

This morning we will hear the word of the Lord from the second half of Revelation 1, verses 9-20. These verses tell us of the circumstances that John was in when he received the vision that became the book of Revelation. These also give us the first vision of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ and how John responded when he saw that vision.

First the situation of John when he received the vision. He was on an island in the Mediterranean Sea, 50 miles west of Ephesus. He was the pastor of the church at Ephesus, but now he was on the island called Patmos and the reason, he says, was “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The island of Patmos was used by the Roman government as a place to exile troublemakers and that is why John was there. He was considered to be a troublemaker by the authorities because of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” His preaching of the message of Jesus had been troublesome to the authorities and so he had been removed from his ministry and taken to Patmos to minimize his influence. Like many before and after him, the political authorities considered the claim of Christ to be Lord of all a threat to their own authority and took measures to neutralize that threat. Paul had been put in prison and eventually executed for the same reason. We don’t know the details of John’s situation on the island of Patmos, only that it was used by the Roman authorities as a place to send people deemed to problems for them.

Whatever the exact nature of his imprisonment, John, like the apostle Paul before him, was able to write letters to his church which is why we have the book of Revelation. John refers to himself as “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.” These words are important for us because they describe the situation that gave rise to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation came from God through Jesus and an angel and through John and it addresses the situation which John was facing which was also the situation that his church was facing. This is clear from the fact that John refers to himself as a “partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.” The word “partner” means that the terms, tribulation, kingdom and patient endurance describe both John and the churches to whom he is writing.

But when we look at the way these terms are used in the rest of the NT, we must draw the conclusion that these terms apply to all churches in every situation. Last week I made the point that while the book of Revelation deals with persecution of Christians, it is not teaching that all Christians are always being persecuted, at least in an extreme way. That is clear from the rest of the Bible and also from the history of the church. But what is also clear from the rest of the Bible is that all churches are faced with tribulation in this sense that all churches are involved in spiritual warfare and spiritual warfare is a form of tribulation. It is tribulation in this sense that the devil and his hosts are trying to kill us. Satan and his demons are doing everything in their power to draw us away from the Lord – into their orbit which is the spiritual realm of death.

In John 16:33 Jesus said to his disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation.” Earlier he had said to them, John 15:18-19, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” This is true of every believer. If the world loves us it is because we belong to the world. If we belong to Christ the world hates us. And behind the hatred of the world is the hatred of the devil and he wants to destroy us. He wants to lure us into his kingdom. He wants us to end up in hell with him. Peter tells us that the devil is our adversary and that he “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8).

That qualifies as tribulation. Even if we are not being persecuted in extreme ways, we are always under attack. We are hated by the world and the world, inspired by the devil, is doing everything it can to lure us away from Christ into its culture of death. The world seeks to conform us to itself. There is tremendous pressure on us to conform to the world.

The majority of what we see on television or hear in secular songs or see in advertisements is designed to conform us to think and act like the world. The devil can use persecution to try to get people to turn away from the Lord. But he also can use the shaping influence of a godless culture to seek to achieve the same goal. And the large number of people who turn away from true Christianity is a testimony to his deadly success. Some people just drift into worldliness. Some people are tempted into sexual sin. Some people are lured by the love of money. Some people by self-indulgence. But the end is the same – spiritual and eternal ruin unless there is repentance.

So when John address his churches as partners “in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus,” he is addressing a situation that is common to all Christians of all times in that we are always under attack. Not all Christians are persecuted, but all Christians are hated by Satan and by the world and their goal is our destruction. The pressure from the world to conform to its thinking and its living ultimately comes from the devil and its goal is the shipwreck of our souls.

And that is why we are called to endure. John referred to himself as a partner with the churches in the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus. To be in God’s kingdom is to be involved in spiritual warfare and that warfare requires endurance. It means continuing on in faithfulness in the face of opposition. Endurance is an important part of the Christian life. We are constantly being tempted to sin and we are to endure in the face of that temptation. Paul prays for the Colossians in 1:11 that they might be “strengthened with all power ... for all endurance....” And the book of Hebrews tells us to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us... looking to Jesus....” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

We need to understand that from a spiritual perspective, the danger to our souls posed by persecution or by the enticements from the society we live in are not all that different. It is obviously a lot more pleasant not to

be persecuted and I am not in any way making light of persecution, but in either case we are in spiritual warfare and in both cases the issue is life and death – standing firm in Christ or falling away to the destruction of our souls. At the end of the day it will not make much difference if you fell away from Christ because of persecution or you fell away from Christ because you drifted away through the love of the things of this life. Think of Demas. Once a fellow-worker with Paul, but Paul had to write to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:10 “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me....” We can fall away because of the pressure of persecution. Or we can fall away because of the conforming pressure of our society in a situation where there is no extreme persecution. In either case the effect is the same: death – spiritual and eternal death. So what follows in the book of Revelation is as relevant to us as it is to people who are facing the more extreme forms of persecution.

Next John mentions that he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day.” The use of the term “Lord’s Day” is significant for our understanding of how the OT Sabbath-command of the fourth commandment applies to us today. This is the only place in the Bible where the term, “Lord’s Day” is used, but it corresponds with the fact that the early church, under the direction of the apostles, met for worship on the first day of the week rather than on the seventh day of the week. Many Christians, including our tradition, have interpreted this to mean that the fourth commandment, the sabbath command, is now to be kept on the first day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This view has become a minority position in the church, but the case for it is actually quite strong. And this passage is part of the biblical support for the idea that the Lord’s Day, which is Sunday rather than Saturday, is the day of rest and worship after the resurrection of Christ. John was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day.

The idea of being “in the Spirit” probably has to do with receiving prophetic revelation. It could mean that John was under the influence of the Holy Spirit as he worshipped on the Lord’s Day, but the language of being “in the Spirit” is often used by the OT prophets in connection with them receiving revelation from the Spirit and so it is likely that that is what John is speaking about here.

He hears a “loud voice like a trumpet” and the voice tells him, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches....” And then the seven churches are mentioned. Here we have John’s explanation for how the book of Revelation came to be. The loud voice, which turns out to be the voice of the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus, instructs John to write what he is going to see and send the resulting book to the seven churches. So the book of Revelation has its origin in this command of Jesus Christ.

Then John turns toward the voice and he describes what he saw in verses 12-16. This is the first of the visions that make up much of the book of Revelation. It is a vision of Jesus and his presence with his church. The vision is the beginning of the message to the churches in their tribulation. The first thing that the struggling churches need to visualize are different aspects of the glory of Jesus Christ and his presence among the churches.

It is a description of Jesus and his relationship to the churches that is meant to be visualized. It is a vision that John saw and that he is told to describe and pass on to the churches. It makes points that can be expressed in propositions, but it comes in the form of the description of a vision and it is intended to be imagined – to be visualized.

That is very important. Jesus wants us to see a picture in our minds – a picture that we can imagine by reading John's description of what he saw. This is important because it means that the picture as a whole is something that we can remember without remembering all the details. All the details have meaning and since the words were written down it is possible to ponder the details. But the main purpose of the vision can be accomplished in us through the picture that we can imagine simply by hearing the words read.

Remember that the first way that the book of Revelation was used was by being read aloud to the churches. No one could remember all of the details, but everyone would be able to remember the overall picture that the words describe. And that is an important part of the way that the book of Revelation is to function in our lives. We can profit from it by going through it line by line, but the first way that we can profit from it is by remembering some of the pictures that it describes and their overall meaning.

One of the key parts of the vision that John describes in these verses is the relationship of the exalted Jesus to the churches. Verse 12-13: "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and 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." In verse 20 we are told, "the seven lampstands are the seven churches." In 2:1 we are told that the exalted Jesus "walks among the seven golden lampstands."

So we are given a vision of the exalted Jesus "in the midst of" or "walk[ing] among" the seven churches. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven he told his disciples, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." These verses, in the book of Revelation, give us a way of visualizing that. We can imagine the exalted figure described in this text walking among the seven golden lampstands. And that, with only a minimal amount of explanation, is a powerful image that we can carry with us in our minds. It does not even need to be a distinct image which includes all the details, just a vague image of the exalted Christ walking among the seven churches. This is a powerful image that is intended to be of great comfort to us.

It describes something that is true but not visible to our physical eyes. We see this picture through imagining and believing what John describes for us in the book of Revelation. We do not see this picture on the news. We do not see this picture when we read about what is going on in our world from the news media. We do not see the exalted Jesus with our physical eyes. From all that we learn apart from the Bible, we see weak churches. Some places they are persecuted. Some places they are immature. Some places they are worldly. In few places is the church very influential. We see weakness. We see problems. But here in the book of Revelation we are given a picture to visualize that conveys an invisible reality to faith: the exalted Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of the churches.

We see that Jesus is with his church. He has not abandoned his people. He is invisible to our physical eyes, but these verses give us a picture that describes a reality that is seen by faith. The picture is of the exalted Jesus walking among the churches. And not just these seven churches, but all his churches. He is with his people. He is present to them. He is watching over them.

And this is what John saw: Verses 12-16, "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."

Now this describes a vision that we can imagine. All of the details have meaning, but so does the picture as a whole and the impression that it makes. It is a picture of Jesus Christ in his heavenly glory. The overall impression is one of transcendent greatness – supernatural glory. This is a vision of something – out of this world – from the heavenly realm. The glory of the exalted Jesus is beyond any earthly glory. Imagine “eyes ... like a flame of fire ... a voice like the roar of many waters ... his face ... like the sun shining in full strength.” This is a picture of a person who is in a higher category than any human being. This person, whom John sees and describes for us, is terrifying in his majestic greatness.

We will consider just one of the details. He is described “like a son of man.” This was Jesus’ favorite label for himself while he was on earth and it comes from Daniel 7. The relevant verses in Daniel 7 also describe a vision – a vision that Daniel saw: 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. ¹⁴And 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."

You can see the similarity between Daniel’s vision of one like the son of man and John’s vision of one like the son of man. In both cases we are seeing a person who is far above any mere human being in power and glory. “To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away.” This is a description of the power and glory of God. This is a description that makes the highest earthly glory and power seem like nothing. Isaiah 40:17 which describes the supreme greatness of God fits very well with the glory of the son of man as described in both Daniel’s vision and John’s vision. “All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.”

Every one of the details of John’s vision of the exalted Christ is significant, but It is enough for now to see and sense the overall impression. John’s response to the exalted Christ helps convey how awe inspiring the

glorified son of man is. Verse 17, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.” The glory of the exalted son of man is so great that John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, is absolutely terrified. He falls down before Jesus. He hides his face. He cannot remain standing. To be in the presence of such glory causes one to become unglued, as it were. John is undone. He does not think he can survive. Perhaps he remembers what God said to Moses. “[Y]ou cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”

This is greatly important for our understanding of the glory of Jesus and the nature of our relationship with him. In the OT godliness is described as the fear of the Lord. In Hebrews we are commanded to “offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” God is love. He is gracious. But he is still God. And his glory is so great that to see it is to tremble. It is easy for us to live with a view of God that is much too small and mundane. It is easy to have a view of Jesus Christ that does not do justice to his majestic transcendence. There is a place for trembling in biblical worship. Even if we are saved and secure in his love, honoring God includes reverence and even fear simply because of his overwhelming majestic greatness. We should ask ourselves if there is anything of this in our relationship with God? Acceptable worship includes reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire.

But look at what Jesus does and says, Verses 17-18, “When 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, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

The exalted Jesus lays his hand on John. It is an act of tenderness and reassurance. It is a gesture of encouragement. And with it come the words, “Fear not.” Jesus does not mean that John’s reaction to his glory was all wrong. It was absolutely appropriate for John to fall at Jesus feet as dead. He was a creature before his creator. He was a man before his God. Fear was appropriate. But the invitation “not to fear” was a word of grace. The only way rightly not to fear before God is when he tells us not to fear. Jesus was not saying that John was wrong to fear. Jesus was making it possible for John “not to fear” by the word “fear not.” Jesus is telling John that he can stop being afraid because of what Jesus said to him – his word.

And so it is with us. The only thing that rightly takes away fear is Jesus’ word. The gospel. We can be un-terrified in the presence of God only because of the word that God speaks to us in the gospel – that we don’t need to fear, if we are believing, because of the word of grace and mercy that comes to us in the gospel.

Jesus’ words that follow show why John did not have to fear. And in those words, there is a combination of awesome greatness and the grace of the gospel. “Fear not, I am the first and the last.” That is a claim to cosmic dominance. There is nothing before him. I am the first. There is nothing after him. I am the last. I dominate reality. But Jesus is also the living one. He is the living one because he has life in himself. But he is also the living one because he has conquered death. “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

If Jesus tells us not to fear – there is no need to fear anything. Think of what Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Well if the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell tells you not to fear – there is nothing left to fear. If Jesus tells you not to fear – there is nothing to fear. He is the first and the last. And he has the keys of death and Hades. If this awesome figure of the vision of the glorified son of man tells you not to fear – there is nothing to fear – not even death.

And this is a word for all believers – “Fear not.” The exalted Jesus who is so glorious that it is a fearful thing to see him, tells his people, “fear not.” No power on earth or in heaven can stand up to him. The great enemy of death is under his control. He went through it and came out on the other side and so will all of his people. And so we do not need to fear – anything – not because of any strength or capabilities that we might have – but because the exalted son of man, whose voice is like the voice of many waters, says so.