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The Living Jesus among His Churches: Revelation 1–3

RICH LITTLE

This sermon was delivered on opening night of the 2013 Pepperdine Bible Lectures. The theme of the lectures was Can I Get a Witness? Faithfully Following the Lamb in Revelation.

I wasn't raised in a Christian home so I had no exposure to the book of Revelation. I attended a Catholic school as a child so that almost guaranteed I wouldn't learn anything about Revelation. I was baptized at thirteen in a Church of Christ, which further guaranteed I wouldn't learn anything about Revelation, until one day some Jehovah's Witnesses came to our door selling books on Revelation. My parents bought me my first book on Revelation—*Revelation: Its Grand Climax at Hand!* I immediately went to church and told older members that the bankcards they were using were from the antichrist: the letter *B* was shaped like three parallel sixes. I also told them that only 144,000 people would be going to heaven, according to chapter 7. Quite a troubling thought. I thought, "God's got some work to do." Then I read chapter 14 and learned that the 144,000 are male virgins. That was also discouraging. I was in desperate need of an education on Revelation.

No book in the Bible has been used, misused, misinterpreted, and exploited as much as this great book. Some of this confusion comes from the very first few verses of Revelation, which is where we begin: "The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (Rev 1.1–3).

Some think that referring to Revelation as a "prophecy" means that the writing addresses end times only, some future fulfillment, and it's not relevant for us today. This gives us an easy out—it doesn't affect us today, we won't be around when it happens, so we don't have to worry about how we address it today. (It's where the government learned to manage Social Security.)

Still others think that this prophecy took place entirely in John's time, because of his use of the phrase "It must soon take place." So it means nothing to us because it already happened and we can't learn anything from it. We might think that there was a battle, some people won, some people lost, but let's just act like nothing happened because we really don't know what happened and we're embarrassed that we can't explain it.

Still others think both are correct, that we're sandwiched somewhere between Revelation 19 and 20. Some of the writing has been fulfilled and some has not. We're not too sure what's happened and how we got here but we definitely know there're more battles to come and blood to be shed.

All three views lead us to believe that it isn't relevant to us—which are surprising approaches for a group that tries so hard to be relevant. Further, the situation John is addressing is also debated. Two views have emerged on this.

The first view holds that John was writing to address a current persecution, an empire-wide, officially sanctioned, systematically implemented destruction of the Christian faith. Every Christian was in danger of

being arrested and killed because they lived such different lives from the surrounding culture. They were punished because they didn't conform to the culture of the land—like trying to be a youth minister who uses a pc and doesn't have a soul patch. (You *will* be persecuted.) However, we have no records of any law outlawing Christianity at the time or that Christians were forced to worship the emperor. Persecution was local and temporary, not an empire-wide act. In these local instances, it's believed that Christians were charged with criminal behavior by their neighbors and put on trial and executed, but this falls far short of a widespread persecution. Additionally, Christians were used as scapegoats for the fire in Rome in 64 CE, but this falls short of an official persecution of Christians by Nero.

However, not all churches were experiencing these isolated outbreaks of persecution. Some churches had become very comfortable in the Roman culture, leading to the development of a second view on the setting John was addressing.

While the first view contends that John was addressing a persecuted church, the second view contends that it was a comfortable church he was addressing, one that was cozying up to the empire, embracing its culture and adopting its norms. The church members had forgotten their identity and how they were supposed to live. This occurred in part due to Rome's offer of peace and prosperity to those who conformed and embraced the imperial culture, leading followers of Jesus to forget their first love over their love for what Rome offered. Harry Meier said, "The problem the Apocalypse addresses is not too much persecution, but too little."¹ John is calling churches to separate from Rome and to experience persecution as a result.

Both views in opposition to the other view are wrong and both have some truth to them. This is evident if we look at the character of the seven churches to whom John writes. There are fourteen verses of praise for Christians who follow Jesus and seventeen verses of warning for Christians who follow Rome. There is both faithfulness and unfaithfulness in the churches. In many cases, there are both faithful and unfaithful people in the same church.

Yes, the story of the seven churches is our story too. It's the story of God's people desperately wanting to follow the Lamb but constantly tempted and tested by the power and pull of the surrounding culture. These are churches that desperately want to follow Jesus but feel like they're losing in a culture that has a radically different set of standards and a different way of measuring success. Jesus' words to the seven churches teach us that those who want to be faithful to God will always be pulled between accommodating their culture and resisting their culture, which invariably results in suffering.

Those who accommodated their culture included the church of Laodicea who John describes as prosperous, self-reliant, and comfortable. Embracing the Roman culture and its economy, the Laodicean church could boast, "I am rich: I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing" (Rev 3.17). Prosperity and wealth had become its god. Its members enjoyed the perks that came from scratching the backs of Rome while their fellow Christians suffered.

The Pergamum church had a similar problem. Nestled within the heart of perhaps the most Romanized city in Asia Minor, Pergamum was saturated by the gods of Athena and Zeus and would later be home to the first temple built for emperor worship. The church had grown so accustomed to the culture that the two couldn't be separated. It became easy to be desensitized to cultural sins and find them to be normal. Pergamum's a prime example of that struggle.

Thyatira also accommodated its surrounded culture and was charged with following the teachings of Jezebel, a prominent woman in the church who also accommodated the cultural values. Similar to the Pergamum Christians who followed Balaam's teachings, those who followed her teachings were seen to have committed adultery with her: "You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols" (Rev 2.20). Thyatira's a loving church but yet it "tolerates" a woman who is hurting its members' faith.

In contrast to the accommodating churches, John also turns his attention to churches that are suffering. The Ephesian church is charged with perseverance and a hatred of wickedness, despite forsaking its first love.

1. Harry Meier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. xiii.

Jesus tells it, “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked people. You have persevered and endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary...[but]...you have forsaken your first love” (Rev 2.2–4). Like a husband who no longer buys flowers for his wife but enjoys the benefits of marriage, this church has lost its spiritual spark.

The Smyrna church is addressed as the epitome of faithfulness. Jesus says, “I know your afflictions and poverty, yet you are rich.... [B]e faithful, even to the point of death, [or ‘even if it results in your death’]” (Rev 2.9–10). This is the little church who feels so insignificant, whose members think God’s forgotten them. They compare themselves with others and they always feel like they’re not successful. They have church envy, wishing their church could do the things other churches do, baptizing the people other churches are baptizing, but feel broken as a church. However, Jesus says this little church is rich in all the right ways.

The Sardis church is another suffering church with a good reputation but lacks spiritual strength. It’s the church with the flashy website and the appearance of a lot going on but the members have grown stagnant. Their great visions for the church have dried up. Their reputation no longer matches their faith and deeds. What they say on paper no longer matches what they do in action.

Finally, the Philadelphia church—like the Smyrna church—represents great faithfulness and receives no command to repent. Jesus says, “You have little strength, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name.... [H]old on to what you have” (Rev 3.8–11). To this small church who feels weak and insignificant, wondering if it’s worth the cost, Jesus says, “Remember me, the one who became weak for you.”

The seven churches remind us that the pull of the surrounding culture and the assault on the faith of Christians can take very different forms. They also remind us that followers of the Lamb live in a world of evil and suffering, and we shouldn’t be surprised by experiencing both, as did the Lamb.

However, evil isn’t always easy to define and suffering doesn’t mean that you’re doing something wrong. Suffering has become normal for those churches that follow the Lamb most closely, and Jesus tells them that they’re doing something right. Other churches are following peace and prosperity—that’s become their “lamb”—and they have lost their faith. John reminds them that evil comes in many deceitful forms. It seeps into our consciousness and is reinforced by everything our culture says is true and right. It’s hard for these churches and our churches to always consistently name evil in a culture that is so dominant and powerful, where the ways of the empire are so prevalent that they seem right and true. It’s also easy to misname evil, thinking that anything that creates suffering must be evil. Gregory Stevenson says in *A Slaughtered Lamb*, “John envisions evil as that which stands in *opposition* to the kingdom of God.”²

Living life in the Kingdom of God and following the example of the Lamb will bring forms of suffering. However, our world resists suffering. It views suffering itself as evil. It’s tempting to believe that God wants us to be happy and that we can only be happy when we’re not suffering. We hunger for prosperity and comfort; we want desperately to feel accepted by our culture and world, to feel normal and included and comfortable in the world. And we will tolerate more than we ever have to get there. But this is not the way of the Lamb.

The kingdom of God, fully lived out in the church as Jesus delivered it, will challenge the very structures of our society. Loving your enemies, radically making peace, giving generously to all in need, not judging, and faithfully following the life of the Lamb is intended to disrupt societies, to reorient the hearts of people to their Creator. We haven’t been called by the blood of the Lamb to be comfortable and secure. We’ve been called by the bloodied lamb to follow his example, expecting no less resistance than the resistance he felt to the ways of God. There is no way to do both. This will put followers of Jesus at odds with the kingdoms of this world, at odds with our own culture and the powers that rule. If we do it well, we will experience the suffering of Christ. Hence, John points accommodating churches and suffering churches to the same source of strength and example: Jesus. He points those who are giving up their faith and those whose faith may feel worthless to the same source of encouragement: the Lamb.

And in the midst of suffering and accommodation he names the correct enemy, who is often easy to misname. The enemy is not the Roman Empire, or the Babylonian, or Egyptian, or Seleucid, all of which appear in Revelation. No, these empires are just tools in the hand of the enemy...who is Satan. Satan seeks to

2. Gregory Stevenson, *A Slaughtered Lamb* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2013), 5, italics added.

control all power structures—empires, nations, social institutions, academic institutions, and especially churches. He is hungry for power.

The bad news for gun lovers is that the enemy isn't Obama. And the bad news for liberals is that the enemy isn't Fox News. The enemy is not the democrats or republicans. The enemy isn't North Korea or the Taliban. The enemy isn't Hollywood or Chik-Fil-A; the enemy isn't pro-choice or pro-life; the enemy isn't gay rights, straight rights, or bi rights. The enemy isn't illegal immigrants, or the rich who bought their way into America. It isn't that elder who never gives you what you want, or the member who wishes you preached somewhere else. No, these are not the enemy. These are people living in enemy territory who the enemy seeks to control and exploit for his own purposes. C. S. Lewis says, "Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign in sabotage."³

The king has landed in disguise, for we fight an enemy who is used to disguise. But what is the disguise? Don't we fight the enemy with weapons of war? John tells us, "Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Then behold, I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne" (Rev 5.5).

Jesus confuses the role of power. Power in God's economy comes in the form of a bloodied lamb, not a roaring lion. The roars of the lions in our land may seem so loud, so dominant, so controlling, but healing power is found in the bloodied lamb, the image of true faithfulness and resistance in a culture that roars with the power of a lion.

Rome showed power through might, domination, economics, and military strength. Like in Rome back then, it's easy to feel secure in America all the while she dominates economically, militarily, socially, politically...but is that where followers of the lamb receive their security? The Lamb shows might through suffering, or weakness, in the world's view—not in domination and cultural accommodation. God's people show might not through taking our identity and security from the land, but taking it from the Lamb.

God's people don't show might through using the powers of the empire for personal gain. We don't cozy up to the powers of the world for our security and happiness. This might be our temptation for it's normal to always show allegiance to the one with the most power. We find this to be true in our world, jobs, and relationships.

We may also find power and significance in numbers. Small churches might think they are not significant due to their size. Our land also tells us that there is power in popularity, personality, money, and access. All of these forms of power fail the followers of the Lamb when they become objects of our desire and thus begs the larger question, "Where should we place our allegiance?" Like the churches in Revelation, we might easily confuse our allegiance to the empire with our allegiance to the Lamb. So John and Jesus both remind us that our allegiance is to a bloodied Lamb, one who has gone ahead of us and offers us a difference power structure and model by which to live.

This allegiance in turn paints a very different view of our future. Like the churches in Revelation, as a future promise to instill present strength, we are given a grand view of our victory over death and eternity with God. The hope of future victory and heaven is given to remind us to live differently today. It forces us to think beyond our ten-year strategic plan and vision statements, beyond the pull of our culture and the powerful forces that steal the love of the church. And irrespective of whether the churches John was addressing were accommodating or suffering, every church is given the same encouragement: "The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels" (Rev 3.5).

The call to all who profess faith in the Lamb is to now faithfully follow the Lamb! And lest we forget who it is who makes this promise, John tells us, "I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me...someone like a son of man...coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. *His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance*" (Rev 1.12–16, italics added).

3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Paperbacks Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), 51.

John's churches had seen an image like this before. Helios, the Greek sun god, who later became identified as Apollos, the god of light, resembled this image. John's powerful use of this imagery reminded the church that the god of light is not Apollos: it's the Lamb. The great light is not the powers you invest in, no matter how powerful they seem: it's the Lamb. The great light isn't success in the empire's eyes: it's the Lamb.

It is he who holds a sword not in his hand, but a sword in his mouth, where his words of life bring healing and judgment. And these very prophecies to the churches then and now are not only the words of Jesus, for John tells us, "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev 19.10). The prophet is both Jesus and his life. To those Christians who were convicted when they started following Jesus but, over time, have experienced pressure to give in, give up, and quit...remember Jesus' life and ministry, which was the faithful witness. He is the model of suffering and victory over evil. Through his suffering, his death, and his resurrection, we have strength to endure, a witness to share, and a glorious future ahead. Oh, to be like him! Oh, to be a faithful witness! Can we get a witness today?

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