

Do Not Be Afraid

Series: Theology In Pictures

by Steve Zeisler

The opening chapter of Revelation is a good place to end a study in the book--as well as a good place to begin--because in this chapter, John's vision, the "slide" that he projects before us, is of Jesus' ministry on earth to his embattled church under conditions which were exactly like what we face today. (In earlier studies we talked about Jesus' ministry in the heavenly places, his ministry before the throne of God, and his ministry at the end of history.)

There are two sections to chapter 1, and each of them will say something helpful to us in preparation for the Lord's table this morning. We are told in scripture that "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Communion therefore, is a sacrament that was given by God to minister to Christians who are waiting on earth for him, who are longing for him who are standing firm for him in the days between his first and second coming.

Scripture tells us two things about communion. First, we are to examine ourselves and so "eat the bread and drink of the cup." The experience of the Lord's table ought to bring us to the point where we will look clearly at the kind of people we are. We should ask ourselves difficult questions about whether our Christianity is genuine and deep, or hypocritical and perfunctory. Second, Jesus told us that we should eat and drink in remembrance of him. That is the second thing we will see in our study this morning. We will be helped to remember Jesus by what we see of him in this vision; we will be helped to observe him clearly, to recall his victory over sin by his death on the cross. So we can examine ourselves on the basis of our study and we can remember Jesus on this basis. Rev.1:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by his angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it, for the time is near. JOHN to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him even so. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

In this first half of chapter 1 we encounter some useful truths for examining ourselves for asking questions of our own hearts about the nature of our Christian commitment. There are more things here than we will be able to deal with in detail this morning but there are three points that will be helpful to us. These points form what I will call a "sandwich"--two responsibilities (two slices of bread) encasing a description of a relationship (the filling).

The whole book is summed up in the opening phrase "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." Everything John saw and experienced was directed toward making plain the character, the person and the work of Christ. However, the immediate context of Rev.1:1-3 will be important for us to learn the first of our two responsibilities. The "Revelation of Jesus Christ" is committed to individuals to pass on to other individuals. Bearing witness to the

truth of Jesus is the context in which this phrase, this summary of the Book, is given. There are five generations of witness in the first three verses—God (1) gave the Revelation to Jesus (2) who gave it to an angel (3) who gave it to John (4) who gave it to the world (5). Lastly, a blessing is pronounced (Rev.1:3) on the individual who reads it. (I take that to mean to an individual who reads it aloud before a congregation.)

So, five times this message is passed from one individual to another and that is the first responsibility we ought to look at: the responsibility to bear witness to the truth of Jesus. But this responsibility would be better thought of as a privilege I think. Have you ever wondered why God did not write the gospel in detail in the clouds so that everyone who ever lived could read about the cross etc., as he looked at the sky? Or have you wondered why God does not appear to every man and woman so that the gospel is efficiently communicated to every individual in the world? Why has he chosen to use us rather, as instruments to give the Revelation to someone, who in turn must give it to another who in turn must give it to another? Well, he has done so because he loves us, because the greatest honor he can bestow on his people is to allow them to participate with him in the bringing of light into a dark world. If he did not love us so much he would have arranged for the gospel to be declared another way, but we have the privilege, the honor of being used by God to reveal Christ to the world. That changes my feeling about my witnessing responsibility; it is an honor, not a burden.

Another thing we should recognize is that the words "to bear witness" (Rev.1:2) come from the Greek word "martureo," from which we get the English word "martyr." The Greek word suggests that bearing witness means putting your life on the line. Some people assuage their consciences about witnessing by putting tracts in the pockets of passers-by or shouting hellfire and damnation from a street corner. But that is not what the Scriptures have in mind here and the reason is that very often those actions have the effect of driving people away from a close examination of your life. If you are irritating and insensitive, angry and cold, you will drive people away from you, although your conscience may tell you that you have done the work of witnessing. By speaking of Christ lovelessly no one will come close to you and you can continue to be insensitive to your family, faithless toward your creditors, and lecherous in your thought life. You can avoid the requirement that your life back up the things you say. Witnessing needs to include a loving heart so that people can get close to you to see whether or not you are living the things you preach. So first we have a responsibility to pass on the Revelation by witnessing.

The second responsibility, the other "slice" of our sandwich is found in Rev.1:9:

I, John your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus...

John says that all of us partake of three conditions in life: tribulation, the kingdom, and perseverance. Being a member of the kingdom of God requires that we obey and remain loyal to Christ as King. Now his kingdom, at this point, is overrun by a usurper. so our loyalty must exist under the same kind of conditions that the citizens of, say, France or Poland endured during World War 11 when they maintained their loyalty to their respective countries. Or perhaps we could use Robin Hood as an illustration of loyalty during a usurper's reign. Robin Hood and his merry men lived out in the forest, loyal forever to Richard the Lion-Hearted, while evil Prince John ran the affairs of England during the Crusades. They suffered the tribulation of losing their homes, etc. and they had to endure with patience as they waited for King Richard to return to power. We as Christians must wait in patient endurance for our King to return.

Now I doubt that there are many people in this room who have suffered physically for the cause of Christ, but there are other kinds of suffering that all of us endure. The most difficult, perhaps, is our emotional reaction to injustice. Some people here have spent days and weeks and months serving hurting, needy people, only to find that the recipients laughed at them, took advantage of them, and then came back for more help. There are people in this church who are the most thorough-hearted servants of God, who give most of their time and energy to helping people, only to find that there are a dozen others waiting to take the glory at the end. Now there is no justice in that; there is no justice in a system where one or two people do all the work and everybody else seems to benefit from it. Yet that kind of tribulation is required of us because we are loyal to our King in a world controlled by a usurper.

Recently I have struggled with having to confront a couple of people because I am loyal to the King, because scripture tells me that someone has to go to a brother caught in a trespass. But instead of being received under those conditions, to be fought against, to be hated and treated bitterly and angrily is a hard thing to accept. Again, those conditions exist because the King's country is controlled for the time being by an outsider. Justice does not always prevail in this world, and as a result the King's people will suffer, they need to wait with patient endurance for his return. So that is the second responsibility highlighted in this section. First, we have a responsibility to bear witness; second, we are responsible to be loyal to the King, even though it requires tribulation and endurance.

Now, sandwiched between those two responsibilities, is the statement of a relationship that makes them possible. Look at verse 4:

JOHN to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

The important words in those sentences are the prepositions "from" and "to." In any relationship there is always a reciprocal giving and taking; that is what makes a relationship. From God, God the Father, God the Spirit and God the Son, we have received grace and peace. We have received peace as our foundation. That means that we can be at home with ourselves, free from guilt and alert to opportunities, because we no longer have to worry about all the attacks and worry that come into the lives of those who have no peace. And we have received grace; the riches of Christ, the resources of the lord of the universe.

The other half of the relationship is our return to him. From him, grace and peace, "to Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever." The response of servants of God in this relationship is to return to him dominion and glory, to honor him, to declare to the world his value, his utter worth, and to stand for that in the world. We receive grace and peace; we return glory and dominion to him. It is that kind of relationship that allows us to take up the responsibilities that we have spoken of. (As a side note, I think it is very helpful to observe here that the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Spirit, are involved together in giving us of God's resources. But when we return praise to God we return it through Christ only; there is no other way to glorify God except to glorify Jesus. This scripture clearly gives the lie to Jehovah's Witnesses and to every other cult, to every other attempt by human beings to approach God except through Christ. It is through Jesus that we reflect God's glory and honor, and as a result of that we honor the three members of the Godhead.)

Now we can examine ourselves with reference to these things. We can examine ourselves as to whether or not our lives are on line in revealing Christ to the world. We can examine ourselves as to whether or not we are loyal subjects of the King; we can examine ourselves as to the nature of our relationship with him. If we will reflect on these things it will make our experience of communion, our experience of worshipping God at his table fuller for us, rather than a ceremony that is merely automatic, without meaning. Communion provides us with a chance to examine ourselves.

The second half of the chapter will provide us with information, with truth, that will help us "remember" Jesus. Christ told us, referring to communion, "do this in remembrance of Me." Well, let us look at him here and learn some things that will remind us of him. Rev.1:10:

I was in the Spirit on the lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see; and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His

voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. "Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands; the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

John was an old man, probably in his 90's, at this time in his life. He had ministered in the Roman province of Asia prior to the time this book was written. He had a long and successful ministry there, as far as we know, and, as a result of his effectiveness in serving Christ, the Roman government had him banished to an obscure island in the Mediterranean. He was there alone, and one Sunday morning he began to worship God, he was "in the Spirit," praying and rejoicing, when suddenly he heard a loud, dramatic voice behind him. He turned around and saw, not the rocky seascape of Patmos, but the province of Asia again, the territory that had been his home for ministry. Now in looking at Asia he did not see it the way we would see it if we were riding around in the Goodyear Blimp. He did not see it with "physical" eyes; he saw it from the point of view of God. He saw Asia with seven lighted lampstands, which represent the seven churches, as we are told. That suggests to me that when God looks at the world he does not see it as our maps indicate with a border between United States and Mexico; he does not see different colors representing the First, Second, and Third Worlds; he does not see light and dark patches on a map distinguishing between different language groups. When God looks at the world he sees churches. The things that matter to him, as he looks at this globe, are the lampstands, the health of those lampstands, and the significance of the light they reflect. In a corporation headquarters you might see a map on the president's wall with pins stuck in it representing all the McDonald's stands in the world, for instance, or all the Chevron stations, or all the National Parks. But when God looks at the world he sees his church, his lamps that are to be light to the world, and his concern is to help the vitality of those churches.

John saw the dramatic vision of Christ in his priestly robes. These probably suggest the help that the Lord offers to his people. He saw the wisdom of white-haired age and the burning penetration of Christ's eyes, and he saw coming from his mouth the invincibility of the word of God, represented in the sword. He saw Jesus ministering to these churches, correcting them, counseling, consoling and encouraging them. That ought to suggest two things to us. One, as I have already indicated, is that God's primary concern, as he looks at the world, is how healthy is his church, because the health of the rest of the world depends on that. Any freedom, any joy, any health that anyone in the world experiences depends on how serious-minded and faithful the church of God is. If the church is unfaithful the light begins to go out; and when darkness takes over it is dark for everyone.

Second, this suggests that the military individual, 'the warrior whom John saw,' is Christ. He is the One with the burning eyes; he is the One with the sword in his mouth. The church is called to shine, not to win. We do not have to win the debate, to defeat the opposition, to elect the right people. We do not have to carry the tide against unrighteousness and see ourselves victorious. All we are asked to do is declare clearly, by our statements and by our lives, what the truth is. The Lord is the warrior, the One who wins. Christians everywhere ought to remember that we can be encouraged, we can stand firm, we can continue. We do not need to be overwhelmed and fearful and frightened whatever the circumstances, because it is not up to us to win, it is up to the Lord. All we have to do is be faithful.

This section does not end with John seeing the Lord ministering only to the churches in Asia. Jesus moves over and ministers to John himself, and that is the scene I would like to end with. We are seeing things about Christ in this section; we are visualizing him as he is, so that in our experience of sharing his table we can have an informed memory. Now the final thing for us to see is Jesus' ministry to John, who fell at his feet as a dead man. John was the beloved disciple, the one who sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. John knew that his Savior cared for him, and yet in this vision he is afraid. Now Jesus does two things to minister to John's fear, and I think he ministers to two different kinds of fear. The first thing he does is touch him. In the Book of Isaiah, when the prophet saw a vision of God he was terrified, but he was ministered to by a touch. John falls at the feet of Jesus and he is

vision of God he was terrified, but he was ministered to by a touch. John falls at the feet of Jesus and he is ministered to by a touch also. That is always the way Christ approaches us when we are afraid of him, when we are guilt-ridden, when we have been antagonistic and insensitive toward him. He always meets us with intimacy and tenderness. He touches us, draws us near to him, encouraging us by his tenderness. We need never be afraid of Jesus, but when we are, his intimate concern reaches out and lifts us up.

But there is another thing that John is afraid of, and the Lord ministers to that fear with his words. Look at Rev.1:17,

"Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades."

It strikes me that if this statement was intended to help John in his fear of Christ, it would have had exactly the opposite effect on me. If I had seen this dramatic individual with a sword coming from his mouth, with his burning eyes, and then he announced that he was the living One, that he has been dead but now he was alive and he had the keys to death and Hades, it would only have intensified my fear of him. But I do not think that is what the Lord is ministering to here in this statement. I think what he is saying is, "John, you do not need to be afraid of the failure of the gospel either. Not only do you not need to be afraid of me" (as his intimate touch proved), "but you do not need to be afraid of the world you live in. You do not need to be afraid of the failure of your calling."

John was a prisoner, banished to a lonely island. He had lived all his life for the cause of Christ, and now he was set aside and the power of Rome had been allowed to take him from his place of ministry. I think there was some fear in John's heart that maybe the Christian enterprise would fail. But the words of Christ ministered to that fear. "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and the living One. I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades." There is absolutely no reason to fear that the cause of Christ will fail. He is our Captain; he is the King to whom we are loyal; he is the Lord of Glory. He is in the midst of his churches, and he is a strong deliverer. No matter how life appears, in reality he is Lord so we need not fear that our service to him will fail. We do not need to fear a coming recession, we do not need to fear the advance of secularism, of political upheaval, etc., anything that might lead us to the conclusion that believing in Christ is a foolish waste of time.

The conclusion to be drawn from the Lord's statement is in Rev.1:19: "Write therefore." Based on what he has seen and heard, John is told to proclaim, to say something, to make the message clear to the world, to stand up and declare the things that he has seen and heard. And that is where we are this morning. We are going to partake together of the Lord's table. We said earlier, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," so our eating of this meal together is a way of saying, "I belong to him. I am placing my confidence in his death and resurrection. I am standing in the hope of his return." In the same way that John was told to write what he saw, we proclaim the Lord's death as we take communion together.

We have had a chance to examine ourselves through our study of this chapter of scripture. We have had a chance to see some things of Christ that we can remember. As we partake together, recall as well that you, individually, are making a bold statement about your own commitment to Christ in sharing this communion.

Lord, we thank you for the salvation you brought for us on the cross. We thank you for these beautiful visual aids, these reminders you have given us, your broken body and your shed blood. We thank you for the privilege of that proclamation that we share this morning and that we share in our daily lives. Make us witnesses; help us to bear tribulation; help us to remember that you are the Lord of your church and you are the Lord of our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.