

What Must Take Place

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord God, our Father, we thank you that through your Son, Jesus, we can call you Father, and that you have revealed him to us, and that your word helps us and leads us and guides us into the truth of Jesus.

We pray that this evening you will lead and guide us into the truth of Jesus, for his sake, for your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, over the last few weeks, I have mentioned to a number of people that we are embarking on a series on Revelation.

When we finish the book of Acts. Now, many of these people rolled their eyes. Some said how brave it was, and others commented on how hard the book is to understand.

Some wished me, and all of us, I guess, by extension, good luck. On the assumption, I surmise, that we are going to need it.

[1 : 27] Understanding and benefiting from the book of Revelation, in their minds, it would seem depends on luck.

You see, the thing is that for many of us, the book of Revelation is a bit of a mystery, a puzzle to be solved, even a scary proposition.

I want us to lay aside those things and those assumptions about the book for a moment.

And maybe we should approach it on its own terms, on what it says about itself. Because Revelation does contain some images and some ways of expressing things that are really pretty foreign to us.

And that can get confusing at times. Especially if they are looked at on their own. So we're going to have to do it carefully and, I guess, soberly, but never fearfully.

[2 : 46] And I think that we'll see that the book is not intended as any of those things, scary, mystery, puzzle, whatever, but that it's got a set, a reason for its being there and it is to encourage us.

So, first of all, let's think about the context of Revelation. The book of Revelation was written to a church facing persecution. It was written sometime in the 90 ADs, so it was during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, who was a cruel and ruthless man and one of his particular interests, it seemed, was the persecution of Christians, especially in the latter part of his reign, which is when this is set. And John, the writer of this book, had been banished to a penal colony on the island of Patmos in the middle of the Aegean Sea for his faith.

And we'll see more about that later in Chapter 1 next week. But Christians were targeted for their faith by the Emperor.

And it seemed like everybody with political ambition in the Roman Empire was jumping on the anti-Christian bandwagon to get in the good books with the Emperor, to be seen to be carrying out his policies and his interests.

[4 : 35] And it wasn't just hassle for Christians. Christian people were facing death just for being Christian.

You see, so for an ordinary Christian person, there were good reasons for fear and despondency. good reasons to be down and even to doubt their Christian faith. How can Christian faith be good if all we get is persecution for it?

And the book of Revelation is an answer that God gives to them in that situation. What does God do?

He doesn't tell them to harden up. He doesn't take them out of the situation. He doesn't tell them to go quiet with the Gospel either.

[5 : 50] He doesn't do what many of us modern people would expect him to do and teach them mindfulness techniques. He doesn't set them a mysterious puzzle to work out or give them a road map for a far distant future, which is what many people think Revelation is.

He gives them a revelation of Jesus Christ. verse 1, chapter 1, reads, 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. The NIV translation in a way misleads us.

A better translation or another translation, I'd say I think a better one, a more accurate one, the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to show his servants or slaves the things which must soon take place.

The book of Revelation is a revelation of Jesus. It's about Jesus.

[7 : 17] Any interpretation that doesn't have Jesus as its centre is going to be misleading. John tells us as much right from the very start, the opening words.

It's a revelation, a letting it be known, of Jesus. It may not name him at every turn and there may be symbolic ways of talking about him and about his work but he's the central revelation of this book. And Jesus is revealed in this book in such a way that the readers are encouraged and comforted. Their doubts are driven out and their fears are calmed.

It's the revelation of Jesus. It's not the brain teaser of Jesus. It's not a mystery or puzzle. It's not hiding anything. It's revealing it.

Ironically, we sometimes get that the wrong way around, don't we? We see it as a puzzle to be solved, a code to be cracked and we can get disturbed and confused and uncertain and afraid even by the contents of this book which is exactly the opposite of its intention.

[8 : 48] It's not only a revelation of Jesus, it's a revelation from God to Jesus.

We see in this verse the chain of revelation. God gave it to Jesus who revealed it to angels who in turn passed it on to John the messenger of God who wrote it down for the people of God, the rest of God's servants.

That's what verse 1 tells us, 1 and 2 tell us. And just in case we haven't got the message, verse 3 lets it be known that it's for all of God's church, not just for those in the know.

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 end is near. You see, this verse envisages a situation where the book would be received by a church and someone would read it out.

Remember that this was centuries before the invention of the printing press. Books were hand written and expensive and rare and only a few people could read.

[10 : 25] So it would have to be read out but it's not just for those who can read. The one who reads it aloud is blessed, yes, because he's sharing it with its intended audience but that's not where it ends.

Blessed also is the one who hears the contents of the book and takes it to heart. Notice that it's not just for hearing.

It's a practical book. It's to be heard and its contents impact people where they live. Yes, it contains things about the future.

Yes, it tells us predictions, etc. Verse 1 tells us that it contains information about things that must soon take place. But even those things that must soon take place have an impact on people's lives now and that's where the message is.

And these things are things that happen under God's authority. They may be in the future, in the very near future even, but it's not just to fill our brains with interesting facts and knowledge and predictions, but it's to fill our hearts with faith in God.

[11 : 57] And this book starts like a letter. And in fact, in the coming weeks, we'll see that it is a letter with very specific people that it's addressed to.

It's addressed to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, what is now modern Turkey or Turkey if you're even more modern.

We will meet some of those churches in the weeks to come. But the greeting, the message is one of grace and peace.

This book is meant for comfort, to bring grace and peace to people who are stressed to the max even, and being hunted down for their faith.

Grace and peace in the face of such things is a really powerful message. message and the power of the message is emphasized by the power of the one who sends it.

[13 : 14] It's from God, the eternal one. Grace and peace to you from him who is, who was, and is to come.

he's the God of the past, the present, and the future. He is in all of those different time references. And it's from the seven fold spirit. Now, through the book of Revelation we'll find out that numbers are really important. They symbolize different things.

And the number seven is the number that symbolizes perfection, wholeness, completeness. And so, the seven fold spirit is the perfect spirit.

It's the spirit, the Holy Spirit. It's a message from God, the eternal one, from the Holy Spirit, and it's from Jesus, from Jesus Christ.

[14 : 27] it's from the three in one God himself, eternally existent, intimately present, to help, and Jesus who is the king, that is the Christ.

The powerful, intimate king is saying grace and peace. And we hear in these verses that goes on to talk about who Jesus is.

It explains in great detail who Jesus is, first of all, and what he's done. In the next part of verse five, Jesus is described to encourage and build up those to whom the letter was sent.

So this second part of verse five, we hear more of who he is. The last part of verse five and verse six, we're told what he has done. And then in verse seven, we hear about what he's going to do.

So who is Jesus? The way that Jesus is described in these verses are in terms of the Old Testament.

[15 : 58] If there is a code for interpreting revelation, it's the Old Testament. So John tells us that Jesus is the Christ.

It's from Jesus Christ. He is God's appointed forever king. The one that was promised from long ago, expected from the time of David, thousand years earlier than John was writing.

Jesus fulfills all of the promises around God's Messiah, his Christ. Messiah is the Hebrew word, Christ is the Greek word.

Jesus is the coming king. Those words both mean the one who is appointed to be the king.

Jesus, Christ isn't Jesus' surname. Christ is who Jesus is. He's the king.

[17 : 09] and that Jesus is the Christ is a really reassuring thing. God hasn't forgotten or abandoned his people.

Quite the opposite. He's active, fulfilling his purposes through the Jesus that you have trusted in, persecuted Christian.

You can be encouraged. because Jesus is the king. But verse 5 also tells us that he's the faithful witness.

You see, Jesus has been where his people are now, under pressure to bear witness to their God. And he's the one who's been faithful under that pressure.

as the book of Hebrews reminds us, he's the author and pioneer of our faith. We can have courage to be faithful because he's gone before us into that.

[18 : 24] He's the faithful witness. So we can also be faithful witnesses to the goodness and grace and peace of God.

But Jesus is also the firstborn from the dead. You see, we have hope beyond our present circumstances. Emperors may decree our death, governors may condemn us, security forces may arrest us, local officials may harass and persecute us, but what can they do to us who have eternal security?

Eternal security. You see, Jesus has died for us and he is risen. The worst thing that these authorities are threatening has already happened to Jesus and he's triumphed.

As we who follow him will triumph, we are, so to speak, the next born from the dead, if he is the first born.

We too can know that the worst that we might face in terms of ridicule, scorn, rejection, mockery, exclusion, or whatever it is that is just what Jesus faced, and more.

[20 : 02] And he has been vindicated, glorified, and even raised from the dead. And so we will follow him in all of that.

And so we will follow him in all of that. But not only that, he's also the ruler of the kings of the earth.

As I said, this letter was probably written during the reign of the notoriously cruel and despotic Roman emperor Domitian.

And Jesus is the ruler even of Domitian. whatever any human rulers may claim for themselves, no matter how total their control of human affairs may be, no matter how comprehensive their surveillance system might be, Jesus is the ruler over them all.

See, Jesus is the Christ. He's the faithful witness. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead and he's the ruler of the kings of the earth. This is such an encouragement for a church under pressure.

[21 : 29] But we're not only encouraged by who Jesus is, we're given further encouragement by what he has done and continues to do. Jesus that God anointed, faithful, eternal, ruler over all, loves us.

Us. And John, that venerable, respected, old apostle, writing from captivity, includes himself in this. but he also includes sinful, imperfect, and even straying Christians. They might have been a persecuted church, but we will read in coming weeks, through chapters two and three, that the original readers were far from perfect.

Perfect. I've known a few people who have been martyred for their faith.

I, when we were in Nigeria, we lived through a time when there were Muslim extremists that were attacking Christians, Christians, and calling them out.

[23 : 04] If you couldn't say the Shahada, that is the Muslim confession of faith, they would kill you. They would ask you, are you a Christian?

If you said yes, they would say, turn away from that. Otherwise, one of my colleagues, he was not the best example of a Christian person, I would have said.

He was a bit loose with his handling of money. He was not very disciplined with how he spoke.

He wasn't a perfect Christian. And yet, when the Muslims came and captured him, they asked him to deny his faith, and he refused.

And so they beheaded him on the spot. and it got me thinking, you know, we don't have to be, we're not all perfect, we're not all shining examples, but we're called to be faithful, we're called to follow him.

[24 : 43] and Jesus loves us even if we're not perfect. And look at this verse, it's present tense, he loves us now.

Jesus not only loved us at the cross and where he paid for our sins, and that's where we see his love most clearly, but he loves us now, even as we muddle through, as imperfect as we are.

What a thought, what a thought. and he's freed us from our sins by his blood.

You see, sin had enslaved all people, trapping everyone in their own rebellion against God. And Jesus freed his people from that by his death, through his blood, as the verse says.

So it might look like Christian people are oppressed and downtrodden, but the reality is that Christian people are the only ones who are truly free.

[26 : 16] And we are freed for a purpose, to be a kingdom and priests, to serve God. Some of you were here at the Taste and See services, and we talked about a verse in 1 Peter that tells us about being a kingdom of priests.

But you are a chosen people. This is talking to Christian people. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, his wonderful light.

I memorized the wrong version. We saw that this priestly role, royal priestly role, was originally given to God's people in the Old Testament.

In Exodus chapter 19, God's people are called to be a royal priesthood. And we have a role that is both royal and mediatory.

That is, mediating God to other people, bringing God to other people. So we have royal status with Jesus, but also we have a role of bringing him to others.

[28 : 04] You see, the point is that God's people, the people of Jesus his son, have a place, a part, a role in God's purposes.

And this is repeated throughout the book of Revelation. We'll see that God has purpose for his people. He has things that he wants his people to do and to be and to stand for.

And that truth is a wonderful fact for us. We aren't just saved for heaven when we die, although we are, but we certainly have much more than that.

We're saved for God's glory right now, to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Can you see how wonderful that would be for a church facing persecution? if you've got pressure on your faith, to know that God has his purposes for you is wonderfully encouraging.

[29 : 30] God has a purpose in what you are going through. And that's not just a word for them back there, back then, it's a word for us now.

God has a purpose in what we are going through. There's meaning in hanging on and remaining true to your faith. And that meaning is God's glory.

To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. God has to come to God's God.

But Jesus is not only the Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. He's the one who's freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father.

And he is also coming back again. Verse 7 tells us. Look, he's coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who have pierced him.

[30 : 39] And all the peoples on the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be. Amen. When he does come back, everyone will see him.

Now we don't know how that's going to work. We aren't told how that works. But everyone will know. and it will be just like what the prophet Zechariah prophesied in our first reading.

Because Zechariah prophesied that when people see Jesus, sinners who have not repented will weep and wail.

It will be great news for those who love him. But really bad news. if you don't.

All the peoples, even the Romans, the ones who are giving God's church such a hard time, will face the judgment of this coming king.

[31 : 52] So shall it be. Amen. Yes, it is true and sure. In a world where there's so much fake news, Jesus is the one we can look to for hope now and justice to come.

Isn't that great? So be encouraged. Hold true. Don't doubt or waver. Jesus will triumph regardless of what it looks like now.

And then God speaks. There are only two times in the book of Revelation when God speaks. Right now at the very start of the book and right at the very end of the book.

He begins it and he will complete it. And that's what he says. I am the Alpha and Omega. Alpha and Omega are the first letter of the Greek alphabet and the last letter of the Greek alphabet.

He's saying I'm the A to Z. I'm everything. I'm the start, I'm the beginning and I'm the end. He is the eternal one.

[33 : 14] The almighty who was, who is and who will be. Past, present, future as we saw before. The one who will bring grace and peace to his people.

What encouragement. What encouragement. We may not be under persecution in the same way as the church in the time of the writing of Revelation.

But there are pressures on us. There are discouragements. There is the need for grace and the grace and peace that the book of Revelation brings.

You see, we need to hear from the one who is, who was and is to come. We need to hear from the spirit who draws near to the churches.

We need to hear from Jesus. The Jesus who freed us, who has given us royal status and the privilege to serve even God himself.

[34 : 32] we need to remember and look forward to his coming and final triumph over all things that are against him and against us.

We need to have a better view of who he is, what he has done and what he will do so that we can be comforted and better able to praise him.

we need the eternal and almighty God. We need the message of the book of Revelation. I'm so looking forward to studying the book of Revelation together.

Let's pray. Lord God, our Father, you who are the one who was and is and is to come, we look to you and we thank you for the grace and peace that you bring to our lives.

Through the Lord Jesus, through his death on the cross for us, through his rising to life and the hope that we have through eternity, for the things that you have purposed us for, for your glory in this life.

[36 : 00] We pray that we would learn more and more to trust you, to look to you, and to know you as our God. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus.

Amen. Amen.