

An Inspiring Vision Revelation 1:1-20

Mail is unavoidable. We get it in the box by the side of the road or outside our porch. It comes electronically to our computers, cell phones and iPads.

Some of it is just junk mail that comes addressed either specifically to us or to someone named occupant.

Mixed in with the junk mail are bills. They are for the credit card, consumer's power, our mortgage, car insurance, student loans, medical expenses and the myriad of other vendors we may owe money to. If we ignore them, we get notes in the mail that the bill is past due. If they are ignored long enough we eventually get a note stating the bill has been turned over to a collection agency.

From time to time we may also get personal mail. It might be a birthday card from an aunt, a get well card from a friend or a wedding invitation. Letters with general news are less common these days with things like email and texting, but there are those who still rely on this mode of communication to convey some newsworthy events. When my Great Grandma was alive, she would often write her letters in the form of poetry.

Depending on who sent the mail and the nature of the mail will determine our response. Junk mail is most likely tossed, even if you have the chance to win the Publisher's clearinghouse sweepstakes. Other mail may require a response but isn't urgent. Still some requires that we respond right away such as the bill that's due or the RSVP.

The book of Revelation is a letter. If it came in an envelope it would be stamped with the words URGENT: Immediate attention required. Many choose to treat it as junk mail and toss it in the circular file. Others scan it but do little with it because it's like reading a legal document. The

nature of the letter requires a change of heart to repent and follow the One who is sending the letter because certain judgment is looming if no action is taken.

To others it is a word of encouragement to hang tough till the end in spite of tribulation because He who promised His return is coming and will bring with Him a reward for those who are faithful.

So, let's take our Bibles and turn to **Revelation 1** and notice what **verse 1** has to say.

If you get nothing else out of this study, understand this: Revelation is by Christ about Himself given to John who will record the things he hears and sees. Its intended audience are His servants, His followers, the residents of these seven cities and it is to us today.

Notice importantly a little phrase tucked neatly in the middle of the verse. It says that these things John is about to see are to take place soon.

I could tell you that this sermon will end soon. All of you will agree that it will end today. Most of you will agree that it will end sometime after 12. Some of you might hope that it will end sooner than that. I could say that the sermon is done right now and you would ask me who I am and what have you done with our pastor.

The events John is about to write about that will soon take place is not indicating that the events will happen later today or tomorrow or next week or even next year speaking of a specific time or day, but rather that these events could happen at any time. It means that when they happen it will be sudden and can occur immediately. The application of this thought going forward is this: what is about to be revealed about Christ in the letter is to give us cause to evaluate our relationship with Him. What is about to be revealed will be the result of whether or not we have a personal relationship with Him.

There are only two clear choices resulting in two clear, distinct but entirely different destinations, condemnation or salvation.

This letter is written to seven churches in Asia Minor, each of which we will meet in the ensuing weeks. In each letter to them Jesus has specific things for them that are applicable to us today. They serve as an evaluation tool to be used by the church today to determine if we are guilty of the same things Jesus is warning them about.

Before we look at each church individually, it is imperative that we look at the author of the letter to see why we should in fact give attention to His words. As I said a moment ago, the book of Revelation is by Jesus and is about Jesus. The opening words describe the emphasis of the book, what the book is about. The word revelation itself is the Greek word apocalypsis from which we get our transliterated English word apocalypse and means an unveiling or disclosure. It is unveiling Jesus Christ and what will take place yet in the future. It's a call to be prepared.

Now let's right away get a notion out of our minds. This is not a revelation of Jesus as He appeared on earth for some 33 years following His incarnation, the Jesus who taught and healed, who experienced the same human emotions and pains that we do. We need to get that picture of Him out of our head as we read Revelation and study the seven churches. This is a revealing of Christ in His glorified state. This is not a historical book of things that happened as is the case in the Gospels. It is a book of future events. That is clear in verse 1.

What we will read about John states is a genuine testimony of what was given to him and not the result of some bad chili or feverish hallucinations. What he is about to write at the request of the Lord is a true and accurate account of things he was privileged to witness concerning things yet to come.

Verse three then gives a threefold blessing.

There is a blessing for those who read it.

There is a blessing for those who hear it.

There is a blessing for those who obey it.

About these blessings, I want you to know that they are in the present tense meaning that there is a continuous blessing in the reading, hearing, and obeying.

Some bypass the book of Revelation because it is filled with symbols that are difficult to understand. To them it's like reading about quantum physics or differential equations. You are blessed if you read it.

There is an additional blessing for those who listen to it being read and study it and remember what is written in it.

Finally, there is a blessing for those who obey it. It doesn't mean that they understand and can speculate about dates and events, but rather from a study of it, the person discovers life principles that he or she applies to daily living. Future events have a practical application for today because those future events may begin today. They should motivate us to godly living, that Christ would find us faithful when He comes.

Those who put their trust in God and follow Him in obedience are blessed and receive joy and peace and contentment not experienced when we are disobedient the results of which are guilt, shame, anxiety and judgment.

James tells us that we should be doers of the Word and not just hearers only. **How many would agree there's a difference?** John says we will be blessed by hearing and obeying.

As we read through these passages we have a responsibility to act on what we hear. Standing before God on the Day of Judgment and telling Him we were a good listener isn't going to fly. We have

to obey it. As verse three says we need to take it to heart. The vision about to be revealed and the words about to be read give a straightforward warning to the church of the dangers of sin should we persist in it, but also instruction for godliness and the rewards that await those who are obedient.

John then addresses the seven churches on behalf of Jesus Christ, the One he is writing about. He begins with a very standard greeting bestowing on his audience “grace and peace.” It is more than just a general salutation. It is pregnant with meaning. Grace is the free exercise of God on sinners who do not merit anything from Him. Grace is what He gives to us out of His love for us on behalf of what Jesus did on the cross for us. We phrase it simply as *God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense*. It is unmerited favor. We can’t earn it and don’t deserve it, but God freely gives it. Grace is His to give alone. Just as we see in the book of Revelation so it is also true with grace – it is all about Christ because of Christ.

The church needs to be reminded over and over again that we were bought with a price – the precious blood of Christ. We should be reminded of that price whenever we hear the word grace. The favorable response of God to us who are sinners came at a great cost to Him. And you know what, He was glad to do it because He loves us.

What always accompanies grace is peace. We cannot have peace without grace. Because we have been given God’s grace, we will receive His peace. It is a word that can also mean unity so that when we experience the grace of God we immediately have been reconciled to Him and receive His peace. We have been brought back into unity with Him experiencing the grace of God and peace with God. His grace gives us peace which results in an assurance that His grace has settled our eternal destiny. Because we have been justified by the blood of Christ, we have peace. Grace and peace only come from God.

Romans 5:1-2 “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

This letter is both a warning about judgment to come and a call to be reconciled to God before it’s too late. This grace and peace have only one source and John says it is from Him who is and who was and who is to come. John’s description speaks both to God’s self-existence and eternity. He always has been and always will be.

Beginning in **verse 5** we notice three specific titles given to Christ. They speak about Him being our prophet, priest and king.

1. He is the faithful witness which speaks of Him as our prophet.

A prophet was a messenger of God given a specific message by God. He delivered the message often to hostile people who didn’t want to hear the stern warning about judgment from God for disobedience and the need for repentance. The word witness comes from the word we translate as martyr. Christ was a witness about Himself that led to his death.

During His years of ministry He was faithful to proclaim the message given to Him by His heavenly Father. They were at times words of judgment and condemnation. At other times they were words of love and encouragement. He was faithful in whatever message was given to Him. Heaven and earth may pass away but as a faithful witness His words will remain forever. He spoke the truth about heaven and hell, salvation and condemnation for those who receive it or reject it. In every way Christ was a faithful witness and He is the source of this revelation. All He says will come to pass. That is the first title. The second title is this:

2. He is the firstborn from the dead which speaks of Him as our priest.

Colossians 1:18 “And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.”

Others in the Bible have been raised from the dead but have later on succumbed to death again. Christ is the first and only one so far who has been raised to life never to experience death again. Look at **verse 18**. Jesus describes Himself to John as **“The Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and forever.”**

Bible teacher Theodore Epp writes “It is wonderful indeed to know that death will have no more dominion over Him. He died once for all, but now He has been raised once for all (Romans 6:10). He is the first to enter into this indestructible life and has provided the same kind of life for everyone who will receive Him.”

The book of Hebrews tells us that Christ entered as the High Priest to offer Himself as our sacrifice for sin and He did it once for all and that he lives to intercede for us.

Hebrews 7:24-27 “Because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself.”

He is our high priest.

There is one other title given here which gives us another reason why we should heed the warnings given to the seven churches.

He is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

3. He is our King which speaks of His sovereign rule over us.

As a matter of fact, this verse along with others in Scripture reveals to us that He is ruler over all other kings and kingdoms. No one is above Him and no one is equal to Him.

Again from the pen of Theodore Epp who writes “Earthly rulers may take it upon themselves to try to crush the Church out of existence, but Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. Human leaders may have political power over the lives of individual Christians, but these men do not have the final power that belongs to Christ. One of these days He will come again and rule in the position that is rightfully His and every knee will bow and tongue confess that He is Lord.” **(Philippians 2:10)**

All praise will be given to Him who sits on the throne, the throne that will last forever over a kingdom that will last forever. That Christ is the rightful ruler and king over the earth should be enough for us to listen well to the warnings given to the seven churches.

Then in verses 5 and 6 we see why Christ cares enough to give such a stern warning. We read that **“He loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and He has made us to be a kingdom and priests in order to serve His God and Father.”**

Christ died for the church.

Christ is the head of the church.

Christ loves the church.

Christ wants the best for the church.

You understand that the church does not refer to a building made of stone or brick or wood. It's not an address or a place on a map. The church is the people who have placed their faith in Christ. We know Christ loves us because He died for us.

(Ephesians 5:23-32)

Because of our faith in Christ we have been transferred into His kingdom and become His servants for the purpose of giving God glory.

Are we doing that? In everything we do or say does He in some way get glory? If we are from His kingdom we are His representatives to the world and we are to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the One who reigns over us and through it praise God.

In our walk do we glorify God?

In our words do we glorify God?

In our work do we glorify God?

In our worship do we glorify God?

Is He in some way exalted?

I think that when we examine the seven churches more closely we will see that some of the things they were doing they thought were honoring to God but Christ condemns them. It would do us well to examine how and why we do things in the church.

Is God really getting the glory or are we just fooling ourselves into believing that they honor God?

Verse 7 is a call to awareness, a call to alertness, a reminder that Christ's return is imminent. **"Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him."**

The word **"look"** suggests that He is already on His way. It suggests our need to be prepared. This warning is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments.

Daniel 7:13-14 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

Matthew 24:30 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory."

Acts 1:9-11 "After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.'"

I Thessalonians 4:15-18 "For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

That Jesus is coming at any time should be compelling enough reason to consider well the warnings issued to the seven churches. He is coming and judgment will be meted out on those who have ignored and rejected His salvation. It will happen just as the eternal One has said it would. We are to look for His coming and be prepared. In our watching and waiting we are to serve Him. **Are you ready to see Him? Are you ready to receive Him?**

If we were to get a call today or receive a letter in the mail that some dignitary would be visiting our home but wasn't sure on what day it might be, we would do our best to make sure that everything was spotless every day for that visit. **Is the church of Christ ready to receive her King?**

In heaven resides the One who simply spoke and the heavens were created.

In heaven resides the One who holds your very next breath, your very next heart beat in His hand.

In heaven resides the One whose name one day will be spoken and every knee will bow down and every tongue will proclaim Him to be Lord.

We better listen up and obey the warnings He has for the seven churches. They are words for us today. Repeated to every church in chapter 2 and 3 are words that we are not exempt from. They are words for every church throughout history to heed. **“He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

Now, let’s jump down to **verse 12** where John gives us another description of the One whose words are to be heeded.

John tells about hearing a voice. It was not the voice of the one He heard speaking to Him on the hillside when thousands were fed.

It was not the voice of the one who stood in the stern of the boat and rebuked the sea.

It was not the voice of the one healing the lame or the deaf or the blind.

It was not even the voice of the one who told him to care for a grieving widow standing beside a rugged cross as she watched her son slowly die an agonizing death.

Even though it had been 60 years since Christ left this earth I believe John would have recognized that voice.

It has been almost three years since my Mom passed away. I miss her voice, her laughter, her singing. Sometimes when I recall a particular scene I hear her sound, see her face, recall her smile.

When John heard the voice, he turned to see who it was that spoke to him. These verses record what he saw.

He saw seven golden lampstands. We learn from **verse 20** that the seven lampstands are the seven

churches of whom the voice just spoke about in Asia Minor. They are representative of the church throughout history and that exist today.

Seven is a number that is used throughout Scripture and speaks of fullness or completeness. That the lampstands are golden tells us what Christ thinks of each church. Gold of course is the most precious of metals. Christ views us as the most precious to Him. Why? We are precious to Him because He died for the church. He gave his life for the church. We are of greatest value to Him. That they are gold also speaks about the glory that Christ receives from the church through their work.

That they are lampstands reveals the principal function of the church. As the primary function of a lampstand is to give off light so the church’s primary function is to be a light to those around.

The implied olive oil used to light the lamps speaks of the power of the Spirit given in our witness. **Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”**

When you look at a map of Asia Minor and consider the location of the seven churches mentioned you will notice that they are shaped in a semi-circle. That John sees **“someone ‘like a Son of Man’”** in the middle of them suggests the continued presence of Christ.

Matthew 28:20 tells us He will be with us to the end of the age.

Hebrews 13:5 states that He will never leave us or forsake us.

They are good reminders that no matter what we, the church, go through, the One who loves us and died for us will always be present with us.

That Christ is in the middle of the seven lampstands also suggests that He knows everything that is going on with us. His warnings in chapters 2-3 aren't based on things He heard about second or third hand, He is well aware of everything we do, even the motives behind what we do. On the surface they may appear to be with godly intent, but He who sees the act also knows the heart.

Notice what John saw: **“Someone ‘like a Son of Man,’ dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet and with a golden sash around His chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”**

That His robe was long, reaching to His feet refers to the type of garment worn by the priest in the Old Testament. The priest not only made sacrifices and offered intercession on behalf of the people to God, he also acted as a judge. John sees Jesus in both capacities among the church interceding for her, correcting her, empowering her and judging her. Jesus is in our midst acting on our behalf.

Then we notice that He has a golden sash around His chest. If the sash were around His waist it would speak of service. That was His first coming. His second coming has a different purpose. Jewish historian Josephus indicates that the sash around the chest speaks of dignity and majesty and provides for greater ease in movement.

These two garments together tell us that Christ is the final authority over the church.

John then sees Him in the same fashion as Daniel with hair white as wool. Daniel refers to Him as the Ancient of Days, John as the Son of Man. Both

imply His deity and the Oneness that exists in the Godhead. This description speaks of His pre-existence and eternity, as we already saw that He was and is and is to come. That His hair is white suggests both His wisdom and purity.

Fire in Scripture often refers to the purging of sin that is necessary and here speaks about how His eyes seek out and reveals even the hidden sins so that His righteousness can purify them. He knows the church thoroughly and His penetrating gaze brings us to acknowledge our sinfulness and to repentance.

His feet are like bronze. This is in reference to the bronze altar on which the sacrifice for sin was laid in the Old Testament. That His feet are like bronze tells us that He is moving around the church bringing judgment on it for its sin, but also that He was the one who atoned for her.

Exiled on the Island of Patmos John has a vivid reminder of the voice he heard in the pounding waves as they would break on the shoreline. This loud voice is one of authority power. It is the voice that spoke and brought the universe into existence. It is the voice that will one day judge the nations.

In His right hand He held seven stars. Verse 20 tells us that these seven stars are the seven angels or better translated messengers of the church. They may be the elders or pastors of the seven churches. His hand speaks of His power and that the seven stars are in His hand tells us that they are under His control, that He is their head.

Domitian was emperor over Rome at the time of John's exile to Patmos. He was a ruthless ruler who did all he could against Christians. His son died and to exalt him to a place of deity had a coin made with the son's image surrounded by seven stars indicating that he was now lord of the heavens.

John's imagery of Christ holding the seven stars describes Jesus as being the rightful ruler of the heavens.

Then we see that coming out of His mouth is a two-edged sword. Of course we know that sword to be the word of God that pierces and divides. His Word is truth encouraging on the one hand but also bringing judgment on the other. This sword speaks of the divine judgment that will come.

John concludes His description by noting that He saw Christ in His glory, similar to how He was seen on the mount of transfiguration.

What is John's response to such a grand vision? He falls on his face. It is a sign of awe and reverence and respect. It is the same response of Daniel when he was given a similar vision. He states that when he saw the vision all the strength was sapped from him and he fell on his face.

Folks, when we get a glimpse of this One who will come in glory, our response will be the same. We dare not think that we have any right to stand in the presence of the one who holds power in His hand and judgment on His tongue.

But even at that He speaks a clear message to John and yes, even to us who have made Him our master and King, who have taken Him as Savior. He tells us not to be afraid.

We are to take to heart these warnings to the seven churches because they come directly from the One who has the power to carry them out, both the blessings and the curses.

Bible scholar John Walvoord writes "the pointed message of Christ to each of these churches is the capstone to the New Testament Epistles dealing with the practical life of those committed to the Christian faith. On the one hand believers are

exhorted to Holy living and the other hand unbelievers are warned of judgment to come."

Revelation and these letters to seven churches encourages us to be rightly related to Christ and when we are rightly related to Him we will be better able to face persecution, persecution that these seven churches no doubt knew under Emperor Domitian. As Christ writes to each church giving practical application for us today you will note a recurring theme. Christ encourages the church to be overcomers, to put away sin and commit to following the One who loves us and died for us.

Warren Wiersbe concludes that "what the church needs today is a new awareness of Christ and His glory. There is a dangerous absence of awe and worship in our assemblies today."

As we approach a study of these seven churches, that is sound advice for us to evaluate how we view Christ and come into His presence with reverence and respect.

Ephesus – the church that lost its way
 Smyrna – the church told not to dismay
 Pergamum – the church that would not obey
 Thyatira – the church that went astray
 Sardis – the church about to decay
 Philadelphia – the church that was built to stay
 Laodicea – the church that thought it was okay