

Jesus Christ Among His Churches I - Evening Service

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[0 : 00] It's wonderful to have you here this evening. My name is Aaron. I don't think I introduced myself. I'm Aaron. I look after this service. If you're new, I'd love to meet you. Just come and say hi afterwards.

So, we are doing a series in Revelation. It's just started. This is week two. It's an amazing book. It's a book we need. John, who wrote this book here, he wrote it during a time of immense persecution against the Christians under Roman rules.

He had the Roman Emperor Nero who started the trend of persecuting Christians, and then the Emperor Domitian really kicked it into high gear. So, the storm clouds were brewing over these seven small churches in modern-day Turkey.

They were sort of a fairly... I can only imagine they were a fairly terrified group of people. Small, weak, persecuted minority.

And how did these Christians face their persecution? Well, it would seem that most Christians faced their persecution. Or a lot of Christians, anyway, faced their persecution very well. History tells us that the more the Roman Empire killed Christians, the more the church grew.

[1 : 15] So, they're killing these Christians, and the Romans are thinking... They're watching these Christians die with courage, and they're questioning, why? How is this happening? Well, part of the answer is people like John.

John gave them something to face it. What John gave them was an exalted view of Jesus. A view that gave them courage not to wilt under pressure, and a courage to die well, which seems many Christians did.

And so, what we're going to do is we're going to look at the vision of Jesus tonight. And the passage, I'm going to focus mostly on chapter 1, 9 to 20. And it sort of breaks up really nicely into three kind of groups.

It's basically this. It's the first little section is the commissioning of John. The next little section is what John saw. And the last little section is what Jesus said.

So, the commissioning, what John saw, what Jesus said. So, let's begin with the commissioning of John. This is verses 9 to 11. We see how, basically, the book of Revelation came to pass.

[2 : 23] John starts by identifying himself with the folks he's writing to, and he says, listen, I know. I know what you're going through. He indicates that, you know, they're both, he says, we're both in the midst of tribulation, which is, the word tribulation is a technical word.

It's not like normal life problems, like, I don't have nice clothes, or I can't find a girlfriend, or whatever, which are, you know, those are problems, sure. But this is apocalyptic problems.

That's what it means, apocalyptic problems. I don't know if you've ever had an apocalyptic problem before. It's really, really bad. But, anyway, John says, he says, look, we're partners in this thing.

And he reminds them, he goes, in fact, just as a reminder, I'm on this, like, little volcanic rock of an island, in the middle of nowhere.

Like, you know, if it was a Gulf island, it would be, like, savoury island. Like, it's really hard to get to. And he's going, I'm there. The Romans put me there. And they put me there because he was preaching about a king.

And when you're an emperor like Domitian, who's trying to sell the idea of that the ruler of Rome is a god, and there's some other guy wandering around quite successfully saying, well, actually, no.

[3 : 39] There is one god. His name is Jesus. Well, that's not going to go down very well with Domitian. So Domitian's going to get rid of him. But he's not going to kill him because that will cause

a riot. So he just goes, well, let's just put him on savoury island there for a while, and he'll be okay. Patmos Island, excuse me. Patmos. Which you can go, you can visit still, actually, Patmos. Apparently the local cheese pies are a must-eat. Don't tell me you don't learn anything here. Right. So John reminds them. He goes, look, we're in this together. We're partners in this. We're brothers and sisters in this. And then he reminds them that they're part of a kingdom, a kingdom that is greater than the kingdom of Rome.

So endure. Stay the course. Remain faithful. And then he begins to tell them something that will help them endure. He goes, let me tell you something I saw.

Let me tell you something I saw. And then he describes his commissioning, though. Before he gets to that, he tells us sort of the exact commissioning, but it's really interesting. It's very important to notice verse 10 there.

[4 : 45] John says, I heard a voice. We don't want to quickly pass over that line there. This is really important. I heard a voice. See, the vision that John had of Jesus did not come from inside of him.

This was not John's musings on the divine. This was not John's Summa Theologica, right? This is not a collection of his thoughts. He wasn't like writing down, I've got some thoughts.

Let me write them down and I'll send them to you. Why don't you read them out at church during the announcements? They're quite good. No, there's none of that. It's like, it's, it's, it's.

God spoke to him. God gave him a vision. He was praying. It was a Sunday. And he was given this vision of Jesus. This is why we should pay immense attention to these words, because their origin is not human.

Their origin is divine. Anyway, so that's how John introduces the vision. That's section one. Section two. What did John actually see? So remember, the churchgoers are facing a very real prospect of death for their faith.

[5 : 58] And later on, in a chapter or two, we're going to hear about this guy that died. John writes, I'm sorry about this guy that died. So, these churches are facing very real prosecution.

Now, what vision of Christ is going to steady their faith, is going to strengthen them? How is Christ going to be presented so that we would recognize his centrality in the universe?

And there's lots of wonderful pictures of Christ in the Bible. If you just sort of think about the gospels, there's the shepherd king, Jesus with his flock. There's the kind Jesus holding children. There's compassionate Jesus touching a leper.

There's tragic, tragic slash victorious Jesus on the cross. There's the philosopher Jesus debating Nicodemus. They're all wonderful pictures of Jesus.

There's all true pictures of Jesus. Ones we should know. This is not the vision of Jesus that John gets. He gets a very different picture. It's Christ, Lord of the cosmos.

[6 : 55] And it's a picture that's meant to put our whole lives into proportion. So John has this vision of Jesus. And if we look at the elements, if you just slide your eyes over that passage there, look at the elements described.

John says, it was like the Son of Man. It was like a long robe and a white sash. He had white hair and his feet were bronze.

And his voice was like water, like roaring water. And he held seven stars in his hands. And his face shone. In his mouth there was a sword. Now remember, these are symbols. They're pointing to something.

Jesus doesn't have bronze feet. John is trying. John is describing them like that because when you're trying to describe the indescribable, you use symbols.

So this is not John. Like he's not recording what happened to him like a modern day journalist. He's like a painter. He's painting a picture for us. A picture that's rich with meaning. So what do these things actually mean?

[8 : 00] All this description of Jesus. What's it all about? Well, it all points to the amazingness of Christ. And for us, we hear that list and we sort of go, it's just bizarre. It just sounds odd. But for the Old Testament reader, they're like, what, what, what?

It's amazing, amazing, amazing. See, John was using a lot of Old Testament symbols to paint his picture of Jesus. And we'll look at them individually quite quickly. First, the robe.

Who wore robes back in the days? Priests. The priests wore robes. You know the Latin word for priest is pontifex? It's actually an engineering term.

It means bridge builder. Bridge builder. That's what a priest does. This is what Christ does. He brings together God and humans through his work on the cross. But you see, it's not just any old robe.

It's a long robe. Why does it mention the fact that it's long? Because in the ancient days, back in the days, the longer the robe, the higher the status. You remember Isaiah 6.

[9 : 03] When Isaiah has his vision of God, he says, I saw the Lord sitting on the throne high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. It was a really big robe. So Jesus, that first symbol, Jesus is a priest.

The son of man. We could spend a lot of time on this. We'll do two sentences. It's referencing Daniel 7. And in Daniel 7, in that chapter, it talks about this man, God, person, figure, who will rule the universe.

And then Jesus is described as having white hair. Again, Daniel 7, but in this case, it's not this God, man, universe. It's the ancient of days in Daniel 7. It's described the same terms.

And then Jesus says, and John says that Jesus has a voice like rushing water. That's Ezekiel. That's Ezekiel. That's a phrase, the same words used to describe the Lord.

So do you see what's happening here? Basically, Jesus is being described in ways that only God is normally described. I don't know if you guys remember the book, The Da Vinci Code.

[10 : 14] It came out like, I don't know, 10, 15 years ago. It really shook some Christians' faith. And it shook it because it questioned the divinity of Christ.

And it did it in this kind of winsome, faux, scholarly kind of way. There's a scene in the book where the main character is speaking to, you know, Gandalf.

I can't remember his name. But I know, I know. Who's Gandalf? What's his name? Whatever his name is. Right. So he's, the main character is speaking to this professor who's the actor who plays, you know.

And anyway, here's what the professor says to the main character. He says, Given what we've just read in the book of Revelation, It is completely wrong to say that the early church thought Jesus was just a man.

The early church, this was written within the lifetime of Jesus living. The early church believed Jesus to be God.

[11 : 50] Now we'll keep going. John says that Jesus' eyes were like flames. What's that all about? Well, Jesus doesn't look at us. We're not spectacles to him. We're not a spectacle to him.

He looks into us. These are eyes that see through us. That see past all shams, all facades, all pretenses. And the eyes that purify fire.

And the Bible is a purifying thing. So these eyes that look into us and expose us, they expose us and they lead us to righteousness.

Okay, what about these feet? These bronzed feet? This is from Daniel 7 and it talks about, Daniel 7, Daniel 10 sorry, it talks about a messenger from God who, who, who in the vision in Daniel has these bronzed feet.

And the girdle, the sash thing, that's what a king wears. And the sword in the mouth, that's a nod to Isaiah 10. It's a prediction that there's a Messiah to come and he's going to judge. He's going to make everything right.

[12 : 52] It's a very interesting image, I think. Because in this quite beleaguered community, terrorized by the Roman sword, maybe some of them would have been tempted to take up the sword. But the Bible says that the only weapon Jesus uses is the sword of his word.

That's what that's trying to say. It's his truth. And we know this, it's true, that his word does conquer and correct. And it cuts through willfulness and through rebellion and pride and it points us to righteousness.

So that was a very, very quick survey of that. But what's it, what is just basically what's it saying to us? So you have this man, God, priest, king, judge, figure, whose weapon is truth, who will save his people.

That's what the, that's what the picture says. And it also says he holds seven stars in his right hand. The Roman emperor at Domitian had a coin minted that featured his late son reaching up to seven stars on the coin.

And perhaps, perhaps that's John appropriating this kind of Roman propaganda and saying, reach up. I can just hold it in my hand. I'll hold these seven stars in my hand like a, like a piece of fruit. So

here's our betrayal of Christ.

[14:03] The true king, the judge of all, the high priest, the Lord of the cosmos. So why is it important to know this?

Why is it important that this is communicated? Because if it is true, if it is true that Jesus is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, as it says here, then we start with Jesus and we finish with Jesus.

All our thinking should start with Jesus. If it's true that Jesus, he was God, then in the beginning was God, not in the beginning was us.

It's not I think, therefore I am. It's, it's God, therefore I am. It's God as the beginning, God as the end, God's middle. It's all Jesus and it changes everything.

Should change everything. In chapter 3 of Revelation, we read that. After the end of chapter 2, there are seven letters, seven short letters to these individual churches, sort of pointing out various things and encouraging them or admonishing them.

[15:17] And we sort of jumped to the last one there, the church in Laodicea. And the message is, Team Laodicea, you are neither hot nor cold, you're lukewarm.

You're all about you. And this church needed to be shocked out of its self-centeredness. It was a church that was pretty impressed with itself. And I don't think you shock a church like this by saying, stop that.

Stop being so into yourself. No, you have to replace, and this is true, I'll just let this sit with you, right? You can do this what you like, right? That you have to replace the object of their affection for something far greater.

So John gives them a picture of Jesus that you can't be indifferent about. You cannot be indifferent about this Jesus right here that has just been described.

He gives them a picture of Jesus that makes all of their goals and all of their treasures and all of their wealth and all of their plans look very trivial.

[16:24] So, John describes what he sees. That was section 2. Now, the last section. 17 to 20.

This king, this priest, this judge of all, the one who has come to save, has something to say. And before Jesus speaks, though, John falls down as if he is dead, it says.

In the Bible, when people get any kind of, like, in the presence of God, they generally fall down. They generally don't go, yay! Best day ever!

Can't wait to tell the guys at work. No, they fall down. They're mortified. I quoted Isaiah 6 before. You probably know this. It's a famous passage. I see the Lord seated on the throne, and the train of Israel fills the temple with glory. And what happens to Isaiah? What does he do? What's his response to this vision? He says, woe is me.

[17:27] I am undone. See, when we face God in that situation, I can only imagine that we would be overwhelmed by dread at the holiness of God and that we're instantly aware of sort of all the darkness in our hearts.

And we would fall down. And we will fall down. But the scene doesn't end with John crying on the ground and Jesus walking away going, ooh, it's a bit awkward.

Nor does it end with Jesus just sort of in this sort of, you know, power pose. Look, I've got my stars. You remember the scene in the Lord of the Rings where Frodo offers Galadriel the ring of power. She's like the elf queen lady, right? Offers, Frodo says, you can have it if you want. It's an amazing scene. And Galadriel for a moment processes what that would be like to have this ring of power. And she says these words here. Instead of a dark lord, you would have a queen, beautiful and terrible as the dawn, treacherous as the sea, stronger than the foundations of the earth.

[18:38] All shall love me and despair. It's a great scene. That's not what's happening here. Right? You like to see how I did that?

It's clever, right? See, Christ is not like, we don't get this scene, so Christ is like, look at me and weep. No, it's so tender, the scene here.

It's, let me help you up. Let me, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. I've got something I want to tell you. And it's something amazing. And it's going to help a lot of people.

It's very tender. Jesus reaches out his right, it's interesting, reaches out his right hand. This is the one holding part of the universe. I'll just put that down. Don't be afraid.

He reassures him. I just think that's a beautiful tender picture here. And let's look at the words that Jesus says. Verses 17, that's when he, do not fear.

[19 : 46] And why shouldn't John fear? Because Jesus explains, I've defeated your greatest enemy, death. And he says, you know this is true, because like, you know, I'm alive, right?

I'm alive. I was dead and now I'm alive. And he uses this picture of holding keys. He says, I've got the keys to death in Hades, which is a fantastic image to use. Because up until the resurrection of Christ, death was a door that you entered.

You never got out of that door. There was no way out. And Jesus says, I've got the key to that door. Don't be afraid. And then look what else Jesus says about himself.

He goes, I'm the first and the last. He was there at the beginning. He'll be there at the end. You know, there's been, I looked this up this week. There's been about 40 or 50 major empires in the world over the last sort of two and a half thousand years.

About 40 or 50. All of those empires have gone. The biggest one was a British empire. At one point they had like about 35% of the world's population. If you're British, well done. But all of those empires are gone now.

[20 : 55] But the kingdom that you and I are part of, Jesus is saying to us, is eternal. So this thing that we have, this bond that we have, this will never dissolve.

And this is great news for these persecuted Christians. Because you can imagine that this tiny little group of people here would look up at the Roman Empire and go, Oh, you guys are invincible. Well, they weren't. Now, to give you a very non-scientific example of the comparative influences and staying power of these two empires, the Jesus one and the Roman one, let me ask you a question.

What do we call our children today? We call them Matthew and Mark and Luke and John and Paul and Mary. We call our dogs, Nero. Now, before I finish, I want to point out something that is easy to miss in the passage.

This cosmic king that John sees, this all-ruling, all-judging, all-powerful king, who can hold part of the universe just in his hand here, in the vision, where is he?

[22 : 10] So we have this cosmic vision of this amazing Jesus. Where is he actually hanging out in the passage?

Verse 13, In the midst of the lampstands, who represented the church. In the midst of the lampstands was one like the Son of Man. Jesus was with his churches. Jesus was with his people. In chapter 3, in the letter to the church in Laodicea, where was Jesus? Verse 20, Behold, I stand at the door and knock. He's at the front door. Jesus wants to be with his people.

Even the really slack ones, like the Laodicean church. It's like about the door. I think sometimes we can mistakenly think that that passage is talking to people who are not Christians.

Like it's, Jesus wants to come into your heart. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. The passage is actually talking about Christians. Jesus is trying to get into the front door of a church here.

[23 : 13] This church in Laodicea was fairly wealthy, rather impressed by themselves, as I've already mentioned. The passage says they were blind to the fact that they were in desperate need of God because they were quite a pitiable group of people.

And the amazing thing is Jesus doesn't walk away from them. He's with them at this point. He's knocking on the door. I find that quite comforting. Let me conclude here.

Folks, Christ is the center of all. Christ is the center of all. And if that's not the reality of your life, then good spiritual practices are helpful.

Attending church is that you should be doing that. That's great. Being honest with yourself and your struggles, that's really good. But what we really need, and those things can facilitate that, is we really need the affections of our heart turned to Christ through a profound vision of who Christ really is.

If you have a small view of him, your response to him will be a small response. But if you have a big, profound, and vivid vision of Christ, you can say, Jesus, here's my whole life.

[24 : 46] It's all yours. Do with it what you want. And you're about to say that under any condition. And giving us this vision of Jesus is what Revelation is about.

Amen.