

CHAPTER 39: Revelation 1 thru 5

We are rapidly approaching the end of our long journey. We are on the final leg of the trip looking at the book of Revelation. It contains **the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants what must happen...** (Revelation 1:1). Here we receive an apocalyptic snapshot of future events – things that will take place in the final days of human history. We are not told WHEN these events will take place. God has His reasons for keeping this a secret. But we can rest assured that these events WILL happen in God's perfect timetable.

The writer of Revelation identifies himself as John. This is widely accepted to be the Apostle John even though the style of writing and language of this book is different from John's other writings (the Gospel of John and 1, 2 and 3 John). In about 95 A.D. the 90-year old apostle is banished to the island of Patmos by order of Emperor Domitian. His crime was preaching the Gospel. By this time the practice of Christianity had been made illegal. Patmos is a relatively small island in the Aegean Sea about 30 miles off the coast of Asia (western Turkey today).

During John's exile on Patmos he is visited by a glorified Jesus who dictates to John seven letters. These are to be hand-delivered to seven actual churches in Asia. The purpose of Jesus's messages is to both warn and encourage persecuted believers to stand firm in their faith. All these churches were in and around the city of Ephesus, where John had been ministering prior to his exile. So John probably knew many of the people in these churches.

John is about to be shown a series of visions. Jesus instructs John to write down everything he sees. He will get a rare glimpse into heaven. This will be followed by a lengthy vision of end time events. These are things that are future even for us today. John records his visions in vivid detail. He does the best he can to describe accurately the incredible scenes that are played out before him. It's a lot for a man living in the First Century to comprehend! Many of the events and images he sees are frighteningly clear while others are not. This creates a lot of mystery with Revelation. What does it all mean? Is John writing symbolically or literally when he conveys his visions? Probably a little of both.

For all of its mystery, Revelation gives a hopeful message to believers in Jesus to whom this book was written. That message is this: In the end Jesus WILL return to the

earth just as He promised. When He does He will come back with His saints and He will reign as King and Lord. This book contains a promise: **Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near!** (Revelation 1:3)

John begins by sending his personal greetings to the seven churches of Asia... **From John, to the seven churches that are in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from “He who is,” and who was, and who is still to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ – the faithful Witness, the firstborn from among the dead, the Ruler over the kings of the earth. To the One who loves us and has set us free from our sins at the cost of His own blood and has appointed us as a kingdom, as priests serving His God and Father – to Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever! Amen.** (Revelation 1:4-6)

Jesus is the One who reveals all truth. John passes along, not his own words, but the words of Jesus to these seven churches.

Look! He [Jesus] is returning with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the tribes on the earth will mourn because of Him. This will certainly come to pass! Amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the God – the One who is, and who was, and who is still to come – the All-Powerful! (Revelation 1:7-8)

John then explains what happened to him while he was exiled on Patmos: I, John, your brother in Christ and one like you being persecuted for the faith, was on the island of Patmos. **I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, saying: “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches – to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.” I turned to see whose voice was speaking to me...** (Revelation 1:10-12) And who do you suppose John saw? He saw Jesus Himself!

Listen to John's description of the glorified Lord Jesus: **And when I did so, I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands was one like a Son of Man.** (Revelation 1:12-13) [Note: “Son of Man” was Jesus's favorite term for Himself]. **He [Jesus] was dressed in a robe extending down to His feet and He wore a wide golden belt around His chest. His head and hair were as white as wool, even as white as snow, and His eyes were like a fiery flame. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and His voice was like the roar of many waters. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp double-edged sword extended out of His mouth. His face shone like the sun shining at full strength.** (Revelation 1:12-16) Here Jesus appears quite differently than John remembers Him. In fact, His appearance utterly terrifies John!

When I saw Him I fell down at His feet as though I were dead, but He placed His right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid! I am the first and the last, and the one who lives! I was dead, but look, now I am alive – forever and ever – and I hold the keys of death and of Hades!” (Revelation 1:17-18) John suddenly realizes that this is Jesus. He likely recognizes Jesus’s voice in the same way that Mary Magdalene had recognized His voice in the garden after the resurrection. Jesus tells John: **“Therefore write what you saw, what is, and what will be after these things.”** (Revelation 1:19) John is to write down what he is about to be shown. First, things that are present in John’s day. Then, things that will happen in the future.

First, things that are present – letters to the seven churches of Asia. These are messages from Jesus Himself for seven actual churches that existed in John’s day. Some people see these letters representing seven periods of church history that make up the Church Age. Perhaps. Some say these letters speak to seven types of churches or seven types of Christians. It could be. I’m more straightforward in my view. I see these simply as being direct messages to local churches in John’s day.

The first letter is to the pastor at the church of **Ephesus**. Our Lord commends this church for being hard-working; for patiently enduring, for being resilient under pressure; and for being doctrinally sound, not putting up with false teachers. There are a lot of really good things about this church. But then Jesus admonishes them for not continuing to love Him the way they once did. He prescribes a solution for this problem – remember, repent and return. He warns this church that if they do NOT repent, He will remove them.

“The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will permit him to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.” (Revelation 2:7) You will hear that phrase “The one who has an ear had better hear” repeated in all these messages. It simply means “You better pay attention to what I’m saying!” And for each of these churches Jesus offers a specific promise, a blessing.

The second letter from Jesus is to the pastor at the church of **Smyrna**. He praises the believers there for following God faithfully; for living out their Christianity despite severe persecution, poverty and being subject to evil slander. Jesus has nothing bad to say about this church. He has no admonition for them.

“Do not be afraid of the things you are about to suffer. The devil is about to have some of you thrown into prison so you may be tested, and you will experience suffering for ten days. Remain faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown that is life itself. The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will in no way be

harmed by the second death.” (Revelation 2:10-11) A famous person in the church at Smyrna was Polycarp. He will be martyred for his faith decades after John writes this.

A third letter is dictated to the pastor at the church of **Pergamum**. Jesus praises this church for holding to the truth and for not denying their faith. To their credit, the Christians of Pergamum refused to denounce Jesus in the face of harsh persecution. But Jesus has something against them. They have grown tolerant of the worship of false gods and the blatant immorality associated with it. Yes, they are standing firm in their own faith, but they refuse to speak out against the evil practices around them. In addition to that, they have compromised their own Christian ethics and morality by allowing false doctrines to infiltrate their church without resistance. Jesus warns this church that He is coming in judgment and authority. He will deal with those who compromise. He exhorts these believers to repent before it's too late.

“The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give him some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and on that stone will be written a new name that no one can understand except the one who receives it.” (Revelation 2:17)

The fourth letter is to the pastor at the church of **Thyatira**. This church possesses several virtues: good works, love, faith, service and perseverance. They started out with a lot of potential. But then something went wrong. In Thyatira there was a woman of great power and prestige who effectively seduced this church away from the one true God. Because of her influence they embraced the pagan temple gods around them. As a result this church had slowly become weak and insignificant. Jesus gives them an opportunity to repent. He warns them that, if they do not, His judgment will be swift. He reassures the faithful few in this church – those who have not embraced the false teachings – that they will not fall under the burden of His judgment.

“And to the one who conquers and who continues in My deeds until the end, I will give him authority over the nations – he will rule them with an iron rod and like clay jars he will break them to pieces, just as I have received the right to rule from My Father – and I will give him the morning star. The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 2:26-29)

A fifth letter is dictated by our Lord to the pastor at the church of **Sardis**. This church has a reputation for being a lively church. In reality, they are spiritually DEAD. Jesus tells them, “Wake up, church! Strengthen that which remains. Don't abandon the sinking ship, but stay and strengthen it. Revitalize the living remnant that remains.” As was the case with the church at Ephesus, Jesus' remedy for this church's problem is to remember, repent and return.

Jesus points to one bright spot in this church: **“But you have a few individuals in Sardis who have not stained their clothes, and they will walk with Me dressed in white, because they are worthy. The one who conquers will be dressed like them in white clothing, and I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will declare his name before My Father and before His angels. The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** (Revelation 3:4-6)

A sixth letter from Jesus is dictated to the pastor at the church in *Philadelphia*. For this church Jesus has only words of praise, no rebuke. This is an evangelistic and missionary-minded church. The Lord tells them that, because they have been faithful witnesses for Him, He is about to give them an open door of mission opportunities. Jesus commends this church for its deeds, humility, obedience and faithfulness.

“Because you have kept My admonition to endure steadfastly, I will also keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have so that no one can take away your crown. The one who conquers I will make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will never depart from it. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God (the new Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven...), and My new name as well. The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:10-13)

A seventh and final letter is dictated to the pastor at the church in *Laodicea*. Jesus has some harsh words for this church: **“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm... I am going to vomit you out of My mouth!”** (Revelation 3:15) This is the church that made God sick! The people in this church see themselves as self-sufficient. They're rich. They have it all! But they are only fooling themselves. Jesus tells them that the reality is that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. Jesus offers to be their source of supply, to be the remedy for their awful spiritual condition.

Jesus now calls on them to repent. **“Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears My voice and opens the door I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with Me. I will grant the one who conquers permission to sit with Me on My throne, just as I too conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne. The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** (Revelation 3:20-22)

The famous painting by William Holman Hunt of Jesus knocking on a church door is based on this passage. But this is actually a very sad commentary on the state of the Church collectively. Jesus, in effect, has been locked out of His own church!

We come now to a major transition point in the story...

Everything we have looked at up to this point in the story (Genesis thru Revelation 3) has been IN THE PAST – thousands of years ago. Starting with the events of the next chapter, Revelation 4 to the end of the story, everything described will take place in THE FUTURE. This is not just future for John but also future for those of us here in 2023 (the year of this writing).

So then, if you have been following along in the Bible, place a bookmark here at the beginning of Chapter 4 because we will be coming back to it later.

Between Revelation 3 and 4 is the long and indefinite period of time we are presently living in. It is commonly referred to as “The Church Age.”

As Chapter 4 begins, John looks up and sees an open door to heaven. He hears the voice of Jesus calling him: **“Come up here so that I can show you what must happen after these things.”** (Revelation 4:1) Jesus basically tells John, “I’m going to show you what will happen in the future.”

Immediately I was in the Spirit, and a throne was standing in heaven with someone seated on it! (Revelation 4:2) By way of a vision John is transported by the Holy Spirit into heaven. He now sees himself standing in the glorious throne room of heaven. What John experiences here closely parallels what the saints of God will experience one day whenever they are transported to heaven. This is often referred to as “the Rapture of the saints.”

I need to stop here and point out something very important. We just heard Jesus promise the church at Philadelphia that He would keep His saints from the hour of testing, from tribulation: **“Because you have kept my admonition to endure steadfastly, I will also keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth.”** (Revelation 3:10) So then, by removing His people (those believers who are still alive at the time of the Great Tribulation which is about to take place) from the earth and transporting them to heaven, Jesus is fulfilling this promise. It was not a promise only for this one church, but it is for all believers of all time. **YOU WILL NOT GO THRU THE TRIBULATION!** This is a promise from our Lord Himself.

John writes down what he sees, which is the same thing that all those newly translated saints at the Rapture will see. I believe that this is also what all believers in Jesus Christ see whenever they physically die. They see the Triune God sitting on His throne brightly and brilliantly arrayed. The Apostle Paul once noted that as believers we **would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.** (2 Corinthians 5:8) So then, when we believers in Jesus experience death we apparently go from a consciousness here on this earth to a consciousness in heaven with God. The difference between one’s translation at death and the translation during the Rapture is

that the Rapture is a translation both physically and spiritually; death is a translation spiritually only. This will become clearer as we look at events later in Revelation.

John sees God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit seated as One Holy Triune God. Surrounding the throne are the 24 elders – the 12 apostles and representatives of the 12 tribes of Israel. Lightning and thunder, symbolizing God's righteous judgment, proceed from the throne. In front of the throne burn seven flaming torches that represent the Holy Spirit's supernatural work. The throne is set on a placid sea like glass crystal, characteristic of God's perfect peace. The four living creatures (similar to the four creatures of Ezekiel 10), and the cherubim and angelic beings worship God around His throne. **Each one of the four living creatures had six wings and was full of eyes all around and inside. They never rest day or night, saying: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the All-Powerful, Who was and Who is, and Who is still to come!"** (Revelation 4:8)

There is unending worship around God's throne. The 24 elders bow before God in holy reverence declaring: **"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, since You created all things, and because of Your will they existed and were created!"** (Revelation 4:11)

In His right hand God holds a scroll that has writing on both sides. It is sealed with seven seals. This is God's deed and title to the world. The summons goes forth through-out heaven to find someone who is worthy to take the scroll from God's hand, open it and take permanent possession of the earth. **Then I saw in the right hand of the One who was seated on the throne a scroll written on the front and back and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a powerful angel proclaiming in a loud voice: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it.** (Revelation 5:1-3)

Sadly, not one of the myriads of saints or angels or heavenly beings are worthy to take the scroll from God's hand.

So I [John] began weeping bitterly because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered; thus He can open the scroll and its seven seals." (Revelation 5:4-5) So then, there IS One who is worthy. WHO is this One?

Then I saw standing in the middle of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the middle of the elders, a Lamb that appeared to have been killed. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (Revelation 5:6) WHO is this Lamb that was killed but is

now alive? It's JESUS! John looks over at the throne of God surrounded by the 24 elders and the four living creatures. There he sees Jesus standing in His resurrected body with the marks of death still visible on Him.

John recalls that dark day many years before outside the city walls of Jerusalem where on a Roman cross Jesus experienced so much pain, anguish, ridicule and shame. John had been there! He witnessed all that personally. Now he sees Jesus splendidly arrayed in heaven. Jesus, the Lamb of God is highly exalted. What a contrast!

Then He [Jesus] came and took the scroll from the right hand of the One who was seated on the throne... (Revelation 5:7) Jesus takes the scroll from His Father's right hand. He alone is worthy! At this point all heaven breaks out into a new song of praise: **"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because You were killed, and at the cost of Your own blood You have purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation. You have appointed them as a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."** (Revelation 5:9-10)

Millions and millions – too many to count – of all the saints of all time plus all the angelic host comprise a massive heavenly choir. They begin to sing loudly and in perfect unison: **"Worthy is the Lamb who was killed to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and praise!"** Then I heard every creature - in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea, and all that is in them - singing: **"To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb be praise, honor, glory, and ruling power forever and ever!"** And the four living creatures were saying **"Amen,"** and the elders threw themselves to the ground and worshiped. (Revelation 5:12-14)

This is a truly amazing scene! John is fully captured in his soul by this rare glimpse into heaven. He relishes watching this vision with all the incredible worship taking place in the throne room of heaven involving millions of saints and angels. We can only imagine what John sees. It's almost too incredible for words!

But alas, the perspective of Revelation now shifts. It moves away from the grandeur of heaven back to earth. It's as though through John's eyes we have been flying way above the clouds in the bright sunlight and now we begin our descent through dark clouds of doom back down toward the earth. The same Lord and Redeemer we just saw as the object of heavenly worship by the saints and the angels – Jesus, the Lamb of God – will soon become the Righteous Judge of all those who reject Him.