

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

The Revelation to John

Readings: *Revelation 1:1-3:22*

Reflections:

- The Revelation to John: See introduction for expanded material about the authorship, dating, parallels to Old Testament books, and themes.
- Revelation from Jesus Christ: The proper title of this book is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” Jesus indicated that he would return to bring judgment to Jerusalem and destroy the temple (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) and if Revelation is the final warning given to this prophecy being fulfilled, it makes sense that this would be again called the “revelation of Jesus Christ”. John believes that the events he describes are about to take place and “the time is near.” This would encourage us to start with immediate events at the time of John’s life as being the events in view of this prophecy. We see again the openness to God speaking directly through the Spirit of Christ to guide and direct the church. As Jesus indicated in the Sermon on the Mount, the key is not just to hear the truth but respond to the truth (Matthew 7:24-27).
- Salutation to seven churches: The author simply refers to himself as John. This suggests he is well known to his readers. Many scholars find this as evidence that only John the apostle would be this well-known. “Grace and peace” is the standard Jewish and Greek greeting combined that Paul used. The “seven spirits” is most likely not seven individual spirits but rather the Spirit described as complete (seven in Revelation means complete). This would mean that John is referring the Father (“him who is, and who was, and who is to come” suggesting the eternal nature of God), the Spirit, and Jesus the son. Jesus’ identity is fully affirmed as the unique revealer of truth and the resurrected Lord of all.
- Praise to Almighty God: Many of the key themes of the Jesus movement are summarized here – love of God, forgiveness through Jesus’ shed blood, the kingdom, the role of believers as priests to the world. We also see the restatement of Jesus’ prophecy of him coming on the clouds (see Matthew 26:64; Mark 13:26; also see Isaiah 19:1, Psalm 104:3 referring to God coming on the clouds to judge). This phrase refers to Jesus returning to judge Jerusalem and destroy the temple. “Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him” most likely means that all those in Israel will see him, even those who are still alive who saw his crucifixion. “...all the peoples of the earth will mourn” likely means that the world will

mourn because of the horror of the judgment Jesus will bring on Jerusalem. This was true as the story of the 70 CE was considered a horrific event even by Roman standards. "I am Alpha and Omega" is restated in Revelation 22:13 and quite clearly seems to be Jesus speaking. This would be more evidence that the early church saw Jesus as "God with us."

- Origin and Purpose of Revelation – Description of voice: We see the close connection between suffering and serving in the kingdom. There is some question in the Greek if John was actually on the island of Patmos if that was a part of the visioning experience. Church tradition has two thoughts. One is that John was banished to this island and died as an old man. Another is that he died as a martyr by boiling. This island is off the coast of Asia Minor near the seven churches and so it makes sense that John would write to the nearby churches. The Lord's Day was Sunday and the new day of worship for the Christ-followers rather than the Sabbath (Saturday). "I was in the Spirit" probably refers to a prayerful state of listening for God to speak and feeling closely connected to God through the Spirit. Although there were more than seven churches in this region, the order of the churches follows a natural ordering based on how a messenger would visit the churches. Also, seven is an important number in Revelations and so these seven may represent the churches in that region.
- Vision of one like son of man: There are some parallels to Daniel's messenger (Daniel 10:5-6). Long robe suggests priestly role. Gold sash suggests high rank. White hair suggests wisdom. Blazing eyes suggests clear and holy perception. Feet glowing like bronze in a furnace suggests coming judgment as Jesus will tread upon his enemies. Voice like rushing water suggests authority and power. The sword in his mouth is the word of God. Brilliant face parallels his transfiguration (Matthew 17:2). All of these images portray the glory of Jesus.
- Identity of voice and vision: This is a clear statement on the total authority and divinity of Jesus.
- John's mandate to write: The seven angels (the seven stars) should probably be translated as "seven messengers". This revelation from Jesus was to be communicated to seven churches and to seven leaders who would share this revelation with the seven churches. Throughout this section to the seven churches, the term "angel" should probably be translated "messenger".
- Letters to the seven churches: Through the seven letters we see a parallelism to the unfolding story of Israel from the Garden to Balaam to manna to Jezebel to David to the New Jerusalem. If this prophecy is ultimately about the judgment against Jerusalem then it makes sense that John in writing to these churches is drawing parallels to the story of Israel in giving them strict warnings about not turning away from Christ.
- Ephesus: This was a mature church that had received a lot of investment from Paul, Timothy, Priscilla and Aquilla, and Apollos. The fact that they had tested and rejected supposed apostles may suggest an earlier date for the writing of this letter as one of the key

aspects of being an apostle was seeing the resurrected Christ. This church has spiritually fallen off and become cold. Losing their lamp stand suggests that their role in being a light to their community could be lost. The Nicolaitans may refer to the rising influence of Gnosticism. The tree of life in paradise refers to eternal life (see Revelation 22:1-5) that awaits faithful Christ-followers.

- Smyrna: Although they appear poor they are spiritually rich, opposite to Laodicea that appeared rich but was really spiritually poor. As Jesus declared, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (See Matthew 5:3) The Jewish synagogue in this city was the largest in the region. The fact that there is significant persecution from the Jews again suggests an early date prior to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. We see again a close connection between suffering and remaining faithful to Christ. Ten days of suffering may refer to ten actual days of persecution or it may be a symbolic number suggesting a limited amount of suffering.
- Pergamum: If Ephesus was like New York City, Pergamum (or Pergamos) was Washington, DC. It had the second largest library in the world (next to Alexandria in Egypt) and was the seat of Roman governmental rule. This governmental office may be “throne of Satan”. Antipas is one of the few martyrs actually mentioned by name in Scripture. This church both faced real persecution and yet also struggled with false teaching that promoted the sexual practices of the Roman religions. Jesus is warning that he will bring prophetic words (sword of his mouth) against these people. The reference to hidden manna is a promise of God meeting their needs in unexpected ways. Jesus himself is the hidden manna. The white stone has many possible interpretations. It may refer to a pass into a feast, a sign of acquittal in a Roman court of law or the token given at a Greek game to be converted into a prize. The key is to understand that this stone has a new secret name written on it. This aligns with the hidden manna. God is saying he will be the true source of security for whoever is faithful. He will meet their needs and provide for them a secure identity. It seems most likely that this stone was pass or ticket into the kingdom party. Rather than participating in the Roman orgies, the kingdom offered true community and celebration. The morning star is Jesus himself (see Revelation 22:16). He is the first bright light to break into our dark world to signify that a new day is beginning. Again this image is that we are now totally one with Christ.
- Thyatira: Was the least significant city in the list provided here. It had many trade unions (see Acts 16:14) that participated in many sexual religious rites. Jesus is portrayed as a judge (feet like bronze ready to tramp his enemies). Although this church was doing a more than they did at first (which may not be saying much) they are tolerating a spiritual seductress who is promoting “deep secrets” most likely associated with sexual practices. Jesus warns that this woman, those who are having sex with her and those who are following her (her children) will be judged. Although it is referred to a bed of suffering, this may be symbolic of a disease, possibly a sexually transmitted disease. Jesus promises true spiritual authority to those who are faithful. This would have been meaningful to those who lived with little

authority or position of influence. He also promises himself, the morning star, to those who remain faithful. Again Jesus is really all we need.

- Sardis: We see a reference again to the Spirit as the “seven Spirit” or the perfect Spirit. This city had a reputation for sexual immorality (which is saying something since all cities back then had big sex industries associated with the Roman temples). This church is spiritually dead even though they have a better reputation. Sometimes it is easy to look good on the outside but we must remember God judges not by appearances but by the heart. Jesus is threatening to come and steal their lamp, their influence as light to the city. Those who have not dirtied their clothes with participation in the sexual orgies of the Roman temples are promised to live intimately with Jesus (“walk with me, dressed in white”). The promise that their names will not be blotted out from the book of life seems to suggest that someone can willfully reject God and therefore end their relationship with God and so this church is warned of losing their secure standing in Christ.
- Philadelphia: This was a small city plagued by earthquakes. Jesus uses an image from Isaiah 22:22 to suggest that he has the keys to the true presence of God and these Gentile Christians are being offered an open door to God that no one can shut, not even the persecuting Jews of their city (again we see the reference to persecuting Jews which suggests an early date). We can be encouraged that no one can stop us from being close intimate friends of God. These persecuting Jews are not real Jews of the heart, just Jews of descent. They will one day have to admit that God really did love the Gentiles. Jesus’ promise of coming soon most likely refers to his coming judgment against Jerusalem which in turn would radically change the influence of the Jews across the Roman Empire. Those who are faithful are promised a place in God’s new community, the true temple of God, the true New Jerusalem. As we see, the kingdom is one rooted in Christ-centered loving relationships, not in buildings or geographic locations. Again they are offered a new and secure identity through Christ.
- Laodicea: This city was known for a number of things. It was a wealthy banking and textile center that prided itself in its dress, wealth, independence, and health. It had a well known medical expertise and particularly a medicinal eye salve. The city had no natural water source and so it had a stone water system to bring in water but that water itself was lukewarm and terrible to drink. Nearby Colossae had wonderful cold spring water and nearby Hierapolis had hot springs. In light of this, this warning utilizes many of the well know elements of their city as a part of painting a picture of the strictest warning. They had everything on the outside and nothing on the inside. We see again how hard it is for the wealthy to enter or get into the full experience of the kingdom of Jesus. Their outward wealth always seems to distract them and give them the illusion of success without it being rooted truly in Christ and his grace. Jesus here portrays himself as being locked out of his own home. Christ’s heart is to live in intimate friendship as portrayed by hanging out and eating together. To those who are faithful, they find that they are offered more true spiritual wealth and authority (a throne) than they could ever imagine.