

A Vision of the Lord of the Church

Revelation 1:1-20

[We've read it; let's pray we "keep it"]

A few weeks ago I talked about how my kids gravitate to mama more than papa.

- In effort to elevate my standing in the house, I took the girls shoe shopping!
- I know one of *the quickest ways to a woman's heart is through her feet*,
- Now, they are decked out in some fresh Adidas.
- One of them is playing Volleyball so I had to fork out some more cash for volleyball shoes. She bought **Nike's**.
- I told her that I used to "dominated" the competition wearing Nike's, and she could too!

Why am I talking about shoes?

Because the root word from which "Nike" takes its name, appears more in Revelation than every other NT book put together.

- **Nikao** - Verb (noun); **Nikos** - noun for Victory
- *Nike* was the Greek goddess of victory.

Nikao is a major theme in the book.

- It's translated as "to **overcome**" "to **conqueror**,"
- It's an athletic/military metaphor denoting victory over a foe.
- It appears 26 times in the NT; with 21 of those usages being in books authored by John, with **15** of those references in Revelation.

And most significantly for our study of these seven churches, it appears at the conclusion of each address: See **2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5; 3:12; 3:21**

I don't really care what brand of shoes you are wearing, but I want you to be a conqueror!

How?

By being united to Jesus Christ, the ultimate Overcomer (**John 16:33**) — The one who triumphed over Satan, sin and death on Easter weekend, and who now sits at the Father's right hand, and will come again as the King of Kings.

- Notice **3:21**.
- **It is in Christ that we overcome particular trials and temptations.**

What kind of trials and temptations were these churches facing?

- What were they up against? We will look at them in detail in the coming weeks, but let me summarize.

They were facing the **trial of persecution**,
and **the temptation of worldliness/compromise**.

We could put it in more basic language. Jesus tells these churches:

- “**Don’t give up**” — in the face of persecution.
- “**Don’t give in**” — to the pressure of the world.

Jesus is the Overcomer — **live like him, and die like him.**
 To put it in a little jingle:

Be faithful to the end,
 Don’t give up, don’t give in.
 For our King has overcome,
 And He will come again.

This message to the churches is a microcosm of the entire book.
 If they will remain faithful, each church is promised eternal blessing.

Let’s consider Revelation 1 as we prepare to study these churches.

The Prologue (1:1-3)

We see **the type of book** that Revelation is:

1. It’s an **apocalypse**. That is, an *unveiling* or *uncovering* of what will “soon take place” - both **short term and long term**.
 - There are a series of visions that uncover hidden truths about God’s sovereign control of the future, and he will bring it to an end in Christ.
 - Vaughan Roberts: A number of years ago there was an advertisement. It featured one scene - at least initially. There was a young looking girl with her purse around her shoulder. And a young man was grabbing her shoulder. It was clear what was about to happen. He was about to steal her bag. That was one picture. But there was another picture. It was a wide angle shot, and suddenly you saw what was going on. A bus was bearing down on this young girl, who was blindly unaware. The young man saw what was happening and he is going to rescue you her. Underneath, the slogan: “Get the whole Picture. The Guardian.” [A British Newspaper].**
 - Revelation gives us the whole picture; that is we see the world from a heavenly perspective.
 - We see God’s **rule** and God’s **rescue** and God’s sovereign **triumph through Jesus**.
2. It’s a **prophecy**. Or you may say it is “**prophetic-apocalyptic**.” It doesn’t just have a word about the future through symbolic language (apocalyptic); but it calls the people of God **accountable** in light of this (prophetic).
 - So there’s **warning** and **comfort** (like the prophets) in light of events in the immediate future and the distant future.
 - **Revelation** has many allusions to the prophets. And the book drenched in the Old Testament.
3. It’s a **letter** (as we see in v. 4ff)
 - So the **present readers** are addressed with eschatological visions of the future to inspire faithfulness to the end.

- And this message is for church across the ages

v. 1: revelation “of [or from] Jesus Christ” – He is the revealer and the who is revealed.

- The manner of communication is stated: “God to Christ to Angel to John to us.”

v. 2: All that John “saw” -- 52 times “seeing”

- Revelation has a series of pictures/symbols
- We don’t look at it as clips in a movie with a strict chronology; but more like portraits in an art gallery.
- We often see things repeated, but stated in a different way with different symbols – *recapitulation*.

3: The first of seven blessings in Revelation to those who hear/keep the word.

- The letters in the NT were read out loud. This one would have taken around 1:40.
- How can someone listen to something for 1hr 40 min? I don’t know, it seems like people can sit through a 3 hour Avenger movie with no bathroom break.
- This idea of “keeping the word” is found 10 times in the book; it’s another way to express the theme of perseverance, faithfulness to the end.

“the time is near” – frames the book (see 22:10).

- The “nearness” of the Lord’s return is used throughout the NT to call believers to be faithful (Rom 13:12-15; Heb 10:24-25; James 5:7-8; 1 Pet 4:7).
 - The fact that He is coming, should impact all of life: purity, corporate encouragement, patience, self-control Prayer...
- The study of eschatological should not make us fanatical, but faithful.
- It shouldn’t cause us to quit our job and head for the hills and pray for escape; but embolden us to live as Christ’s witnesses right here, right now.

#1: A Greeting to the Churches (1:4-8)

4: John – the apostle John.

- He is an old man at the time of writing (most likely the last living apostle), exiled on the island of Patmos during the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96).

4: “To the Seven Churches”

These were 7 historical churches located in SW Asia Minor (Turkey) at the end of the first century.

- They were located on a major postal route and are addressed in order in terms of their location, starting with Ephesus and moving clockwise. (SEE MAP)

While these are historical churches, there is great wisdom and application for churches today (and throughout history).

- All churches must heed “What the Spirit says to the Churches.”
- “7” is an important number in Revelation; it indicates **completion**, and the representative nature of the letters to these historical churches.

A Common Outline for Each Church:

- **The Authoritative Introduction** (a mention of the Church/the command to Write/Words of Christ — with **some characteristic referenced in chap 1**)
- **The All-Knowing Evaluation** (Commendation/Criticism)
- **The Appropriate Exhortation** (to persevere or repent)
- **The Awe-Inspiring Conclusion** (an eternal my blessing/reward, Rev 21-22) ...

A One-Word Description for Each Church:

- The *Loveless* Church (Ephesus)
- The *Faithful* Church (Smyrna)
- The *Compromising* Church (Pergamum)
- The *Tolerant* Church (Thyatira)
- The *Dying* Church (Sardis)
- The *Loyal* Church (Philadelphia)
- The *Worthless* Church (Laodicea)

Two are commended entirely: Smyrna, Philly.

Three are rebuked for spiritual lethargy: Ephesus, Sardis, Laodicea.

Two are rebuked for tolerating false teaching: Pergamum, Thyatira.

So five need serious correction.

4b-8: A Glorious Greeting about Christ's rule, rescue, and return

John greets the churches: “**grace and peace.**” This greeting combined the Greek Hellenistic and Hebrew greetings; and Christians baptized them with more significance: it's grace and peace from our glorious God who has saved us in Christ by his grace, bringing us peace.

The Father – “**Grace and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come**”

- The focus is on God's transcendence/eternality, (cf I AM statement in Ex 3:14)
- He is the God over history and all things.
- Mounce says that John may also be countering a popular pagan saying : “**Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be**”
- Only of our God can we say this.
- **We can trust this God as we pursue faithfulness.**

The Spirit – “**and from the seven spirits who are before the throne**”

- Grace and peace are extended to us from the Holy Spirit as well.
- Some have tried to suggest that these seven spirits are angels or something else.
- But again, we have to read Revelation within its genre.
- Seven is symbolic of completion and perfection; and here of the Spirit's perfect omnipresence and omniscience.
- It's best to read this as the Holy Spirit, as we will in **3:1**.
- Possible allusion to **Isaiah 11:2, 7-fold ministry of the Spirit in relationship to Messiah.**
- The Spirit of God is presented before the throne of God; he proceeds from the very throne of God to energize and renew and equip the church.

- **The One before the throne is also with us, and in us to help us overcome!**
- We are weak, but the Spirit is mighty!

The **Son** – “and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness...”

- Not everyone agrees on how to read every verse in Revelation, but this much everyone should agree on: **This book exalts Jesus Christ!**
- Here John says more about Jesus than the Father and the Spirit but that shouldn't surprise us, since Jesus is central in this book.

He highlights 5 particular truths about Christ's person and work: (1) **Revelation**, (2) **Resurrection**, (3) **Rule**, (4) **Rescue** and (5) **Return**.

#1: Revelation. Jesus is “**The Faithful Witness**” – **you can trust his revelation!**

- The word “martyr” eventually came from this word “witness,” appropriate for Jesus – one who died on the cross, and it's later used for Antipas (2:13).
- **Jesus is the model witness that we follow.**

#2: Resurrection. He is “**The Firstborn from the Dead**”

- He was the first to die, be raised, and never to die again!
- But he's not the last one to do it – **others will follow!**

#3: Rule. Jesus is “**The Ruler of the Kings on Earth**” – reoccurring theme (eg., **11:15**).

- **Why be faithful to the end?**
- **Jesus Christ is the ruler of all rulers!**

#4: Rescue. Jesus “**loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood**”

- Our redeemer, loves us **right now**, present tense.
- Our King laid down his life for us.
- Why be faithful to the end?
 - **No one loves us like Jesus Christ.**
 - **No one has done for us what Christ has done – he has freed us from the penalty of sin; the controlling power of sin; and one day from the very presence of sin.**

The phrase tells us what we've been from: our sins; while the next phrase tells us what we've been saved for: service and worship to God....

Jesus has “**made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever.**”

- John applies **Exodus 19:5-6** to believers (privilege/responsibility; cf 1 Pet 2.9)
- It's an already not yet status – we are citizens of the kingdom now; and priests who serve God now. But will one day also reign with him, worship/serve him in the new creation.
- Why be faithful to the end?
- **No one has given you what Jesus Christ gives you! You are royalty!**

- Domitian and Rome and the Jews may view these Christians as the scum of the earth, but John reminds them of their true *identity* and of their glorious *destiny*!

#5 Return. Jesus Christ is “coming again” (v. 7)

- His coming will be seen (v. 7) – literally, historically, and visibly. (echoing Dan 7:13)
- His coming will be sorrowful for some (v.7b)
 - 2 Peter, time to repent. Don’t be a wailer, be a worshiper!
- Why be faithful to the end?
- Jesus will have the last word on all oppressors!

The “Alpha and the Omega... the Almighty” (v. 8).

- God controls the “beginning and the end,” the “first and the last” as 22:13 defines Alpha and Omega.
- All of history is in God’s hands.
- It may be applied to Jesus, as God.
 - Jesus is the beginning of all history (the Creator) and also the One for whom all things exists.
- In fact, the title appears three times, two refer to God (1:8; 21:6) and one to Christ 22:13, with also 1:17 Jesus being the “first and the last.”
- Thus you can see the unity of the Father and the Son.

The “Almighty” – Caesar was not “Almighty” and the churches are being reminded that God alone is Almighty.

This prologue sets the tone and helps us not miss the big picture – God rules and God will triumph in Christ, the One who will come again.

- Don’t get lost trying to sift through every detail of Revelation; you can end up missing the main point
- Avoid: “S stand for “S....” approach “Sunshine, Media, Icepack, Turtle, Handshake”

#2: A Portrait of the Lord of the Church (1:9-20)

The gospels make no real effort to describe Jesus’ physical appearance – his weight, height, hairstyle, eye color, etc.

- He was fully human. He was a Jewish man. But there’s no description.
- But here we have an inspired portrait of the resurrected Lord of the Church.
- But it’s not Thomas Kinkade. Not Ansel Adams...
- It’s an apocalyptic portrait...

Notice one essential interpretive word --- “like” (see throughout)

- Around 56 times in Revelation
- It’s the use of symbols . You will miss John’s meaning if you don’t think symbolically.

- The same way you miss Solomon's meaning to his bride in Song of Solomon! (Neck like the tower of David; hair like a flock of goats).
- John is revealing the glory of the Lord of the Church with symbolic imagery.
- Each feature reveals something about Christ's majestic being.

**This is what these seven churches needed – a vision of Jesus Christ!
It's what the church needs today!**

Our day is different but very similar!

- This secular world seems so **big and powerful**.
- The church seems so small and **weak and distracted**.
- **Where do we turn? We turn to the exalted Christ.**

A. The Occasion for the Portrait (9-11)

9a: John writes as one of them, "**brother and partner.**"

- You can sense the affection.
- He's an apostle/pastor, but even more, "a **brother.**"
- Whatever your role is, what most defines you is your relationship to God and to one another.

Notice the context in which he writes:

(1) **tribulation**, (2) **kingdom**, (3) **patient endurance**.

These commonalities bind them together.

- Tribulation – it was hard being a Christian. It was dangerous.
- Kingdom – something now, not just later.
- Patient Endurance – How we must live as kingdom citizens in time of tribulation.
- John says "I've been living it out with you."
- It was very moving to study these churches with believers in Turkey a few weeks ago. It's not easy to be a Christian there. Many of suffered alienation from family.
- We had serious security at our event; many questions revolved around blending of Muslim traditions with Christianity.
- In contexts where it's hard to be a Christian, Revelation is a most cherished book.
- We should study it with the persecuted church in mind.

"in Christ Jesus" – persecution, kingdom, endurance are experienced in Jesus; it's part of our participation in the life of Christ; in the sharing of his suffering and the glory that will follow.

9b: "**I was on the island of Patmos**"

- It was in the Aegean, a ten mile long, six mile wide island; about 37 miles SW of Miletus, a harbor city near Ephesus.
- A first century Alcatraz.... Isolated, desolate, bleak.
- It was used to destroy the spirit of the prisoners.

John was there because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

- This is John's way of referring to the gospel.
- His being on the island was the result of preaching the gospel
- He **was not** there as a missionary but as a prisoner exiled under Domitian.
- **"Word of God and testimony of Jesus" carries the idea of suffering and martyrdom of Christians.**
- Christianity had been **outlawed**.
- Religion was regulated by Rome.
- The Roman cult was the only thing acceptable, with Judaism being the exception.

10a-11: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day"

- **One day, on a Sunday, in that place, something happened.**
- He was in the state of prophetic inspiration
- **"A voice like a trumpet"** – a phrase that has eschatological significance; as well as the idea of a theophany (**Heb 12:19**).
- So it was a divine, sharp, clear call to **"write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches..."**

B. The Features of the Portrait (12-16) (his inaugural vision which actually extends through 3:22; with 4:1 beginning a new one)

- Through all these images, we see that **the church is under the control and care of Christ.**
- And the churches are accountable to him, the end time judge and ruler.

12: **Seven golden lampstands** (cf. Zech 4)

- This is a representation of the churches (**see v. 20**).
- The Lampstand was a symbol of the nation of Israel (Ex 37)
- But now he sees **seven** lampstands.
- The light imagery may also be intended to continue the theme of **witnessing** – shining the light in a dark world.

13: **"in the midst of..."** someone like the **Son of Man** (again, Dan 7)

- Jesus is not an absentee Landlord – he's in the midst of his church (**See 2:1**).
- He is here.
- This is why I want my life intertwined with the church – **this is where he is.**
- As bad as some of these churches were, no one is ever told, **"Give up on the church."**
- Sometimes you hear, **"I wish we could return to the way things used to be"**
 - **These are some of the churches! The church has always had issues!**
 - **Churches were never what they were supposed to be!**
 - **Have you read 1 Corinthians!?** We have the epistles because correctives had to be given to the churches.
- **But we don't give up it; Jesus is the midst of his church.**
- He is still the Shepherd, The Head, the Vine, Foundation, Husband.
- **If you love Jesus Christ you will not abandoned his bride.**

- Hey said, “I will build my church!”
- That’s where he was – among his churches.

Feature 1: Long Robe and Golden Sash

- This is the clothing of the priest in the OT (Ex 28:4)
- **The coming Lord is our great high priest** who made atonement for us and intercedes for us.

Feature 2: White Hair like Wool/Snow

- Imagery drawn from the Ancient of Days picture in Daniel 7.
- Revelation takes distinctive trait of God and applies it to Jesus.
- What is John seeing? **The coming Lord who is infinitely wise.**

Feature 3: Eyes like Flames of Fire.

- This symbolizes his omniscience.
- His eyes see through all hypocrisy
- He sees like an x-ray machine.
- Nothing in all creation hidden from his sight
- **The coming Lord possesses penetrating insight. (eg, 3:2/3:8)**

Feature 4: Feet like Burnished Bronze Refined by a Furnace

- This speaks of **his victory**; of crushing his opponents.
- Bronze – heavy, strong, like white hot bronze – they burn everything in its path.
- **The coming Lord possesses unstoppable power.**

Feature 5: Voice like Waters

- **Ever been to Niagara Falls or some other great falls?** If you stand at the bottom, its deafening.
- **The coming Lord has fear-inducing speech.**

Feature 6: He Holds the Seven Stars

- These representatives of the churches are his (v. 20).
- The **coming Lord possesses his church**. They are His.
- To **assault the church is to make him your enemy.**

Feature 7: Sharp Sword

- A picture of judgment and authority, drawn from Isa 11:4.
- Revelation 19:15 – to strike down the nations
- His judgment is perfect.
- These Christians were threatened with the sword of Rome, **but Jesus, the coming Lord has the ultimate sword to fear.**

Feature 8: Face Shining like the Sun in Full Strength

- This feature sums up the previous ones: Brilliance, holiness, majesty.

- This was not the first time John had seen the face of Jesus light up: Mt of Transfiguration
- He sees here the coming Lord, who is the ultimate, conquering warrior.

C. The Reaction to the Portrait (17a)

Terror: John collapses in overwhelming dread.

- It's the trauma of glory.
- Aslan, "He's not safe"
- This is the pattern in the Bible (Isaiah 6, Ezek 1:28; Lk 5)

Mercy: "Don't be afraid."

- We can't stand before his glory but he's merciful.

D. The Explanation of the Portrait (17b-18)

17b: "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore and I have the keys to Death and Hades."

Jesus is saying, "Because of who I am and what I have done, I control life and death. So if I say 'don't be afraid,' then you have no reason to be afraid."

"I hold the keys to Death and Hades"

Jesus said "I entered that door. I was there. But Hades (the realm of the dead/the grave) couldn't keep me. On the third day, I kicked down that door!"

- If you are a Xian, you don't have to be afraid because Jesus has the keys to that realm.
- This is why we you can be bold, and stand for Christ in the face of persecution and opposition: He has the keys.

E. The Consequences of the Portrait (19-20)

"Watch and write"

- What is now; and what will take place later.
- Present and future.
- This is an interpretive guide for whole book.

So then, John's vision is a pattern for the Christian life.

- We see him.
- We fall before him in humility.
- Then we experience his mercy.
- Then we are commissioned.

Conclusion

So Revelation had a word for the first century church.

- And it continues to have a word for the church today.
- Just as they needed an exalted vision of Christ, so do we.

It is by seeing him and being united to him that we can overcome.

- We can be faithful to the end.

Through him, the one who loved us and freed us by his blood, we don't give up and we don't give in.

- This the kind of Nike's that we need!

As a church, let's hear his word to these churches and obey his word, knowing that our eternal, sovereign Christ rewards the faithfulness of his saints.

And let's never forget that we will see him!

- The One whose face shines like the Sun; who has everlasting dominion.
- The Great High Priest who has forgiven us, and now intercedes for us.
- The Wise, Ancient of Days.
- The Prophet who sees all; whose judgments are true; whose voice is like the rushing waters.
- The King who crushes all his enemies.
- The Head of the Church, who walks among us, as the one who cares for his church and is the judge of the church.

We will see him.

And on that day, we will be glad we persevered to the end in faithfulness.

**Be faithful to the end;
Don't give up, don't give in.
For our King has triumphed and He will come again.**