

Revelation 1:9-20

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Happy New Year to you, those of you who have been traveling and away. Welcome back to a season that traditionally we are told we look forward to hope that spring's eternal.

You've gone through the shortest day of the year and with each passing day the sun is grabbing more of its rightful time in the sky.

And on the horizon warmth and our expectation of change is ahead. That said, I'm old enough now to have been through a few decades of new years.

Let me put it to you this way. When our experience of a thing fails to live up to our expectations for the same, we'll need some encouragement to carry on and to remain.

Oh, I feel like Ramell Williams now, my preaching friend, who would say, I like the way that sounds, so let me say it again. When our experience of a thing fails to live up to our expectations for the same, we'll need some encouragement to carry on if we are to remain.

[1 : 38] And so, with a new year before us, we open with a question, what are your expectations? In Christian terms, will you expect that the resurrection of Jesus will land in this year with a present day rising of your own situation?

For the early church, the church to which John is writing, there is some internal evidence in the Scriptures to suggest just such an expectation, a belief that there was a one-to-one correspondence between Jesus' earthly rising and our own earthly experience.

There's a moment in the epistles, Pauline, where individuals began to almost think, given the resurrection, my need to work is done.

Because the blessings of the Spirit age have come. Given the pastoral epistles, we even see where some of the heresies on the resurrection were this over-realized sense of what Jesus' resurrection would bring.

This expectation, one-to-one correspondence, He rose, I'm rising. This letter, though, comes some, well, depending upon the dating, early enough under Nero, late enough under Domitian, 30 to 60 years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and that expectation had been met with real-life experience.

[3 : 41] When our experience of a thing fails to live up to our expectations, of the same, we'll need some encouragement to carry on and to remain.

It didn't go according to plan for the first century church. By the time of our text, seven churches, which are addressed in this letter, and I think universally in that number, the fullness of the churches after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the church itself, the church itself had been met with a life experience that did not match the resurrection events.

They were need, then, of some encouragement to do the same. Let's take a look. Look at the irony of the early church's actual experience in the new day, the new year, post-Christ resurrection.

Verse 9, notice the prepositions especially. They're simply tracing them out. I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Let me put it to you simply as the prepositions put it forward. He is in trouble. He's in tribulation. Not only is he in a season of tribulation, he's in a season that requires endurance.

[5 : 24] And this is after the resurrection. And he's on an island of Patmos. We know that in the Roman era they would often exile their despicable ones, their exilic ones, to islands.

It was like Australia under the empire days where you just ship them off to an island. You would send them off. John is somehow on an island and if he is the apostle John, this is quite a stunning turn of events, the one whom Jesus loved.

The loved one is in isolation. And he's there on account of the gospel. In other words, he's incarcerated. He's imprisoned.

Not only John, but notice, I, John, your brother and partner. The Christian experience in the first century said, well, we have this in common.

We're in a heap of trouble. Life is not easy. His rising has not meant a great change in my own situation.

[6 : 46] salvation. This is the irony of the early church's actual experience. What kinds of trouble? We'll look at chapter 2, verses 2 and 3.

I know your works, your toil. This is to the church at Ephesus. Your patient endurance. There's one of our needs, words. And how you cannot bear with those who are evil. Part of the tribulation was living in the midst of an evil day.

And in this sense, teaching, they've tested those who were calling themselves apostles. There actually was relational friction based upon what it is we believe and don't believe.

That was part of it. But look a little further. Verses 9 and 10, you'll see to the church in Smyrna, it also had an economic reality.

I know of your tribulation, there's our word, and of your poverty, but then he has to remind them, but you are rich. In other words, he says, I know that you are economically deprived and some of them on the basis of the gospel.

[7 : 52] And that those who say they're Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan, do not fear what you are about to suffer. Look at this tribulation. Amazing. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for ten days you'll have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death. The sufferings of the early church were that ironic. They were marching their way toward the road that Jesus himself walked that for some of them would cost them their very life. For the early church, the ascension of Jesus from the earth, we should never forget this, the ascension of the risen Lord from the earth ushered in a lifelong season where his followers would walk into his humiliation.

His exaltation, our humiliation. What do you expect in the coming year?

Historically, if this is indeed under as early a time as Nero or as late as Domitian, we do know that Eusebius of Caesarea lands this particular letter historically under the reign of Domitian and he speaks borrowing on Irenaeus' movement earlier a century before that under that season there was a spasmodic or a sporadic persecution, an occasional persecution of Christians and that in the year 95 it was John himself who was hauled off to be incarcerated on account of the gospel.

[9 : 40] And we do know that many people in the first century lost their lives because of their faith in Christ. Listen to the remarks listed Monday, December 26th by Pope Francis.

This is on the day when the Catholic Church was gathered in St. Peter's Square, Vatican City, to mark the feast of St. Stephen's Day, St. Stephen I of the Christian martyrs.

Francis called on Christians to remember those who had died for their faith throughout history. And then he says, but why does the world persecute Christians? Just a couple of weeks ago, he says, today to the church to bear witness to light and truth experiences harsh persecution in different places to the point of the supreme test of martyrdom.

How many of our brothers and sisters in faith suffer abuse, violence, and are hated for Jesus' sake? I'll tell you something. I just love those very words coming from the head of the Catholic Church.

I mean, imagine, I'll tell you something. Quote, the martyrs of today are greater in number than those of the first centuries. When we read the history of the early centuries here in Rome, we read about so much cruelty toward Christians.

[11 : 02] I tell you, there is the same cruelty today and in greater numbers with Christians today. We want to think about them and be close to them with our affection, our prayer, and our tears.

According to the Pew Research Center, more than 75% of today's population around the world live with some sense of religious restriction.

Christians, of course, being only a part of that. According to a Christian persecution watchdog group Open Doors, 322 Christians are killed each month right now for their faith.

In the latest report, there was a season between November 1st, 2014 and October 31st, this last year, where they indicate more than 7,000 Christians killed for their faith.

These are people who are bearing a heavy weight for the gospel all over the world. And the interesting thing for me is if you look back then at this first letter of revelation to these churches, you

have to ask yourself, what does God give to a church under this kind of experience of life that doesn't match their expectation in resurrection?

[12:19] What does God give to His church? First, He gives them a letter. This is a letter, revelation. It's a letter that arrives in the mail from an old and incarcerated friend.

I love to think of it that way. I have to admit, personally, there is nothing like receiving a letter from a Christian friend who's in prison. I save every one of them that I get.

It's a great reminder of where I'm at on the outside. You know what it's like to write a letter from prison? First of all, you have to fill out that offender request form.

You have to actually indicate the one whom you're writing. You have to have the chaplain hopefully be willing to send it on your behalf. You have to write a note indicating why you want to write it. You have to be willing to have the people read the letter that you are writing.

And finally, if it gets out and on the way, it can come to someone. Well, I don't know on that day in those churches whether they thought, I can't believe the chaplain let John's letter out.

[13:30] But I do know this. There came a day when the church, under the experience and weight of life's difficulties was told, a letter came in the mail from an old and incarcerated friend.

Really? They let John write? Yes, they did. And it's come. Read it to us. And they read it. Let me just give you a line of a letter I've got.

Dear Pastor Helm, Holy Trinity Church, I pray that your entire church family is doing well and in the very best of health, spirit, and mind.

All of a sudden, my life got pretty easy. Someone incarcerated is writing to you and saying, I hope you are doing well in spirit, in mind, and in heart.

Let me put it to you this way. Are you having a bad day? Are you off to a bad start? You got a letter from one who, when you get a letter from one who's in a bad way, especially if they're upbeat, your own troubles seem to diminish along the way.

[14:42] That is the reality of what happened for these seven churches. They got a letter from John. And by the time they were done, they were encouraged to carry on.

That's what God does. I say He still does it today, not in the inspired sense of authoring Scripture, but let me put it to you this way. Put a letter in the mail, old-fashioned, toward one that's under some duress.

Especially if you are under duress. and write it after having reflected on the glories of the gospel and your place in the world. And see if the body of Christ isn't strengthened.

Not only does God send a letter through an incarcerated friend, but look, it's through the letter's vision of Jesus that they would be encouraged to remain. I want to look at this very quickly.

Verses 12 through 16 and 7 to the end. I want you to see what is it in the letter that John saw. 12 to 16, what John saw.

[15:57] And then 17 and following, what Jesus said. What John saw was an apocalyptic vision. A revealing. Not a pulling down of the curtain.

A pulling back of the curtain that the church would actually see Jesus where He was. It's quite an image. It's like standing in front of incredible art on the wall.

When you begin to look at 12 to 16 and take it in, it almost becomes overwhelming. You need to stand back from it. You need space from it. There was one like the Son of Man clothed in a long robe with a golden sash around His chest.

The Son of Man borrowed from Jesus Himself who took that term for who He was in the Gospels. But borrowed by Jesus from Daniel's first vision concerning the one to whom God the Father the Ancient of Days would give an eternal kingdom.

The one who was going to rule over all people for all time. This is the one John sees. He's incarcerated but an angel comes to him and visits him and he has a vision of one like the Son of Man.

[17:12] and oh does he look fine. The hairs of his head are white like wool like snow. His eyes like a flame of fire. Can you see what John saw?

His voice I love this like the roar of many waters. And in his right hand he held seven stars and from his mouth a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

John sees a vision of the resurrected and exalted Christ. It's the vision that the church needs to keep going. And let me tell you when the sun rises in full strength you don't look at it for long.

Neither does John. He falls on his face. Because as Jesus began to rise in his view his response was not oh he he's resurrected I'm rising no he's resurrected I'm falling I'm falling before him I'm at his feet though dead all of life's difficult experiences whether they be economic whether they be ecclesial whether they be relational whether they be doctrinal whether they be your own oppressive sense of having experienced death in the past year or knowing that you may experience it in the coming year all of these things and some of it on behalf of the gospel all of the weight of your heart that goes out to a world where Christians are indeed in other places not here in other places bearing such incredible burden all of that puts the church on its face before Jesus he's rising we're falling that's the place to start the new year this is why

I want to do six weeks resolved 2017 get a vision of Jesus this is what I've been praying for for our congregation how do we want to begin the year get a vision of Jesus and we're going to see a variety of visions of Jesus but this one this one is beautifully placed he is resurrected from the dead that's what a church needs when their expectations of a thing don't match their experience of the same resolved there's nothing more important in my mind as we start our year out together that we would start it out in a sense on our face before the Lord taking in his glories what about what Jesus said if the image of 12 to 16 doesn't grab you the interpretation that comes as a result should he stood before me saying fear not

[20 : 32] I'm the first and the last and the living one I died and behold I'm alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades right there for the things that you have seen those that are and those that are to take place notice how those phrases at the opening fear not for I am the first and the last the living one I died and behold I'm alive forevermore almost begin to encompass all the temporal aspects of time the past is there I'm the first one the future is there I'm the last one the present is there I'm the living one I am the one who went down in the ground but now are there and in fact I've got the keys I know that's just a wonderful word of comfort for you I don't know what you're experiencing in regard to your understanding of Christian expectation but some of you are under incredible weight this is the interpretation of the vision

I want you to see as you begin the year Jesus spanning all of time and he has the keys of death itself for you and for your beloved ones the keys having the keys is always the question of who has the authority if you got the keys you got the car I've told my children when I get old and I lose my mind and you come to me and say now dad you're getting to be a danger to everyone out there on the road in fact they're not even safe on the sidewalks anymore give me the keys I can already tell you what I've told them here you go because I will have already hidden 50 sets of keys around my house you're not going to get the keys from me I may not know where they are but I know enough to know if

I search I'm going to find where I hit them because when you have the keys you have the authority Jesus says I got the keys I'm not giving them up I've got them over death think think this year on those that you love that have passed he says these are my keys no one else is going to take them I release people from death unto life this is this is the wonderful truth of the scriptures Jesus has the keys and he died so he can take you through anything including your own death well the new year is upon us what's needed most is a resolve to get a vision of Christ for one thing I know now having lived a while our experiences in the coming year are unknown to us they're all hidden in the mysterious eternal will of

God but I'm pretty sure that they're not going to measure up to our most hopeful expectations of the same and when that occurs or if it already has we need a vision of Christ to encourage us along the way there's another vision right there it's another picture Lord's table what an interesting picture to leave the church as he is getting ready to return to the father he doesn't leave the church a repetitive picture of his ascended resurrected power he leaves the church a meal that embodies the fullness of his humiliation because we have a need to endure so here's the Christian message and it's full you celebrated the incarnation just a couple of weeks ago in revelation you look at the resurrection from the dead and in this table you embrace you proclaim his death in you until he comes this is indeed the meal that will strengthen you for the journey it is open today for all who profess faith in Jesus

Christ as the savior of their sins if you have not yet done that and intend on standing before God under some other merit or way then simply sit and reflect as people from all ages and walks of life stand and wait patiently to be strengthened through this meal Paul gave instructions to the church concerning our celebration and he says I received from the Lord what I delivered to you that the

Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and we had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body which is for you do this in remembrance of me in the same way also he took the cup after supper saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me