calming peace that issues from that revelation all come in context of the Trinity. The Father is designated as Eternally existing one. The Spirit is indicated in the words “seven-fold Spirit before the Throne.” But Jesus Christ is named.

Here is the exalted Christ in His three offices. He is Prophet as the faithful witness. He is Priest as the firstborn (meaning, being first in his status, not first as to the historical record). He is King for He rules over Kings—monarchs and dictators and governors and Prime Ministers, and even Presidents.

God and His People (v.5b-6)

The Reality of God and His People

The key word here is *to*. Here is our *praise*. Here is His *provision*. He has done all this to make grace and peace possible. The revelation of Jesus is an unveiling of His attributes and an explaining of His accomplishments.

In the midst of terrible trial and distressing trouble, we need the comfort and encouragement that comes in being reminded by John in his writings of particular things about Christ.:

In John’s Gospel, Jesus loves us...

His love is deep and continual. It is the well-spring of His choice of us, His delight in us and His desire to dwell in us.

In John’s Epistles, Jesus freed us from our sins...

The calamities of life and living may be hanging from us like chains, but we are freed from our sins. This sometimes does not affect us as it ought because we do not see nor feel the magnitude, the misery and foul stench that our sins are. When Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress* looked at the cross, the burden of his sins rolled off his back into the grave. What an uplifting and heartening word this is!

In John’s Revelation, Jesus constituted us as a Kingdom community of priests

This is our sustaining and empowering perspective: we are serving our King, offering up ourselves to Him as priests offering living sacrifices.

In the midst of terrible trial and distressing trouble, we need the comfort and encouragement of being sought, saved, and serving.

The Response to God by His People

The heartbeat of a serving people who know they are loved of God and freed from their sins is to magnify the worth of God and bow to the supremacy of God, from now on and forever.

There is another very important revelation of Christ—He is seen in His relation to God’s throne and to God’s people. Now He must be seen in His relation to the World.

God and the World (v.7)

.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.

The key word here is *behold*. Here is the Lord's *Parousia*. Here is Jesus' appearing. He appears from heaven, for His people – but against the world. This is the triumph and terror of the Lord's coming.

John sees Him returning just as He left. There was a bright morning where John stood with the other disciples and watched Jesus go up into the clouds. The angels sent them on to their ministries with the promise that Jesus would come just like that. Now, John gathers up the prophecy and promise and nourishes his hope on the sweet honey of that prospect.

But what is triumph for us will be terror for the lost. Everyone will see Him. From all over the world, all the tribes and peoples of the earth who have rejected Him will suddenly be overwhelmed in the flood of His fire and wrath and they will mourn. How is it with you on this day? How will it be with your soul on that day? Will you be one of the redeemed or one of the ruined. Will there be magnificent triumph or mournful and mad terror? Flee to Christ today. In Him alone put your faith. For in Him we will be delivered from the wrath to come.

God and His Word (v.8)

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

There is a sense of declaration here which is not to be missed. For what is to come in the Revelation that is this book, God stands as this kind of God. He is the Alpha and Omega. God is the first and last of all that is real, that exists, that has meaning. This is true because Jesus is the creator, sustainer, and definer of all existence. He is its beginning and its end. Just as understanding our written language requires a knowledge of the alphabet, so understanding what exists and what it means requires God.

God is the only One who is, who was and is to come - God is an ever present NOW. He simply is. From our view, He is, was and will be. From God's point of view, He simply is.

God is the Almighty. This is a very important designation of God in the book of Revelation. In the ebb and flow of the tides of time and the conflict of Satan in sin against the saints and righteousness, we need to know that our God is almighty. Satan must never be thought as equal and opposite God. No, Satan's opposite number is Michael.

How we need to know when all does not seem to be going well with us and with our world, that God stands sovereign over it all. He understands what it all means. He is in ultimate control.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

William Cowper

The Vision: Christ in His Glory (v.9-20)

John is highlighted *as one in the church*.

⁹I, 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. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "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."

John has seen the greatness of God as Christ is the one *over the church*. Jesus has saved His people, is glorified by His people, and who is coming for His people. Now John sees Christ as glorified in the midst of His people. Christ in His glory is the object of John's worship. Christ in His glory moves among the churches. Christ in His glory sustains the messengers (pastors) of the churches. So this paragraph will prepare us for the penetrating analysis of each church which follows in chapters two and three.

The Explanation John Gave (v.9-10a)

John wants to identify himself closely with us. He is not so different from us. He is our brother and sharer in our blessings and our problems.

John wants us to see ourselves in his place. Our lives in so many ways ought not to be different from his. Christians who are reading this Book should draw from it the same help and hope that John does.

John wants us to understand that he had borne witness to the Word of God and to the testimony of Christ (v.2). What he is now suffering are the consequences (v.9) for faithful work.

John wants to remind us what the gathering with God's people can be like for us. There is a sense of communicating what worship, privately and corporately may involve. It was the Lord's Day and He was in the Spirit. Though he could not assemble with God's people, he could still commune with and worship God.

The Experience John Had (v.10b-17)

When something amazing has happened to us, we usually want to relate it to someone. We usually relate it with great animation and excitement. John has had an amazing experience of God in Christ. He relates this, not so that we will attempt to duplicate this experience, but rather so that we will pay attention to the messages that follow it. It is almost always self-deceiving to expect to have the same experiences as others. Our experience of God in Christ needs to be genuine.

I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "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."

¹²Then 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.

What Was Heard (v.10b-11)

John heard the voice of God with both his spiritual and physical ears.

It was a *commanding* voice. It was loud with a trumpet like sound. It arrested his attention. It would not be ignored. Sometimes God's voice is a small still one, sometimes it is a loud disturbing one.

It was a *commissioning* voice. It told him what he was to do. Write and send. John had a clear understanding of what that voice demanded of him.

If we hear a voice that trumpets what we are to do, we had better listen and obey.

What Was Seen (v.12-16)

John turns to see the voice. And he sees lamps. This idea happens all the time in the Book of Revelation. Look a lion and he sees a lamb. Look a city and he sees a bride

John sees seven lamp stands. Moving among them is One like the Son of Man. John uses Luke's designation for Jesus.

We must at this point stop and remember that John sees in terms of symbols and metaphors. He uses language that is rich in the metaphors of the Old Testament and the Rabbinical inter-testament writings. What makes the whole Book of Revelation profitable to us is to listen to the metaphors and symbols and see the image as a whole. The words of John are metaphorical descriptions of majestic realities.

Even the greatest painting's beauty and power comes from seeing the whole, standing a bit away from it and seeing the image. We too often tend to get out our magnifying glass to trace every brush stroke and every line. Some would even try to detect the pencil marks underneath. Doing so may say much about technique and reality; but it is not the painting. Let us see this without trying to analyze every stroke of the prophetic brush.

This imagery is meant to convey a sense of ancient wisdom and magnificent power. Our eyes are dazzled by His brightness and the ground rumbles under our feet under the mighty cascade of His voice. His truth pierces the soul with the parry and thrust of Spanish steel. His gaze fixes on us in the white-hot arc of a welding torch. The brightness of His countenance is a noon day sun in summer. And in an outstretched hand glitters seven stars.

What Was Done (v.17)

John's whole being utterly failed him and he fell in fear at Jesus' feet. To all of you who listen at the keyhole of much of modern Christanology on radio, and TV and books – if we were to see Jesus now, it would not be the warm, fuzzy, enfolding sense of self-affirming beatitude. It would be a soul rending, sin exposing, mind blowing brightness that would threaten your very existence.

The Exhortation John Received (v.17-20)

When we have fallen prostrate at His feet with a sense of His greatness and supremacy and our own unworthiness, then comes the comforting, encouraging exhorting words of God. Insight into the greatness and glory of God *is always given to people who being sent to serve God.*

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. ¹⁹Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰As 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.

There is an exhortation to courage energized by truth about Christ. “Do not be afraid – here are the facts. If you think that the images of who I am are great, let me remind of you of these realities as well.” These words leave us without a doubt that Jesus is God and that He is the redeemer. John hears the gospel.

To a task communicating truth about Christ. “Write ...” This is probably the only book in the New Testament that has its outline right at the beginning. The obedience to this command brought about the book that is the Revelation of Christ.

To understand truth about Christ. Here is what those metaphors point to. Here is the reality behind them. Christ is upholding His ministers. Christ is present in His church.

Reflect and Respond

In the midst of the very pressing troubles and trials of our lives, may we gain strength and calm, grace, and peace from the greatness of God and the glory of Christ. May this not just be words and religious slogans – may they be deep resources of help and hope from the Spirit.

Christ is in His church. Christ is upholding His servants. How this encourages us and how it motivates us. Yet it also causes us to reflect on our accountability to Christ. May we be found faithful and steadfast in all our loving and laboring in Christ.

May we, in the Word of God, hear His voice and see His form. May we gain real perspective, power, and purpose from having a sense of the majesty, supremacy, and glory of Christ. May we be challenged and comforted by all the truth about Him. May our hearts pant after His soul satisfying greatness.