

Christ and the Churches

Revelation 1:9-20

Turn to Revelation 1. In second half of Revelation 1 John records a vision of Christ with his churches. This vision gives us a picture of Christ relationship to his churches. It is an encouraging and powerful picture; we need to hang on to this. **The mighty Jesus walks among the churches, and hold them in his hand.** That's where this will end up.

Revelation begins with two important and encouraging visions. The first one is Christ and the Lampstands, which we'll read today, and the second is the Throne Room vision, Rev 4-5, which I plan to cover next Sunday. These important things happen in Rev 1-5, the first quarter of the book, and then the rest of Revelation works out the details. Rev begins with encouragement.

These sermons are on the book of Revelation. What does God want the book of Revelation to say to us? That is our question. This is not a series on prophecy, nor on end times, nor on the last days, nor on the second coming of Christ. We'll *cover* some of that, but we are not *asking* about any of that. We are asking: God, what do you want to say to us through the book of Revelation?

So last week we talked about the blessing on those who keep the prophecy. Revelation promises that blessing right at the start, in 1:3, and right at the end, twice in chapter 22. In other words, *blessed* are those who *obey the instruction in this book of prophecy* that we call "Revelation." That is the first thing God wants to say to us in this book. Blessed are those who obey.

In one sentence, Revelation calls us to faithfully worship God, and no one else, worship God and Christ to the very end. Revelation does not just urge us to worship, it is a worship book. We can't read it without actually worshipping God and the Lamb. Already worship in 1:5-6.

So Revelation begins with two important visions, to set the stage, the vision of Christ and the lampstands in Rev 1, and the Throne Room vision in 4-5, important and encouraging pictures.

Rev 1:9 *I, John, your brother and companion in the trouble and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.* ¹⁰ *On the Lord's Day, I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice, like a trumpet,* ¹¹ *which said: "Write on a scroll what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

"I, John, your brother and companion in the trouble and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." This word "trouble" is the old English word "tribulation." The tribulation and kingdom and endurance that are ours in Jesus. When we come to Jesus, we get three things: tribulation, kingdom, and endurance.

That is not how we preach the gospel, but we probably should. Jesus' last teaching to his disciples in John, before he prayed and was arrested: *In this world you will have trouble (tribulation) but take heart! I have overcome the world* (John 16:33).

At the end of Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas head back to Antioch, and on their way they visited all the churches they had just started. Luke records just one sentence of what they preached to these new churches: *We must go through many troubles (tribulations) to enter the kingdom of God.*

The kingdom of God is the best thing that could happen to anyone. But it doesn't protect us from trouble. So John writes, *I, John, your brother and companion in the trouble and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.*

This also means that the troubles, the tribulation if you prefer, had already begun when John wrote. He was exiled to a barren island, Patmos, because he preached Jesus Christ. That is, the trouble had begun for him, and he says he was their brother and partner in the trouble and kingdom and endurance, which means the trouble had already begun for them as well.

In Rev 7, John sees a crowd from every tribe and language and nation, all wearing white robes, standing before the Throne and the Lamb, and they are all praising God! John was taken in the future. You and I are in that picture. We will worship there. It's a happy picture.

The angel says to John, "who are these people?" John says, "you tell me." The angel, "these are those who came out of the great trouble." The NIV translates it "the great tribulation" but it is exactly the same Greek word as in Jn 16, Acts 14, and Rev 1:9. That great crowd clearly intends to include every believer. They all came through the great trouble. **We** are all in the middle of it.

The great trouble started when Jesus was exalted to the Father's right hand, which happened by the time Peter preached his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, and the great trouble will last until Christ returns. It will get worse toward the end. But John's seven churches had every reason to assume that they, and their brother and partner John, lived in the great trouble.

*On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,
 11 which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus,
 Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

These 7 cities are on the mainland, more or less across from Patmos. From Patmos a traveler with Revelation would naturally go first to Ephesus. The next six cities follow in a natural order, from Ephesus you would automatically travel to these cities in the order they are always listed.

This whole letter was for those seven churches in the first century in the Roman province of Asia, just like Corinthians was for the church in Corinth in the province of Achaia, and Galatians to the churches in region of Galatia. It is Scripture, which means God speaks to all his people through these writings. But it was first composed to help those believers, just like all the Bible.

Christ among the Lampstands Rev 1:12-20

This first central vision begins at v12. This is the vision that tells us that the mighty Jesus walks among the churches, and holds them in his hand.

¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹ “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The Golden Lampstands

This vision begins and ends with golden lampstands. That’s important. John turns to see who spoke behind him, but before he sees the person, he sees 7 golden lampstands. And then at the end, the one like a son of man spoke about the stars and the lampstands, and explained them.

The vision begins and ends with the golden lampstands, which are the churches. In between, the glorious one like a son of man, who stands among the lampstands. The mighty Jesus walks among the churches, and holds them in his hand. Churches and Christ are both held up high.

God gave Moses instructions about making a golden lampstand in Exodus 25:31-40. That is the golden lampstand John is talking about. Three things about the lampstands in Exodus 25.

1, The lampstand was in the tabernacle, the tent of God. The lampstand belongs and stays in the holy presence of God. That’s the meaning of the gold. All tabernacle furniture was gold, none of the courtyard furniture was gold, it was brass. The golden lampstands belong in God’s presence.

2, They give light. That’s the obvious thing, I suppose, but we’ll say it anyway. The original lampstand (just one in the tabernacle) burned oil, and it was to burn day and night, never put out.

3, The lampstand is covered with golden buds, blossoms, and almond flowers. It is not just lampstand, it is shaped to look as much as possible like a fruit tree flowering in spring, bursting with life. That paragraph mentions buds, blossoms, and flowers many times. The golden lampstand was a fruit tree bursting with LIFE. Like the tree of life in the garden.

This vision of John open and closes with seven golden lampstands. At the end, the Lord tells John that the seven lampstands are the seven churches. This teaches us about churches. In the material world, churches are little pockets of Jerusalem living in big Babylon, believers in an unbelieving world. But in the spiritual world, we are always in the presence of God.

We have God's light and God's life in us. In the spiritual world, the church is a bright place, full of God's light, and a living place, full of God's life. A golden lampstand before God. Think about God's life in our midst: real light, and real life, in the presence of God.

The Jesus John Sees (1:13-16) *Among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

John uses Daniel 7:9-14 to describe what he saw. In Daniel 7, Daniel records a vision in which he saw four kingdoms, one after the other, each shown as a beast. After the fourth beast, a throne is set up, and the Ancient of Days sits on the throne.

It is not clear if the throne is in heaven or on earth. But it is clear that the Ancient of Days is God himself. Then, one like a son of man comes to the Ancient of Days, and is given authority, glory, power, worship, and an eternal kingdom. Jesus our Lord is the one like a son of man.

What's significant here is that in John's vision, "the one like a son of man" looks like Daniel's "Ancient of Days." In Daniel 7, the Ancient of Days, that's God, had clothes white like wool and hair white like snow, but in John's vision this describes the son of man. In Daniel, blazing fire described the Ancient of Days, but for John, blazing fire describes one like a son of man.

In simple words, this vision pictures Jesus as God himself. Jesus makes the invisible God visible.

John was so stunned and terrified at this Person that he collapsed. Legs didn't work, balance didn't work, John became like a dead man. The Ancient of Days like a son of man came and placed a kind right hand on John and said, "Don't be afraid. You have nothing to fear from me." We need to hear that said to all of us.

A little detour here about the details of this vision. I will not go over most details, because we don't have time, and because the message is more about the overall impression. My detour is to point out that the details often don't quite make sense.

The voice of our Lord has been described three ways so far. He has a loud voice like a trumpet, and he has a voice like the sound of rushing waters. We want to say, “John, which is it?” “Does he sound like a trumpet, or like rushing waters?” John would say, “Both.” Then we read that the Lord has a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. This also depicts his speech.

The words of the Lord sound like a loud trumpet, like rushing waters, his words are like a sharp two-edged sword. None of this is technical description. It gives an effective overall sense, though. Detour is over now.

What the Lord Said: “Don’t be afraid; I have conquered death” 1:17-20

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹ “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

“I fell at his feet as though dead.” What the Ancient of Days like a son of man said to John has to do with death. **Our Lord conquered death.** That’s the point. V18 - *I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

First of all, Jesus died. And as deaths go, it was an ugly death. A particularly unpleasant way to die. Jesus knows about unpleasant death from the inside. He’s been there and done that. God raised him, and God will raise us. He is now alive for ever and ever, nor more dying for him, and our resurrections will be like that.

I hold the keys of death and Hades. “Hades” is the place of the dead. The glorious Lord holds the keys to death, and to the place of the dead. Jesus decides who dies, and when. When he opens, people enter, if he does not open, they do not enter.

Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, we read that in 1 Corinthians and also in Revelation. He has conquered the last enemy, though not yet destroyed it. But because he has conquered it, it only goes where the Lord decides.

This means there are no accidental deaths. Jesus has the keys. There are certainly deaths that break our hearts and seem all wrong. I don’t have the answer to that. But Jesus makes clear here that he has the final say on all these matters. He takes final responsibility. Good news for us.

The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The stars and angels are harder to figure out than the lampstands. I will make this short. The angels are more or less another symbol of the churches, like lampstands. The angels somehow personify or represent the churches. They are more or less parallel to the lampstands. Here’s why I think that:

In Rev 2-3, Jesus gives a message to the angel of each church. But he talks to the angel exactly as he would talk to the church itself. In Rev 2-3 there does not seem to be any difference between the angel of the church and the actual church. It amounts to the same thing. So, the stars in his right hand are the angels of the churches, and the angels in some way represent the church itself.

So we have two different images of churches in this vision: the lampstands clearly are churches, and the stars which are angels are the same thing, or very close to it. Don't be too alarmed by the inconsistency here. We have had three pictures of Jesus' speech already, trumpet and rushing water and sharp sword.

So we have two pictures of the church, the stars in his right hand, and the lampstands among which he stands. The might Jesus walks among the churches, and holds them in his hand

He walks among all the churches, and he holds them in his right hand. That is this whole vision, in one sentence. Who walks among the churches, and holds them in his hand? The one like the Ancient of Days.

When we picture Jesus among us, we usually picture Jesus as he was in the Gospels, the Jesus that was a human that looked like everyone else could be among us. We can sort of picture Jesus in all his glory, but then he's not among us, rather on a throne at the Father's right hand.

But in this vision, the indescribable Jesus walks among the churches, every church, including this church. This one like the Ancient of Days is not far away, he's very close. Maybe too close for comfort? This makes us nervous, certainly makes me nervous.

But he touches us with his hand, and says, "Don't be afraid. You have nothing to fear from me. I'm the one who loves you, I freed you from your sins with my blood, I made you a kingdom, and priests to serve my God. Don't be afraid. I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."

The churches are holy and protected. They are not infallible. Not at all. We see that in chapters 2-3. But they are sacred and protected, even failing churches like the ones in Rev 2-3. On earth, churches can be despised or ignored. In heaven they are like the golden lampstand in the temple.

Amen.