

The inside story from the risen Lord

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[0 : 00] All right, thanks, Martin. Yep, great song. Emma says, me too, for favourite Colin song.

It's great to know that the Lord is not just in and among his world, but this is his world. It's a really encouraging thought, good reminder. So I forgot to say in the hustle and bustle of me changing computers, we're going to have the Lord's Supper after the sermon.

So if you don't yet, you may want to quickly grab some food and drinks so that we can share that together. So, yeah, try and have that ready. But what we're going to do now is hear God's Word read to us and then we'll have the kids talk after that.

So we'll go to Catherine for the Bible reading in Revelation 1 and then we'll cross to Don for the kids talk. Okay. Hi, everybody.

We're reading from Revelation 1. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

[1 : 10] He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the Word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. And blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia. Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.

To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come.

[2 : 54] The Almighty. 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 like 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 middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothes with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like 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 loud 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 the sun, shining in full strength.

[4 : 31] 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'm alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you've 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.

So, after 11 weeks of churching online, how are you feeling about it?

Perhaps you've been surprised how your thinking has changed over the 11 weeks. I certainly have. So, initially, I was really quite fearful that we would not even survive going online.

[5 : 47] Everything that was familiar and comfortable was lost in our face-to-face physical meeting. But at some point, I'm not quite sure when, but at some point I decided I quite like things as they are now.

And the reason, once I started to think about it, is because it gives me so much control. I realized that I can be at church on my terms, engaging only with the bits I like or think worthwhile, and then just getting up and doing other things if I want to at other parts, and speaking only to people I choose to speak to.

So, now I have changed, and I'm now quite fearful again. I'm quite fearful that many actually won't want to go back to physical meeting. It's quite nice being in control, isn't it?

And doing just what you want. So, the elders believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a God-given opportunity to reset our thinking and practice of church.

And so, what we want to do today through this series, we want to start a church family conversation shaped by the teaching of Revelation 1-3. Going online was hard.

[7 : 03] It was new territory for everyone. None of us had experienced it. None of us knew what it should look like. And we had to decide quickly what was essential and what wasn't. I think resuming face-to-face meeting will be even harder.

Because we all have experience. We all have a personal bias about what it should or could look like. So, it's another opportunity to have a conversation directed by God's Word.

So, the question then is, will we be happy to resume physical meeting simply by returning to what we've always done? To what's familiar? To what's comfortable?

If we do that, that's actually resurrecting a culture of churching, which might actually be quite mindless. Now, of course, some of our commitments and practices and thinking may have been really good in the past, and we need to be fighting for them into the future.

We don't want them to go. But, likewise, some of them may have been quite wrong and need to be abandoned. Over the next seven weeks, we're going to zoom into the seven churches, the letters of the seven churches.

[8 : 20] But, imagine Jesus was zooming into our church today. Of course, we know he is, but let's just use the imagination for a minute. What would Jesus have to say about the shape and practices of our church?

What would Jesus have to say about the passions and priorities of individuals within our church?

What are our blind spots in regard to what Christ calls us to in church?

You know, the things we don't want to do because of the personal or perhaps the financial cost. The things we just don't like to do because we don't like them.

The points at which maintaining our personal autonomy will override what Christ calls us to as a church. Those are big questions, aren't they?

They're confronting questions to ask of ourselves and to have others ask of us. Or, again, is it possible to have a vibrant spiritual life that is to move closer to God while only having loose attachment to this community of Christ's people?

[9 : 32] So, the question, in other words, is what part does God mean our church to have in our spiritual growth? Now, the way you answer these questions will reflect your thinking.

Not a doubt about that. But far more important is what Christ thinks of his church. And so we need to hear his thinking. And on that, let's turn to God's word in Revelation and see how he answers these questions.

Now, moving into Revelation, we need to get our bearings by letting the text speak for itself. Dave's already taken us well down this pathway in his introduction. So, the introduction makes clear, the introduction to Revelation makes clear that Revelation is not a weird, futuristic writing, as many suggest today.

It's very plain. In these first four verses, how were to approach it? How were to read it? Verse one, as Don said, it's the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place.

The Greek word is apocalypse. And that means, as Don quite help, it means to uncover or reveal something that was previously hidden. Verse three, we have this joint communique, as it were, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ delivered by supernatural inspiration through John the

Apostle.

[11 : 01] So, putting that all together, what is it? Well, Revelation is the story of God's unfolding word and plan of salvation in Jesus Christ and the gospel.

It's the story of God's unfolding plan seen from God's perspective. It's what I'm calling this morning the inside story. Now, look at verse two.

Why was it written? Well, it was written specifically for the benefit of Christians struggling to live faithfully in a hostile world, including verse nine, as Don's referred to, John's own imprisonment. So, it's meant to benefit now. It's not some sort of futuristic formula. And promises, therefore, verse three, immediate blessing and comfort for all who read it and take it to heart.

So, it's a letter, but it's more than just a letter. Look at the introduction that John gives in verses four through to eight there.

[12 : 03] It's a picture book love letter from Jesus to his beloved people. And his beloved people, verse 11, are described as the seven churches and the list of them there.

And seven in Revelation always denotes completeness or perfection. So, this is a way of Jesus saying, I'm writing a love letter from me to my whole church, my complete church, represented as it is through these seven churches, real churches, in the time that John was writing.

And when we look through the way John brings the introduction and introduces Jesus to us, as it were, through the introduction, it's easy to feel the calming influence of Jesus' reassurance.

Look at the words there in verses four and five. It's as if Jesus is saying, I loved you before the world began. I died for you to make you my special people.

I will always be a faithful witness of you. I will never abandon you. I know your pain. I know your suffering. I will come to you soon and your trust in me, verse seven and eight, will be vindicated before all.

[13 : 23] Now, we delight to get letters. We delight to get those sort of love letters, those reassuring, calming words, calming to us on paper. And that's what this letter is.

It's a picture book love letter. Picture book because there's lots of images. A picture book love letter from Jesus. Now, with that sort of introduction, let's jump into the first picture.

And the first picture is the Lord Jesus Christ and his church as seen from God's perspective. So, come with me just for a minute in a bit of imagination because I think this will help us get a handle for what's happening in Revelation.

I want you to imagine you're a news reporter and you're covering the launch of a massive new architectural plan for the CBD of Newcastle.

So, there you are in the room and the future Newcastle CBD is under a large white sheet. What would you expect when the unveiling finally happens?

[14 : 22] Well, you would expect multiple aspects and components to the design which are integrated around an existing key feature of the city.

All these things would tie together or unite or give form to the overall design. And you would immediately see that every part of the design is important and interesting but you can't possibly write about them all at once.

And so, the designer helps you by immediately directing your eyes to the most dominant feature in the design from which all other parts take their shape.

Well, friends, that's exactly what happens in the book of Revelation. Verse 10 and 11 the Spirit says to John start writing. Start writing as God starts to roll back the sheet and reveal his word, his plan as the inside story from God's perspective.

And what immediately captures John's attention is the centerpiece of God's plan. And what is it?

Well, Jesus and his consuming passion his church.

[15 : 40] In verse 10 John startled and pushed into work by a commanding voice. Get writing, John. And in verse 12 when John turns to see who the voice is coming from he sees verse 12 a circle of golden lampstands seven lampstands.

Now that's Old Testament imagery symbolizing Christ's complete church represented by these local seven local churches. and in the center of the church is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ described here as one like a son of man emphasizing again in Old Testament imagery his unlimited power and wisdom.

Now this is the same Jesus that John introduced us to in verses 48. John introduces us as Jesus God's King and Savior Jesus who controls every detail of his universe sweeping away with a word

of judgment any who dare to oppose him.

This Jesus who ultimately everyone will recognize verse 7 as he truly is. So John starts to see what's at the center of God's plan and purpose for his world the unlimited power and wisdom of Jesus but it's more focused than that because his total focus of the Lord Jesus is on his church the community of his died for people.

In verse 16 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.

[17 : 35] again picture language upon picture language Jesus holds his church his community of died for people in his hand securely and their object their purpose in life to reflect his light their stars reflecting the light the beauty and the hope of the sun into the darkness of the world and his every word this two-edged sword his every word is designed to protect them.

It's a wonderful picture of this unlimited power and wisdom being totally focused on and applied to and available for the community of his died for people.

That's what Jesus is about. It's a beautiful picture and yet there's another aspect to the picture. This Jesus is so awesome so confronting that he's not to be messed with.

Look at verse 17. As soon as John even gets a glimpse of this awesome Jesus he collapses. He just cannot stand in front of this person.

How's it going to go from here? Well look at the tenderness. This same Jesus tenderly helps John back to his feet.

[19 : 04] Not just helping him back to his feet but speaks to him reassuringly. Fear not. Get on with the job that I've set you to do. Get on with the job of writing down the inside story as I peel back the layers and let you see the world and God's purpose from God's perspective.

Friends, the message is simple but profound in all its imagery. Viewed from God's perspective, it is the Lord Jesus and his church that is central to God's purpose in this world.

Put it in different words. I don't think it's too much to say that nothing is more important to Jesus than his church. Put it in a couple of questions.

What was Jesus doing when he came into this world? Well, if you go back through the Gospels, it's very clear that Jesus came to establish and build his church.

Then we ask, well, what's Jesus doing now that he's returned to heaven in all his glory? Well, Revelation tells us he is still building his church. He's totally focused on building and protecting his church.

[20 : 25] The base of operations for Jesus has changed, but the operation remains the same. And woven into all that imagery is our identity.

If you look at verse 20, as for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, the seven golden lamp stands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.

Now, verse 20 is a sort of strange verse. There's an intense cluster of imagery. For what purpose? Well, it actually shifts the spotlight onto Christ's church.

So far, it's been on Christ himself in the center of the church. Now, it spotlights or highlights the church itself. It's a transition verse into chapters two and three.

Now, the word angel here in verse 20 is the word messenger. So, to be honest, it's not entirely sure how we should read this imagery in all its detail.

[21 : 24] It may be the completeness of Christ's church, including the leaders or the pastors of those churches. In other words, the angels might be the pastors of the church. Or, it may be imagery that speaks of the importance of Christ's church, so that even the heavenly beings, angels, taking the angels at face value, are tasked with guarding and protecting Christ's church on earth.

Now, I favor that second option personally. I think it's an easier way to go with. It means there's lots we don't understand, but what it does give us is that sense of importance. Even the heavenly beings are reflecting Christ's focus and sense of importance in the church, because they too have been assigned to guard and protect Christ's church on earth.

Either way, it doesn't really matter. Either way, the focus moves to Christ's church on earth, the community have died for people, his renewed resurrection community that we saw in John's gospel just a few weeks ago, a community already greeted so warmly in verses 48.

And what does the spotlight emphasize? Well, it emphasizes our identity. Now, hear this really, really carefully. We, as Christians, are not simply part of the church.

We're not simply involved in church. We are the church of Christ. How so? By virtue of being in Christ.

[23 : 00] When we're converted, when we come into Christ, we come into church. We are the church of Christ. The two are inseparable. The connection is inseparable.

And here's how it works. You see, God's purpose, contrary to what we often think these days, God's purpose was never simply to save individuals. His purpose was always to save individuals into a new kingdom, a new community of people reflecting the character of their king and savior, reflecting their high priest, Jesus.

Friends, we are defined by our relationship with God through Jesus. We're defined by being in Christ. We are defined as the church, the resurrection community of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, let's get some enormous confronting implications. We should never allow ourselves to think of church as a responsibility.

that is, we should never allow ourselves to think of church as something Christians have to do or have to be involved in. Church is what defines us, the resurrection community of Jesus, who by identity reflect the light of Jesus into our dark world.

[24 : 33] So, we pursue the implication of this. well, it's no surprise that the Lord Jesus, the head of the church, that like the Lord Jesus, the head of the church, we also are to have one consuming passion, and that is to reflect Christ's passion for his church.

And that's what Revelation 2 and 3 is about, and we're going to see that over the next seven weeks. We're going to look at each of these churches individually. And with the same commanding voice, Jesus speaks to his church.

He speaks to the churches in chapters 2 and 3. What does he have to say? Well, just very, very briefly, and we'll dig into the details over the next seven weeks. He demands that his church reflect his own character in terms of witness, purity, and maturity.

That is, he demands that his church reflect his own character, both in proclaiming and modelling the mind of Christ. As he is the faithful witness to us, back to chapter 1, verse 5, so he demands his church should be a faithful witness to him as king and saviour in God's world.

As he is pure and holy, so he demands his church should aspire to be pure and mature in action, demonstrating truth and unity.

[26 : 02] Remember, so that repeatedly through John's gospel, truth and unity within the church and before the watching world. Friends, therefore, it is never enough to say we are Christians.

We need to demonstrate that we are Christ. and as we demonstrate that, then we are the church reflecting the passion of Jesus into his dark world.

We'll see over the coming weeks that Jesus knows all about the external trials as people have to face daily. They're in the middle of serious persecution from the Roman authorities at this particular time.

And Jesus is well aware of that. We'll see that as we look into these letters. But here's the rub. Jesus sees an even greater danger facing his church. Something even more dangerous than persecution and loss of life.

What's that? Well, Jesus sees the danger of compromise. Compromise on the inside, in attitudes and desires and thinking which drive their actions.

[27 : 17] So at one point in chapters 2 and 3 as Jesus speaks into his church, at one point he doesn't hold back.

He's confronting and exposing bad attitudes, wrong desires. He's calling out shallow displays of loyalty, lacking true substance in the heart.

And friends, over the next seven weeks, we need to make sure that we are in a position to hear his word speak to us and speak to our heart and that we are willing to have Jesus speak to us and speak to our hearts.

Otherwise, nothing will change. But at another point, Jesus speaks into his church, offering words of encouragement and hope, and he calls his people to press on in truth and unity, in spite of genuine hardships in this world.

words of encouragement and encouragement. And friends, we need to make sure we hear both equally, words of encouragement, but words of confrontation and exposure also.

[28 : 25] And there's another thing we need to be aware of. We need to be aware of reading Jesus' words to the seven churches comparatively. So our temptation, I think, is that we'll identify with the

circumstances or failings of one church and then dismiss the other.

So in other words, we'll try and see G-E-C-N as one of those seven churches. But that's not how they're to be read because they're typical, they're representative, so we should read them as representing the typical sin which might pop up in any church at any time, including ours, in 2020, unless we stay focused on what we're meant to be as Christ Church.

There's a real problem if we read them comparatively. And what will happen if we read them comparatively is that the level of passion we are aiming for will be one we set for ourselves. And it'll work because we'll allow ourselves to feel good about ourselves relative to other churches. Well, we might have this particular sin that we need to deal with, but boy, we're sure not guilty of those things that those other churches were guilty of.

And so we set the bar according to how we think we're performing in relation to other churches. Rather than looking for the bar of Christ's passion and his demand for unity and truth and authentic living as Christians in community.

[29 : 58] It's Christ's word that needs to inform and direct and shape our conversation moving forward as a church. But let me leave you with this thought as we begin to transition back to physical meeting.

And it's two options for asking the question. Each option reveals something quite severe. Here it goes.

Here it goes. Do you ask, where does God and the church fit into my life or work or leisure? I'll repeat that. Do you ask, where does God and the church fit into my life or work or leisure?

When the real question should be, how does my life reflect Christ's passion for his church as the defining point of my existence? existence?

How does my life reflect Christ's passion for his church as the defining point of my existence? Well, friends, I hope the conversation opens up over the next few weeks directed by God's word.

[31 : 07] But in the meantime, thank you very much for listening to me. Back to Dave again. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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