

The Witness of John
Series: Between a Rock and a Hard Place
January 10, 2021

I. **Context**

- A. Introduction last week – tried to set the context
 - 1. Described the characteristics of the church in the late 1st Century when John likely received the Revelation
- B. Church began to be established in Palestine in the 30's
 - 1. Spread outward from Jerusalem as Jews persecuted those who converted
 - 2. Followed the outline in Acts
 - a. Jerusalem, Judea
 - b. Samaria
 - c. Uttermost parts of the earth
- C. Church was established in Antioch, Syria
 - 1. Became a significant missionary church
 - a. Sent Paul and Barnabus
- D. Church spread to Asia Minor (Roman province of Asia)
 - 1. Across the Aegean Sea into Macedonia (Europe; present day Greece)
 - 2. Eventually, even to Rome
- E. All this was happening in the 40's, 50's, and 60's
- F. While all this was happening, the church was expecting the return of Jesus
 - 1. Jews in particular had in mind a political, military Messiah who would deliver Israel from the bondage of Rome
 - 2. Certainly the church was not devoid of that influence
 - a. Difficult for the first disciples, who were Jewish, to completely forget the Jewish messianic understanding
 - 3. Whether Jewish or not, Christians really did expect Jesus to return to establish His kingdom
 - a. Expectation was sooner rather than later
- G. Now it was 30 or more years later (generation had almost passed)
 - 1. Jesus had not yet returned
 - 2. Church was made up of small enclaves of Jews and Gentiles
 - a. In cultures in one way or another in opposition to the things of God
 - b. Experiencing varying degrees of persecution
 - c. Certainly experienced growth, but not the kind of growth that would radically change the culture
- H. Characteristics
 - 1. **Small**
 - 2. **Struggling**
 - 3. **Persecuted**
 - 4. **Midst of declining culture**
- I. What does a church like that need?
 - 1. A word from God

2. That word is The Revelation
- J. This message – overview of the first portion of Revelation
- II. **What kind of word does this church need?**
 - A. Get a sense of that from how John introduces the book
 1. **Revelation 1:1** (NASB95) — 1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John...
 - a. **God is the source** of the Revelation
 - b. **Gave it to Jesus Christ**
 - c. **Ultimately was given to the church** (His bondservants)
 - d. **Communicated by an angel**
 - e. **John was the recipient**
 - B. What did John do with it?
 1. **Revelation 1:2** (NASB95) — 2 who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.
 - a. **John bore witness to it**
 - C. The form that this witness took is also identified in Ch 1
 1. **Revelation 1:3** (NASB95) — 3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.
 - a. The Revelation is to be read; it is written
 - b. John would write it down
 2. John was commanded to write it down
 - a. **Revelation 1:10–11** (NASB95) — 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, 11 saying, “Write in a book what you see, 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.”
 - (1) The voice is that of Christ Himself
 3. The command becomes clearer, gains a structure of sorts
 - a. **Revelation 1:19** (NASB95) — 19 “Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.”
 - D. The Church needs...
 1. A written word
 2. Word with three basic elements
 - a. **What John has seen**
 - b. **The things which are**
 - c. The things which shall **take place after these things**
 3. It would be easy to conclude that what we have is a past, present, future structure
 - a. Not exactly
 - b. The things **which are = present**
 - c. The things which shall take place **after these things = future**

- d. What John has seen is not meant by Christ to have him reflect on what he has seen take place in the past (his recollections of the earthly ministry, death, resurrection of Christ)
- e. Not even meant to be a description of a vision about the past
- 4. What John has seen just prior to v 19 is a **vision of the Lord Jesus Christ**
- E. The Word that the church needs
 - 1. Vision of Jesus Christ
 - 2. View of the present – an accurate assessment of the current state of affairs in the church
 - a. Messages to the 7 churches
 - 3. Glimpse into the future, into the consummation of the age
 - a. Chs 4 ff

III. **Vision of Jesus Christ**

- A. Small, struggling, persecuted church needs to see Jesus Christ
 - 1. May be the most important thing that such a church needs
 - 2. The vision of Christ needed is the full-orbed, biblical vision
 - 3. Unfortunately, in our day, the vision of Christ that we have is a truncated, minimalized, post-modern vision of Christ
- B. Truncated visions of Christ have often prevailed through recent church history
 - 1. Theologically liberal visions of Jesus
 - a. Jesus as social reformer
 - b. Popular during the late 19th Century, early 20th Century
 - c. Popularized in the book *In His Steps*, by Charles Sheldon
 - (1) Community was radically changed because first one person, then another, then another, took seriously the question, “What would Jesus do?”
 - (2) Their answers to that question fit the mold of the liberal vision of Christ
 - (3) The community cleaned up its act
 - (a) Poor were fed and clothed
 - (b) Houses of ill repute were closed down which had been such a blight on the community
 - (c) Corruption in institutions were rooted out
 - (4) All of that is fine as far as it goes
 - d. What you didn’t see
 - (1) Encounters with the holiness of Christ, convicted of their own sin, granted repentance by the HS
 - (2) True conversion of lost people to saving relationship with Christ
 - (3) The preaching of the gospel
 - (a) Sinfulness of humanity desperately in need of a Savior
 - (b) Atoning death of Christ to pay the penalty for our sin
 - (c) Affirmation of the resurrection of Christ

- (d) Call to turn from sin and self (deny self, take up cross), trust in Christ
 - 2. Ultra-conservative vision of Christ
 - a. Legalistic Christ
 - (1) Supplanted one set of OT rules with a new set of culturally distinct rules and regulations
 - (2) Christ, who hates sin; translates into hatred of the sinner
 - 3. Revolutionary vision of Christ
 - a. Find it employed in neo-Marxist movements, often in South and Central America
 - b. Jesus came to set the people free
 - (1) Interpreted as political freedom
 - (2) Used as a pretext for armed resistance against corrupt governments
 - 4. When you adopt a truncated vision, or any kind of unbiblical view of Jesus, a Jesus of your own imagination, you're bound to have problems
- C. The vision of Christ that John received is anything but truncated
 - 1. It is full-orbed, magnificent, incorporating incredibly diverse dimensions of His nature and character
 - 2. Jesus' own description
 - a. **Revelation 1:8** (NASB95) — 8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”
 - (1) **Eternality**
 - (2) **Omnipotence**
 - b. **Revelation 1:17** (NASB95) — 17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last...”
 - (1) **Origin and consummation of all things**
 - c. **Revelation 1:18** (NASB95) — 18 “and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”
 - (1) **The very source of life**
 - (2) **Authority over life**
 - (3) **Authority over death**
 - 3. John's vision of Jesus
 - a. **Revelation 1:5–6** (NASB95) — 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood— 6 and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.
 - (1) **Faithfulness**
 - (2) **Authority over all the earth**
 - (3) **Love**

- (4) **Savior** who saves us from our sins
 - (5) **Sanctifies** us
 - (6) **Glory and dominion forever**
 - b. **Revelation 1:12–13** (NASB95) — 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.
 - (1) **Present in the midst of the church**
 - (2) **Clothed in humanity**
 - c. **Revelation 1:14–15** (NASB95) — 14 His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.
 - (1) **Holiness and righteousness**
 - (2) **Piercing judgment**
 - (3) **Power** to accomplish this judgment
 - d. **Revelation 1:16** (NASB95) — 16 In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.
 - (1) **Authority over the church**; protector and provider
 - (2) **Incisive judgment**
 - (3) **Powerful light of His countenance**
- D. We'll study this vision of Jesus more next week
1. You can get a sense of the fullness of this description
 2. The church needs this kind of vision
 3. Only this kind of vision will sustain the church
 - a. Small
 - b. Struggling
 - c. Persecuted
 - d. Midst of declining culture
 4. Which is just like the church today!
- IV. **Present**: Accurate assessment of the current state of affairs in the church
- A. Tendency to look at the church with either overly optimistic or overly pessimistic eyes
 1. Easy to find things wrong with the church
 - a. I can be quite critical of the church
 - b. Important to identify the elements of sinfulness and weakness in the church
 2. But also important to recognize the virtues inherent in the church
 - a. Evidence that God is working!
 - B. Observations about the messages to the churches
 1. Not just message to the 7 churches in Asia Minor
 - a. Actually, many other churches in Asia at the time John wrote

- (1) Why these 7?
 - b. 7 is symbolic
 - (1) Revelation is a series of 4 visions
 - (2) Each vision has series of 7's
 - (a) Churches
 - (b) Seals
 - (c) Trumpets
 - (d) Bowls
 - (3) 7 has to do with fullness, or completeness
 - c. What Jesus actually has to say to these 7 churches
 - (1) Are accurate descriptions and exhortations to these 7 churches at the end of the 1st Century
 - (2) But are also representative of every possible virtue and weakness in the church throughout time
 - d. Speaks to them and to us
 - (1) Relevant at the end of the 1st Century
 - (2) Relevant as we move more fully into the 21st Century, the beginning of the 3rd millennium
 - (3) Relevant to every church in between
2. Nearly every description contains a **commendation**
- a. There is evidence that God has done, and in most cases, is doing works of grace
 - b. We need to see with accuracy the real works of grace that God does in our midst as virtues in the church
 - c. Jesus may not have come back yet; we may be small and struggling; we may be persecuted
 - (1) But God is doing something in us; that should encourage us
3. Nearly every description contains a **criticism**
- a. There is no perfect church
 - (1) If there was, don't join it; you'll ruin it
 - b. We need to see with accuracy where it is that we need to grow
 - c. In a sense, none of us is really ready for Christ to return
 - (1) We need to pursue sanctification in the church
 - (a) Doctrine
 - (b) Life
 - (c) Through discipline
 - d. We need to see our weaknesses; we have preparations to make before Christ returns!
4. Every church is encouraged to be **overcomers**
- a. We're in the midst of difficulty, trial, persecution
 - b. Jesus knows that; He's in the midst of the church!
 - c. Part of what it means to be a Christian is to go through those times with patience and perseverance
 - d. Only the overcomers are those who will receive the blessings of the kingdom

- e. We all need to hear that; we all need to be overcomers
 - C. Small, struggling, persecuted churches need that message
 - 1. Need to know what is commendable
 - 2. Need to know our weaknesses
 - 3. Need to be encouraged to persevere
- V. **Glimpse into the future**, into the consummation of the age
 - A. One of the things that we lack is a sense of the end of things
 - 1. Where are we headed? What is our goal? Our destiny?
 - 2. We tend to be a church that is concerned with the here and now
 - a. So interested in being relevant
 - B. But small, struggling, persecuted churches need to see the light at the end of the tunnel
 - 1. We need to know it's going to be OK
 - 2. That's what this Revelation does
 - C. Start to get a sense of the end pretty early in the book – Chs 4 and 5
 - 1. **Revelation 4:2–4** (NASB95) — 2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. 3 And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.
 - a. God enthroned in heaven
 - (1) In all His beauty
 - (2) In charge, in control, reigning
 - (3) We need to know that ultimately God is reigning and will reign
 - 2. **Revelation 4:5–11** (NASB95) — 5 Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; 6 and before the throne there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. 7 The first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. 8 And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.” 9 And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

- a. God who reigns is worthy of worship
 - (1) All these magnificent creatures who surround the throne are devoted to calling attention to the holiness and worthiness of God
 - (2) We need to know that this God who reigns, and will reign, is worthy of His authority and of our worship
 - (a) He is worth going through a little persecution!
 - (b) Which in view of eternity are but “light and momentary troubles”
- 3. **Revelation 5:1–6** (NASB95) — 1 I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. 2 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it. 4 Then I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; 5 and one of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.” 6 And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.
 - a. There is One who is worthy to open the book of the destiny of the ages; One who controls history and is able to reveal it for our encouragement
 - (1) The Lion of the tribe of Judah; also the Lamb of God
 - (a) The One who will come with power to execute judgment on all those who resist His will
 - (b) Also the One who has paid the penalty for the sin of those who believe in His name
 - b. That’s who controls the unfolding of history
 - (1) Jesus Christ
 - (2) King of kings
 - (3) Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world
 - c. We need to know Jesus Christ is in control of history; need to know that He has purchased with His own blood the authority to break the seals and bring history to its consummation
- 4. **Revelation 5:7–10** (NASB95) — 7 And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. 8 When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. 10 “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

- a. Not only did Jesus Christ acquire the right to control history, He purchased a people for Himself
 - (1) Whose people we are if we continue to trust in Him
 - (2) A people from every tribe, tongue, nation
 - (3) But He has made this people to be a kingdom and priests; we will reign with Him
 - (4) We may not be reigning now; we may be small, struggling, persecuted now; we may be the outcasts of society now; we may lack power now
 - (a) But in the end, we will reign with Him because He purchased us with His blood
 - (5) We need to know that

5. **Revelation 5:11–14** (NASB95) — 11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” 13 And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.” 14 And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

- a. Consummation of the age will see the universal worship of God and of Christ
 - (1) Ultimate experience to magnify the worthiness of God and Christ
 - (2) Joined by angels, all of those purchased by Christ’s own blood
 - (a) Indeed, every created thing will acknowledge the glory of God
 - (3) May not be acknowledged now; but it will be acknowledged then
 - (4) We need to now that our suffering, our tribulation, our trial, our persecution, is not in vain

- VI. That’s the witness of John, the testimony of things he has seen, the things which are, the things which are to come
 - A. That’s the word such a church needs
 - 1. A church such as ours in our age
 - B. A full-orbed vision of Christ
 - C. An accurate assessment of the state of the church
 - D. A glimpse into the glorious future
 - E. Only that kind of vision will sustain us through the difficulties we experience now and those that lie ahead