

Revelation 1:9–20

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[0 : 0 0] 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.

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, write what you see in a book 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.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like a roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like a sun shining in the full strength.

[1 : 2 4] When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead, but he laid his right hand on me saying, Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one.

I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are, and those that are to take place after this, as for the mystery of the seven stars that 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. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may be seated. It's good to have you here today.

It's a privilege to be able to not only celebrate Easter, but to open God's word with you. I'm going to look today at three simple thoughts, the first of which is Easter as we have come to expect it, and then move through textually Easter as the early church actually experienced it, and then move through the text in regard to Easter as John would have us understand it.

[3 : 0 2] Because it's a day that comes with a lot of expectation, and not always biblically rooted. Across the country today, preachers and people alike will make many pronouncements about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what it means for you and for me.

And the message, generally speaking, in many quarters of our country will sound something like this, that his triumph is our triumph.

That his victory enables us to live victoriously. That his rising is our springtime. And those childlike images of Charles Schultz's Charlie Brown thinking that perhaps this spring all will go well for him, for hope springs eternal.

There will be much talk about making a fresh start, about turning over a new leaf. It doesn't take one long just even watching CNN to realize that the Christian message today brings forth an expectation of self-betterment, of a life that is perhaps to be your best life now.

And all over the country, people will come with Easter expectations and they will return home, hopefully happy to their ham.

[4 : 44] What's the common thread in regard to Easter as we have come to expect it? The common thread is this. There is a one-to-one correspondence drawn between what happened to Jesus on that first Easter morning and that which rightfully belongs to all those who profess him on this morning and every subsequent morning.

A one-to-one correspondence. His rising, your rising. His empty tomb on that day.

Your new life on this day. Easter as we have come to expect it. What about Easter as the early church actually experienced it?

Easter as the early church. That's where the revelation given to John is an interesting text for us on Easter.

And it's with a bit of irony that we find John historically and traditionally understood to be the Apostle John, the follower of Jesus, the disciple, one who held fast to God's word, one who for an entire lifetime bore witness to his resurrection, one who never let go of the testimony of the rising sun.

[6 : 20] And where do we find him? We find him in verse 9, in trouble, imprisoned, and all on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

That's Easter as the early church actually experienced it. Some 60 years on in. Did you catch the prepositions in verse 9?

Your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus. The preposition, in trouble.

on an island. He was on the island called Patmos, a small island for the ones who defied state authority and were in need of incarceration.

And the third preposition, of, all on account of, the word of God, and the witness concerning Jesus.

[7 : 29] In trouble. On an island of isolation. All on account of the word of God and the witness of Jesus.

That's Easter. That's the Easter message of the early church. Some 60 years after Christ had risen from the dead and had ascended into heaven, the church itself was under great duress.

And so with our opening verse, you need to understand this morning, no matter what expectation you came with concerning Easter or the kind of message you wanted to receive, that the Easter surprise is this, that the leading proponent of the early church, the one who saw Christ, who touched Him, who spoke of Him, who wrote of Him, who that great gospel that would bring life to all those who believed in Him, is himself experiencing all the humiliation of Christ's incarnation.

And He, He indeed is incarcerated. Take a look at the words clearly so you see them for yourself.

I, John, your brother and partner, in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.

[9 : 01] He is living incarnationally. By that I mean all of the humiliation of Christ's first coming now belongs to His followers after Easter and after the ascension.

How is it that we have gotten this so desperately wrong? And notice what was true for Him.

He weds to the whole church. This is Easter in the early church. I, John, your brother and partner, your partner in trouble, your partner in incarnational witness, your partner in all of the humiliation that comes on account of your holding fast to the testimony of Jesus and to the Word of God.

I doubt you'll hear much in this country on this day of that Easter reality. The situation in the early church was one of duress and difficulty.

Take the word tribulation and scan across the column to the next page in chapter 2 in verses 10 and 11 wherein He is writing to one of the churches in verse 9.

[10 : 30] He says, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you're rich and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation.

I know your tribulation. This to me is one of the great comforting truths of Easter. For so many come in with expectations into a church on this day never to return again because the message that has been proclaimed to them on Easter Sunday is that in Christ rising you walk out with incredible resurrection strength and all things will go well with you.

and of course by Sunday afternoon you know that's not the case. You walk away from church and establish religion because the effervescent pastors with smiling faces on Easter morn don't understand the tribulations of life come Sunday evening or Monday morn.

we need to rid ourselves of Easter as we have come to expect it. We need to gird ourselves with an understanding of Easter as the early church experienced it.

[12 : 06] In all likelihood this letter was written under the spasmodic persecutions of those early years following the resurrection.

First there was the time of Nero where history records his initial wave of persecuting the church around 65 AD or so.

More than likely this letter pushes it a little further perhaps under the reign of Domitian and there was spasmodic isolation of the religious community to the culture at large and they were suffering persecution for it.

You could not own the name of Jesus in the early centuries and be at peace with all that was around you. John understood that to be true.

So the irony of Easter is this not that you are empowered to go forth from this place and succeed in your endeavor. Not that you are to walk forth from this place and turn over a new leaf of self betterment.

[13 : 21] Not even in a spiritual sense that you walk forth from this place victorious in Christ. No. Partner in the endurance that is in Christ.

The message of Easter is for those who have need of endurance. I John your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Christ.

Is that interesting when we talk of Good Friday you rarely hear a Good Friday message that doesn't move you immediately to Easter morning. You rarely hear a message on the cross that doesn't want it all swallowed up in resurrection language.

Rarely do you hear a message on the resurrection that does an about face and attaches you back to humiliation and to incarnation and perhaps incarceration and to the need for endurance and patient tribulation.

But that is the gospel message that when you come to Christ you await a resurrection you live in the midst of tribulation and that all that journey that Jesus walked in humility and in trials and in isolation is now your road to hoe!

[14 : 57] until that great day when he returns. this has been impressed upon me even as you look at a letter like the letter to the Philippians where Paul's prayers that he would know the power of the resurrection and what does he attach that very phrase to that I might know the power of the resurrection and share in his suffering so that in some way I might attain resurrection that's the Christian understanding of Easter perhaps if we adopted that message in the church again we would not have so many disillusioned with the message for indeed the people of this city are smart enough to see through any triumphant message that doesn't square with the tribulations of life but notice it was on account of the word many of you know that

I have occasion to travel and to meet with pastors and to work on our preaching and there is an interesting thing that I am observing at the grassroots level of the church leaders across this country recently I was in just outside of Pittsburgh for four days I got a picture of the blokes I was with if you want to see them there was a day three or four years ago when you go to a preaching conference and the discussion would be about style about music the idiosyncratic nature of church life of how much coffee we're able to drink how many rolls we're able to eat and the pastor itself in this country began to have a kind of lethargic look to it a sedentary feel to it a greater girth around it a softness about it not so anymore as I am traveling and looking

I'll give you just a snapshot just outside of Pittsburgh in the old steel mill areas of Allentown New Castle there was an assemblage of about 25 pastors no fewer than seven of which were on the line already over the edge and in persecution and tribulation and in need of endurance because of their testimony concerning Jesus there was one man when he was introduced and you can come and show I'll show him to you after he was introduced to the workshop this way hello this is so and so you need to be careful when you mention his name if it were known that he were here amidst his own community at this workshop he would be excommunicated from his church he's one of the most faithful preachers of the gospel in this state and if they knew that he were gathering with others around the word of

God concerning the testimony of Jesus rather than the traditions that his church holds they would not permit him to preach anymore another man stood and said I am in a denomination that right now am in the midst of court proceedings on whether or not our church is to remove itself from the denomination on the gospel and its meaning three other men joined him in the same and suddenly I come into a small room of twenty five men no fewer than seven who understand the early church's experience of Easter same thing happened the year before in Toronto when the man that I was with had already been barred from preaching the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in that part of Canada indeed his church right now is under great duress for the gospel not for his music or his style or his coffee or lack thereof for the word of

God and the testimony of Jesus I meet men in their early twenties whose very association with the gospel as we understand it means inherently that they will be debarred or disbarred or unable to be ordained in their denomination that is the church that is rising in resurrection power it's a church in tribulation and in need of gospel endurance I'm done with the platitudes of Easter thankfully the church around this country is nearing being done with it as well Easter as we've come to expect it Easter as the early church experiences it

[20 : 31] Easter as we were meant to understand it interestingly the verses 12 through 17 indicate that John intends for us to understand something of Easter he's been called in verse 11 to write it down to put it in a book for the voice came forth like a trumpet and what he writes down in 12 to 17 if you glance at it is a visionary experience of the exalted and resurrected the ascended Lord let's read it then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest the hairs of his head were white like wool as white as snow his eyes were like a flame of fire his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace and his voice was like the roar of many waters and in his right hand he held seven stars from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining in full strength what you have in those verses is an apocalyptic vision which I want to argue is actually there so that it might be accessible to you this is where we need to stop for just a moment and understand the nature of apocalyptic literature when you and I read these things and we see someone standing with stars and a sharp two-edged sword coming forth from his mouth it's nearly incomprehensible!

to us we're not sure what to make of it we might even put off reading revelation all together because this is only the first of many such apocalyptic visions might I suggest to you today if you've never read this kind of literature before that these pictorial like images are meant for you to understand remember the word apocalypse first word of this letter the revelation of Jesus Christ the very word means an unveiling not a pulling down a pulling back of the curtain a revealing all of the language of this book with all of its picturesque symbolic figures that are seen in these strange prophetic visions are for your understanding let me see if

I can explain I have a brother he won't read a book I live in Hyde Park one of the greatest areas for book lovers in the country my brother won't read a book in fact as a basketball coach he has in his school program they were to respond to various questions and one of the questions he was to respond to is what's your favorite book to which he wrote whichever one they're getting ready to turn into a movie that's the kind of home I grew up in but I gave it some thought and I remember that I myself as a young boy wasn't going to check out any book in the library unless it had pictures fewer pages to read first of all I remember my own children learning to read and the teachers wanting books with pictures so that the children could identify via the picture what the language was and indeed we we all like pictures don't we in fact say a picture is worth a thousand words if you've ever sat with pastor dennis can't you see him drawing now for you if

I could just draw it for you then you'll see it and if you see it you'll understand it don't we say things like I'm having trouble hearing or seeing what you're saying you might be thinking that even now don't we say if I could only visualize it so indeed you and I need to know that with our arrival into apocalyptic literature in which we see these visionary experiences with swords coming from mouths and almost incomprehensible art it isn't in order that it would remain revealed or restricted from you he's basically saying look I know this letter is going to need to be read in the 21st century when all they do those days is go to movies and in order for them to be able to understand it let me show you a picture rather than make an argument so

Easter was meant to be understood! The vision shows that but what is it that we were meant to understand? This is the last moment of the sermon today what are we meant to understand?

[26 : 22] I want you to see that the image is like verse 13 a son of man this is a rich figure of speech that Jesus himself applied uniquely to himself he called himself the son of man and the richness of it extends beyond Jesus his own identification with it the richness extends all the way back to the Hebrew prophet Daniel's use of it where in chapter 7 in his first great vision he saw one like an ancient of days preparing to judge the world and then it says one like a son of man coming on the clouds and to the son of man was given a kingdom and authority and dominion and the people that was to be forever his

John here when he hears the voice turns and looks and he sees one like a son of man the identification of his Lord in connection with the prophetic fulfillment of Daniel and already in this picture you and I are to recognize that he sees Jesus as Lord not only resurrected but now ascended he has pulled back the curtain to the struggling church of the early centuries who are enduring incredible difficulties and shown them the risen Lord the exalted Lord the ascended one his hairs of his head were like wool white as snow his eyes like a flame of fire his feet burnished bronze refined in a furnace

I mean all the imagery of his purity is put before you in picturesque language and his voice all his voice like the roar of many waters his mouth came forth a sharp two edged sword and his face when John saw his face it was like the sun shining in full strength now we haven't had much of that sun shining in full strength here it's coming but when the sun shines in full strength you don't look for long and when John saw this one it says I fell at his feet as though dead that's the response of the church at

Easter it's not a great rising it's the great falling falling before the pure one the holy one the exalted one the forever one the son of man one as though dead in fear for to him God has given a kingdom over all the earth for all time that's the beginning of what is to be understood about Easter and if the image doesn't convey it for you John puts all the subtitles in and you can read along with it the interpretation comes at the bottom of the screen verse 17 this is the interpretation of Easter but fear not I am the first and the last and the living one and I love the order he goes to the past he goes to the future and he lives in the present

I died behold I am alive forever more this is what he wants the church to see in their tribulation in their struggle in their sense that God has hidden himself away from you and all of your extreme trials of life he says let me pull back the curtain here is the first the last the living one the one who died but is now alive and alive and that forever could it get any greater than this and look at the authority that he has and I have the keys of death and Hades what a great word of comfort from comfort from a man who was already incarcerated for the gospel soon to lose his life for the gospel and to a church who was undergoing tribulation on account of the gospel and had a need of endurance in the gospel to know that the one who they saw ascended at the right hand of God holds authority all the keys to death and

[32 : 05] Hades that that authority is not given to their persecutor that the authority is not given to anyone else on earth that he can be completely trusted no matter what may come all authority the keys are his keys are always a sign of authority when I get old and lose my mind I have already told my family you're not getting my keys I will hide 50 60 70 sets of keys around my house knowing that I won't remember them I'll still know they're there somewhere and when someone says to me dad you can no longer drive you're a risk to humanity on the roads the sidewalks are no longer safe can I have your keys what they are saying is you are stripped of any freedom of all authority and I won't have it life is always about the keys you got to have the keys

Jesus has the keys he has the keys over the thing that you fear most he has the keys over death he holds the keys over your health he has the keys over your loved ones he has the keys that you think so often reside with your superiors the keys to death and Hades are his and he took possession of those by his perfect obedient life his absolutely stupendous substitutionary death through which he rose victorious to claim authority over all things your future and mine your loved ones and mine your illness this year or five years hence your job your demise that moment when you or

I roll in through an operating door not sure whether we return for any days anymore he holds the keys you can rest in that that is Easter resting he holds the keys hallelujah and so therefore he's to write write therefore verse 19 the things that you have seen write them down why because for centuries the church that begins with Christ will have to walk the road of Christ and the road of Christ is a humbling trouble filled way may we all reach heaven's joys let's pray our heavenly father help us to expect better things from

Easter help us to make better sense of all that we experience help us to understand wherein our true Easter hope lies in Christ's name we pray amen!