

ON PATMOS, IN CHRIST

Revelation 1:9-16

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“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades”
(Rev. 1:17-18).

Forty miles off the coast of Asia Minor is a rocky little island, ten miles long by five miles wide, named Patmos. Because of its crescent shape it possessed a good natural harbor and its ore mines supplied the industry of the Roman Empire. During the reign of the emperor Domitian (81-96 AD), Patmos was also significant as a place of exile for political prisoners.

In the year 95 AD, Patmos housed a most significant prisoner, John, the now-aged apostle of Jesus Christ. There are differing opinions about John’s imprisonment. On the easy side, exiled prisoners may have received mild treatment and been permitted relative freedom on the island, although they had lost their property and civil rights. More negatively, Sir William Ramsay paints a stark picture, arguing that John’s exile was “preceded by scourging, marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on the bare ground, a dark prison, work under the lash of the military overseer.”¹ Whatever his actual circumstances, there can be little doubt that most painful to John the pastor was separation from his beloved church across the sea in Ephesus and his inability to proclaim the gospel of his Savior Jesus.

After the introduction in Revelation 1:1-8, the vision that is introduced in verse 9 begins the main material of Revelation. This opening vision is representative of God’s intention for the entire book.

¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 48.

John is suffering oppression because of his faith in Jesus. This first vision sets before him the sovereign glory of Christ, complete with emblems of his triumphant, saving work, so that John will be encouraged to endure in worship and service to his Lord.

JOHN, THE ENDURING CHRISTIAN

The idea that John serves in this passage as a representative Christian is confirmed in its opening verse: “I, John, your brother and partner” (Rev.1:9). John does not set himself apart as an apostle but proclaims solidarity with his readers. What he is experiencing on Patmos is typical for what all other believers will experience. John sums up this experience in three terms: “in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.”

John centers his experience on “the kingdom” of Christ. This fits his earlier emphasis, highlighting Jesus as “the ruler of kings on earth,” who has made believers “a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:5-6). Christ reigns wherever his Word is believed and obeyed. Alexander Maclaren writes: “We are His kingdom in so far as our wills joyfully and lovingly submit to His authority; and then, in so far as we are His kingdom, we are kings.”² One of the primary ways that believers reign is by governing ourselves in accordance with God’s Word. Under Christ’s rule we also gain a royal freedom from the demands of the world. Peter and John showed this liberty in the early days of the church when the Jewish leaders commanded them not to witness about Christ. Peter answered that they must obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19), and even when they were wrongfully beaten, the apostles gained power from Christ to rejoice for being “counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41).

Our passage suggests three notes about our experience of Christ’s kingdom. First, note that circumstances are not able to inhibit this kingdom. John was a prisoner on Patmos, completely disempowered so far as the world was concerned and subject to the apparent control of his captors. In fact, however, he possessed the power of Christ to reign in triumph over sin and unbelief. However adverse our worldly circumstances may be, we too are free to reign with Christ through faith and obedience to his Word. We also may always enjoy the

² Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (), 17:153.

spiritual blessings of Christ's kingdom, which Paul identifies as "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

Second, our full experience of Christ's kingdom yet remains ahead, coming to us only when Jesus returns from heaven. Even though believers now "reign on the earth" through faith (Rev. 5:10), there yet remains for us "the crown of righteousness," which the Lord "will award... on that Day" (2 Tim. 4:8). Only when Christ returns to fully consummate his kingdom will we experience the fullness of power, blessing, and glory that is befitting those who, John says, are "partner[s]... in the kingdom" (Rev. 1:9).

Third, and most significant, we receive the kingdom only "in Jesus" (Rev. 1:9). Maclaren writes: "When we put the reigns into His hands, when we put our consciences into His keeping, when we take our law from His gentle and yet sovereign lips, when we let Him direct our thinking; when His word is absolute truth that ends all controversy," then we experience the kingdom in and through faith in Jesus.³

Prior to John's participation in the kingdom, however, was his partnership in "the tribulation" (Rev. 1:9). John mentions the suffering of believers first because tribulation marks the path that leads us to the kingdom, just as for Jesus the cross preceded the crown. With this in mind, it is remarkable that many Christians read the book of Revelation as teaching that the church will be removed from the world's great tribulation. Nothing could be more contrary to the emphasis of this book, as of the entire New Testament. The great tribulation of the end-times will merely intensify the tribulation that is always the lot of Christians. Paul taught, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). John Calvin wrote: "The church of Christ has been so divinely constituted from the beginning that the Cross has been the way to victory, death the way to life."⁴ As Jesus himself foretold, "In the world you will have tribulation" (Jn. 16:33). If Christians all come from the same place and are bound to the same destination, it follows that we must all take the same road. Jesus defined it: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23). Just as there is a kingdom "in Jesus," together with its

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cited from Derek Thomas, *Let's Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 9.

blessings and glory, so also is there “tribulation... in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9).

Christians should not be surprised by trials “as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12). Paul Beasley-Murray writes: “Contrary to some modern ‘prosperity’ teaching, membership of Christ’s kingdom does not shield us from suffering – rather, for John and his readers, membership of the kingdom was the cause of their suffering.”⁵ This is John’s testimony concerning himself. He was “on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). John shows that the faithful Christian will not shrink from proclaiming the truth of God’s Word and the gospel message of Jesus, but will accept persecution for it. John did not conform his life or his witness to fit in with the times, and for precisely this faithful conduct he was a partner in “the tribulation.”

The final item in which John is our “brother and partner” is “patient endurance” (Rev. 1:9). If tribulation is our road and the kingdom our destination, then patient endurance is our mode of travel, our manner of living. The Greek word *hupomone* suggests both passivity in the form of patience and activity in the form of endurance. It involves continual perseverance in faith and loyalty to Jesus regardless of the difficulties or cost. Paul wrote that Christ will “present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Col. 1:22-23).

In the Greek text, there is only one definite article for “tribulation,” “kingdom,” and “patient endurance.” This shows that they are boxed together in a set, so that we cannot have one without the others. Like John, every Christian faces tribulation, receives a kingdom, and advances from one to the other by patient endurance. Jesus said, “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt. 24:13). Paul adds, “if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:12).

It was said in the army of Napoleon that every French soldier carried a field-marshal’s baton in his knapsack. The point was that any soldier could rise from the bottom all the way to the top. We might say the same of Christians, except that every Christian has a crown in his or

⁵ Paul Beasley-Murray, *The Message of the Resurrection*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 195.

her possession and every one of them will certainly wear it, but only through patient endurance under the tribulation of this world. John on Patmos showed us how. Despite his imprisonment, poverty, and affliction, he continued to worship and serve Jesus, and to bear witness to his salvation. We are to do the same, as those who with John are “brother[s] and partner[s] in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9).

THE SON OF MAN AS EXALTED DEITY

We are approaching this inaugural vision of Revelation as typical for all Christians. Just as John has described the shared Christian experience, he receives the ministry in his trials that all Christians need. John says he heard “a loud voice like a trumpet,” and, turning, he saw a vision of Christ as the exalted Son of Man.

John describes the situation: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (Rev. 1:10). By “in the Spirit,” John means that he was taken up into a trance-like, visionary state. This is not a spiritual experience common to all believers but was given to God’s special messengers (see Eze. 3:12). A New Testament example is when Peter “fell into a trance” and saw a vision of animals that he was to slay and eat (Acts 10:10-13).

John was taken up in the Spirit “on the Lord’s day.” This is the only use in the Bible of the expression “the Lord’s Day” for the Christian day of worship. The New Testament notes that the apostles moved the day of worship from the Jewish seventh day Sabbath to the first day in order to commemorate Christ’s resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Since the Romans had a day in the month dedicated to Caesar, it was only fitting that Christians should have their weekly day to show that Jesus alone is Lord. The early church father, Clement of Alexandria, wrote: “A true Christian, according to the commands of the Gospel, observes the Lord’s Day by casting out all bad thoughts, and cherishing all goodness, honoring the resurrection of the Lord, which took place on that day.”⁶

We can imagine John gazing longingly toward the east, where his church would be gathering in Ephesus. Perhaps he was praying for their worship, when he heard a voice behind him, turned, and entered

⁶ Cited by Thomas, *Let's Study Revelation*, 11.

a state brought upon him by the Spirit. John says that he turned to the trumpet-like voice and first saw “seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 1:12). We will consider the significance of the lampstands in our next study. John’s attention was especially drawn to a figure standing amidst the lampstands: “one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest” (Rev. 1:13).

Some commentators argue that the description of Jesus as “like a son of man” merely means that he appeared in human form. However, when we remember how closely John draws his material from the visions of Daniel, we find a more exalted meaning. We noted in our study of Revelation 1:7 that John drew from the vision of Daniel 7 when he spoke of Jesus “coming with the clouds.” This same vision depicted the world empires in the form of deadly beasts but then also showed Christ’s kingdom overthrowing these powers.

The vision of Daniel 7 concluded with God as the “Ancient of Days,” to whom “there came one like a son of man,” riding upon the clouds. “Son of Man” does not therefore denote the mere humanity of Jesus but rather the fact that this one in the form of man is really God. According to Daniel, the Son of Man is the one worthy to receive “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan. 7:13). According to Douglas Kelly, the Son of Man is “the sovereign Master of an indestructible kingdom that is going to crush all others.”⁷ Far from signifying Jesus’ humble humanity, Son of Man makes the exact opposite point, declaring Jesus in his transcendent majesty and sovereign rule.

A number of elements in this vision not only make certain the connection with Daniel’s vision, but also highlight the divine glory of Christ and the comfort that his presence brings to his struggling people. For instance, “The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters” (Rev. 1:14-15). The references to his hair being white like snow is interesting, since in Daniel 7:9, the Ancient of Days had hair “like pure wool” and to his throne came the Son of Man. In John’s vision, the ancient and pure appearance of the Father is applied to Christ, apparently to show the union of being which Christ and the Father share in the Godhead. With eyes like flames, feet like

⁷ Douglas Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (: Mentor, 2012), 26.

burnished bronze, and a voice like the roaring of the waves as they crashed against the rocks of Patmos, the Christ whom John saw in his vision was nothing less than very God of very God. Here is one who holds stars in his right hand (Rev. 1:16), and therefore possesses power no less than that which created and upholds all things.

Remember John's situation as he seeks patiently to endure tribulation and then receives this vision. By the emperor's decree, John had been separated from the church and was apparently no longer in a position to influence history. But though he was on Patmos, John was in Christ, and by the Spirit he was shown the true sovereign, the divine Jesus, God's Son. Just as the Ancient of Days was seated in Daniel's vision as judge of the nations, Christ is the ruler of kings on the earth and they will give account to him in the day of his coming.

What mattered most to John, therefore, was not the will of Domitian but the will of Christ. If Jesus desired to set John free, then just as Peter was delivered from Herod's jail by an angel (Acts 12:7), so too would John return to Ephesus, as he soon did, according to church tradition. But even if John remained in exile, that would not keep God's Word from going forth from him in power. Paul wrote from his prison that he was "bound with chains as a criminal." But he added: "the word of God is not bound!" (2 Tim. 2:8-9). Even on Patmos, John was taken in the Spirit to receive the book of Revelation, which he would send to the churches of Asia and through the New Testament to every generation of God's people thereafter.

Does this vision not prove to us that we should never fear to live boldly for Jesus, in accordance with his Word? The world is likely to scorn us and may even persecute us as it did John. But if the exalted Christ is with us, what will we fear? Should we not, like John, preach fearlessly the truths of God's Word into a dark and hostile culture? Even if we are placed in chains, the exalted Christ will send forth his Word through us. How important it is, then, that we fix our eyes on the mighty and victorious Jesus of Scripture! Remembering that John saw his vision on the Lord's Day, what is the picture of Christ that we are painting from our pulpits and worshiping in our pews? Do we preach a Jesus who relies on man's free will to achieve salvation? Do we proclaim a Jesus who exists primarily to make people comfortable or to grant their earthly whims? When the day of tribulation comes, the only way for us, like John, patiently to endure is to receive from

God's Word a vision of Christ as divine Lord, sovereign over Caesar and Christians alike, mighty to save and zealous to judge.

THE SAVIOR AS PROPHET, PRIEST, & KING

As we consider further details from John's vision, we should remember that he saw what Jesus is "like". This vision does not show us what Jesus *looks* like but rather what Jesus *is* like, symbolically depicts his person and work. Biblically trained Christians organize the work of Christ in his three offices of prophet, priest, and king. This is indeed a good way to understand this vision, starting with Jesus as the true and great high priest of his people.

John saw Jesus "clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest," reminding us of the garments made for the high priest Aaron and his sons (Ex. 28:4; Lev. 16:4). The Jewish historian Josephus described the priestly robes using the Greek word that John uses for Christ's "long robe" (*podere*), adding that an embroidered girdle wound around the body.⁸ Further, the vision of an enrobed Christ standing among the golden lampstands recalls the priests who served in the temple and kept alight the lamps. Most importantly, priests offered sacrifices to atone for sin and assuage God's wrath. William Barclay comments: "A priest... was a man who himself has access to God and who opens the way for others to come to him; even in the heavenly places, Jesus, the great high priest, is still carrying on his priestly work, opening the way for all to the presence of God."⁹ The same priestly Christ whom John saw is ministering for us today: "the heart that beats beneath the golden girdle is the same that melted with pity and overflowed with love [at the cross]."¹⁰

Second, the vision presents Jesus as the true and reigning king. The "feet of burnished bronze, refined in a furnace" are those of a conqueror who treads the earth in power. The eyes "like a flame of fire" are those that pierce into every heart to judge according in truth. Christ rules with his Word, which goes forth from his mouth like a "sharp two-edged sword," while the glory of his royal face is "like the sun shining in full strength" (Rev. 1:15-16). Here is a king fitting to

⁸ Cited from William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰ AM, 17:147.

rule, able to conquer, all-knowing so as to judge, and all-glorious to demand our worship.

Third, the vision presents Jesus as the great prophet whose word is double-edged to save to those who believe and slay those who refuse their faith. In Daniel 10, that prophet met an angelic visitor described similarly to Christ in this vision: “a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His 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” (Dan. 10:5-6). That messenger brought Daniel good news of a great hope for salvation, a message that pointed forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus now appeared as the substance of that good news and commissioned John to declare it to the churches of his day.

CHRIST AS THE GOSPEL

There is a word that captures the meaning of Christ as prophet, priest, and king: that word is the *gospel*. This was what John needed in his exile: Christ in his divine glory and the good news of Christ in his saving work. Christ as priest reconciles sinners to God through his blood; Christ as king conquers and judges with a two-edged sword; Christ as prophet appears with a hopeful message of saving grace. This good news – the Bible’s saving message centered on the person and work of Christ – is precisely what everyone needs today, both those who have believed and those who have not.

Albert Mohler published an article recently that shows how the gospel is what everyone really needs. He noted a mother who wrote to an advice columnist about her teenage daughter who had become an atheist. The woman said she had raised her family under “strong Christian values” and was shocked that her child renounced her religion. As might be expected, the secular columnist advised her to accept her daughter’s choice and not be upset. Wrong as this answer was, the real problem was what the Christian mother said. How could her daughter become an atheist? Because “Christian values” are not the same as Christ himself. Mohler wrote: “Hell will be filled with people who were avidly committed to Christian values. Christian

values cannot save anyone and never will ... Salvation comes only by the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

Like John on Patmos, what we need is not Christian values apart from Christ himself, any more than we need a Christian social agenda, Christian lifestyle tips, or Christian worldview training unless our passion is the glorious, divine person of Christ and unless our hearts beat with a conquering joy for his all-sufficient work. Do you know Jesus as John saw him? Is your heart filled with the majesty of Christ’s glorious person, so that your great longing is to know and serve him? Have you trusted in the mercy and grace of Christ, so that in him you have forgiveness of sin and acceptance into the holy presence of the Ancient of Days? And have you received the eternal life that only Jesus can give? Jesus the glorious Savior is what Christians like John need in order patiently to endure under tribulation and to receive his kingdom. Jesus himself is what the world needs as well. Let his glory, his presence, and his good news be at the heart of our worship, our witness, and our own hope for salvation.

¹¹ R. Albert Mohler, “Christian Values Cannot Save Anyone,” AlbertMohler.com, Sept. 11, 2012.