

THE FIRST AND THE LAST
Revelation 1

(Read Revelation 1)

Intro: 50 years ago, in 1974, Barry White had a hit love song that said "You're the first, you're the last, you're my everything."

I wonder how that worked out for Barry? He certainly could write a good love song. But I wonder how that relationship worked out? He passed away over 20 years ago, but had he survived, I wonder if those words would still ring true after 50 years? I'm not judging, I'm just wondering. Was it really the first and last, and everything?

You see, what I just read from the Revelation of John, is a love song. It's a message to us that still rings true after 2,000 years. And that's the reason why I'm going to wade into at least the first three chapters of this final book of the Bible.

You need to understand, I don't enter this study without a little trepidation. The Apostle John writes some pretty deep stuff here, and it's difficult to understand. And for that reason I have always been reluctant to try to preach through Revelation in a series. That's why I am encouraged by the words of commentator, Morris Ashcraft, who makes a very valuable point when he writes this:

"The Book of Revelation is the strangest book in the New Testament. It is so difficult for most modern readers that they neglect it altogether. But many who do not ignore the book do something even worse: they misuse it. Sometimes the misuse is nothing more serious than an exaggeration of unimportant details. Sometimes, however, the central message is overlooked or obscured.

Bible students should not permit such neglect or abuse of the book to discourage them. The message of the book plumbs the depths of Christian faith and portrays, in exalted terms, the ultimate victory of Christ and his followers. Biblical scholars are in rather general agreement on the major ideas of the book. To be sure, there are enigmatic details in the book which defy explanation. But most students can grasp the central message of the book and, with persistence, can also penetrate much of the mystery surrounding that message." (End Quote)

That message is, ultimately, God has a perfect rescue plan for humanity.

For that reason, I want to make a short introduction today to a series that will cover the letters to the seven churches found in Revelation 2 and 3. If you've been here as long as I've been here as pastor, you know that this isn't the first time I've done this. My first sermon series after arriving here in the summer of 2005 was to preach from the seven letters to the seven churches here in Revelation 2 and 3. That sermon series asked the question, what is the spirit saying to the Church in Ashland? I'm sure that you probably don't remember much of that series if you remember any of it at all. Not because it was forgettable, but because it was 19 years ago. I assure you, though, that if you went back to that series, and somehow found the audio, which is probably around somewhere, you will not be receiving the same series. This is not a reworking of those sermons. This is a completely new series that looks at the messages of each of those seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3, and applies them to us as the church in 2024 – so it's similar, but not the same. The message is timeless, so we are going to learn what the spirit is saying to the church.

What I am going to do today is point out several introductory things in Chapter 1, before I embark over the next 7 weeks into the message that is in each letter to each church. Specifically I'm going to point out three things. The first is . . .

John's message was not for the curious but for the committed

- That point is not my own, I believe I gleaned that from Dr. Ashcraft who I just quoted a bit ago. But it's very true. This isn't a curiosity. The words in John's Revelation are not a thriller or a science fiction story. They are, a revelation. Specifically it is a revelation of Jesus Christ to his followers which John refers to as servants (v. 1). John intends to show these servants the things that must soon take place. Servants are committed. They don't do things just because they are curious about what might happen. They do things as a calling.
- Notice also, the blessing to the one who reads this revelation aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it. (v. 3). The Holy Spirit gave this message to John

and it was intended to be spread through the churches of Asia and, eventually, through all churches for all of holy history.

- Blessed is the one who would read to people who could not read it themselves – because they had never learned to read or write. As a reader, he was being obedient and he was bringing the word of the Lord to people who could not do it themselves. (Just a quick aside here – this is a huge reminder that Christ Followers are not to keep their gifts to themselves – our gifts are to be shared for the betterment of the Kingdom . . . just sayin . . .)
- Notice also that blessed are the ones who hear, and, not only that, the ones who keep (that is, put to use) what is written. We aren't supposed to listen to this and not do something about it. The word that the Apostle is bringing is from the Holy Spirit. It is the revelation which God, himself, gave, and it is intended to be observed and applied. Thus, it's not a message for the curious, it is a message for those who are committed to what it says.
- The second thing I want to point out here in this first chapter is . . .

God's kingdom is never obtained by worldly power

- This is especially important in our politically charged culture – and even more so as we are at the beginning of what promises to be an interminable presidential campaign year. But whereas we have the right, as Christ Following Americans to prayerfully consider the candidates and determine for whom, or even if we vote, the people to whom John was writing were as powerless and helpless as could be. They had already suffered through three or four decades of growing persecution. They were the scapegoats who could be blamed for any ill in society. They were the group of people that anyone could attack without fear of reprisal.
- The people of God had remained faithful. This is because theirs was not a kingdom of this earth – instead they were looking forward to the reward of eternity. In the meantime, they were busy presenting a message of redemption, hope, and peace. Christians were the only ones who could be counted on to minister in times of plague and epidemic or to untouchables like those suffering from leprosy. They were the ones who rescued unwanted babies who had been discarded for some imperfection or because they were the wrong sex from the garbage heap.
- Despite all the good they did, Christ Followers were mainly appreciated for the entertainment they provided when they were thrown to the wild beasts in their stadiums during pagan festivals.
- It was to these faithful people John's revelation was intended. Grace and peace is what he offers from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and *the ruler of kings on earth*. (v 5). The encouragement is this: Jesus is the ruler no matter who the one is who is in power. The Roman Emperor actually expected to be worshipped by his subjects and so one of the reasons Christians were thrown to the lions was because they were considered atheists – because they refused to worship anyone except the one true God. God the son would be the one coming in power in the clouds with this proclamation, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*" (v 8).
- So here is the truth, God's kingdom is what matters, this world is not our home.
- And finally, there is . . .

The perfection in the message to the seven churches in Asia

- Let me explain: Seven is seen as the perfect number. In biblical thought, seven signifies completeness. So while it would seem that the Holy Spirit is coming down hard on some of these churches for their specific faults, and he is, he is also presenting a message that is for all churches. The messages that John wrote in AD 95 to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, are messages that we need in our churches in AD 2024.
- This final book of the Bible was cyclical letter was sent out to the seven churches who formed an oblong semicircle through modern western Turkey. They were intended to be read everywhere. And they were intended to be taken to heart and applied by the faithful followers who heard the words. So, as I said earlier, this is not book to instill fear – instead it is a book of instruction and, yes, encouragement, for the Church to strive to be more faithful and effective. After all, it's better to know what the Laodiceans needed to do to keep from being spit out than to find out the hard way.

- So the perfection of these letters is that we can read, learn, and apply them ourselves and receive the blessing that comes from it.

Conclusion: That's all for this week. A good way to prepare for each week's message is to read through these first three chapters in Revelation several times a week. Maybe you could read them in the morning and then at night before you sleep. That would be a good thing to remind us of Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. Amen.