

## Hear What The Spirit Says 2

We continue our series from the book of Revelation this morning, looking at the message from Jesus to seven churches in what is now modern Turkey. We believe Revelation was written toward the end of the first century by the apostle John who had been exiled by the Roman Emperor Domitian to the island of Patmos, about 40 miles off the coast of Turkey. (Here is a map showing Patmos and the seven churches to whom the letters were sent. The cities follow the path a messenger would likely follow if he had been sent to those seven cities.)

The Emperor Nero had started persecuting the church, blaming them for a devastating fire in Rome and other crimes. Now the Emperor Domitian has taken it to a new level, a more systematic and widespread persecution. Businesses were being boycotted, believers denied jobs, some were thrown in prison, others exiled like John, and some had been killed. Persecution was getting worse but it wasn't the only problem facing the church at the end of the first century. False teachers were spreading error, preaching false doctrines about Jesus, about his divinity, about the faith, and sinful practices and immorality had crept into the church and into the lifestyle of believers. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Persecution, theological error and sin. This seems to be the devil's MO, his method of operation. **John Stott says the attack on the seven churches was “physical, through a persecuting Emperor and his deputies...intellectual, through false cults, and now moral, through sub-Christian ethical standards. These were the devils' three strategies...In every age it has been the same.”** We see the same attacks against the church around the world. Some are suffering severe persecution today, being put to death for the faith. Some are battling against teaching that denies or compromises the authority of God's word, others are battling against efforts to lure the church into moral compromise and the embracing of immorality. The message of the Scripture remains that we are not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the Spirit as we live in obedience to God's word. The message of Jesus to the seven churches is still a relevant message to and for the church today.

Before we get to the message to the first church, we hear from John as he tells us of the events that led to this message from Jesus to the churches. **“I John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit...” Revelation 1:9**

John, the beloved apostle, was their leader, the bishop over the churches and he reminds them that he is one of them. “I’m in this with you and we are in this together. John says, “I’m your brother and companion in three things. In the tribulation, the suffering that we are enduring as followers of Jesus. I’m your brother and companion in the kingdom as well – in the life, power, joy, glory, peace, consolation, the wonder of the Kingdom of God. It’s not all suffering, it’s also peace and joy in the Holy Spirit as well. I’m your brother and companion in the patient endurance, the perseverance that is a part of being a follower of Jesus and living in a sinful world.

This is where we live. Bryan Davenport said, “We live in the tension of patience between the power of Heaven and the persecution on earth.” This is where the saints in Turkey were. This is where believers have always been, living between times, between heaven and earth. We are part of a heavenly kingdom and that kingdom is manifested here, now, and at the same time, it is not yet. Not yet is every enemy vanquished. Satan, sickness, sin and death have been defeated by Jesus, by his death and resurrection and ascension to heaven, but folks are still being damaged by sin and people are still sick and still dying. We live in between, in the tension of patience between the power of heaven and the persecution and troubles of earth. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, but John and the seven churches and all of us, we are living in the middle, between the beginning and the end. We are living in the in between.

John says “I was exiled to the island of Patmos.” He was exiled there because he refused to deny the truth of God’s Word or to deny the true testimony about Jesus. “I was exiled but on the Lord’s day I was in the Spirit.” Exiled and in the Spirit! I think that’s a great sermon title. Persecuted, isolated, cut off from everyone, but still in the Spirit, still rejoicing, still focused on Jesus. Exiled, but still prayerful, still hopeful. Exiled, but I know Jesus is still with me!

**“On the Lord’s day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said, ‘Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.’ Revelation 1:10-11**

John heard a voice like a trumpet. Remember the context, the setting. It’s 60+ years after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension into Heaven. 60 years and the church has grown older, complacent. 60 years and Jesus’ promise to come back hasn’t been fulfilled. The 60+

year old church is tempted to do the same things the 2000 year old church is doing. They were focused on themselves, on the persecution, on their trouble and they had taken their eyes off of Jesus. They were concerned about themselves and not the lost, not about spreading the gospel. Carbondale is an 80+ year old church. It's easy to fall asleep, tempting to rest on the past, to allow ourselves to be distracted by things around us, tempted to focus more on ourselves than on Jesus. And then suddenly, John gets roused to attention.

I'm not going to startle you the way John was startled, but I asked Bob Speer to help me. I'm warning you in advance, but imagine if you are quietly praying, in the Spirit as John said, when suddenly you hear a trumpet blast behind you! (Have Bob play). Suddenly roused, interrupted, startled. You're going to stop doing whatever you were doing and pay attention. The trumpet was like a herald, announcing something regal, something important, something significant was coming. The trumpet is meant to rouse us from sleep – it sounds reveille in the morning. Jesus' voice was like a trumpet blast to John and to the church. "Wake up! I'm not dead. I'm not hiding. I'm here and I've got something to say if you've got ears to hear!"

The voice that sounded like a trumpet now says, "Write on a scroll what you are about to see and send it to the churches." Those seven major churches were part of John's parish. These were churches that looked to him as their bishop, their pastor and overseer. He knew the churches and cared about them.

**John writes, "I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like brass glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance." Revelation 1:12-16**

What in the world? With John's description of this figure whom he describes as someone "like a son of man" we get launched into the rich, amazing imagery of Revelation. Eugene Peterson says we need to view John as a theologian, a poet and a pastor. Those three things will help us understand what we read. N.T. Wright, a British theologian and pastor says, "a great deal of this book is about ideas made visible, on the one hand, and scripture made real on the

other.” Ideas made visible is a pretty good way of describing what we read in Revelation. How do you make this idea, this spiritual truth come to life? How can you picture this idea in order to describe it to generations of churches? It’s truth, but it’s expressed in figures, images, sights and sounds and smells. It’s like the Lord says to John, “Let me show you what faithfulness looks like. Now write down what you see and hear and smell. Let me show you what wisdom looks like, what sacrifice looks like, what love looks like, what prayer looks like, now write down what you see. Let me show you what authority and dominion looks like, what the beginning and the end all rolled together looks like, now write down what you see.” That’s what John is commanded to do and that’s what he does and that’s how we then receive these images.

John turned to see the voice that was speaking and the first thing he saw was seven golden lampstands. Not a menorah, like the seven-lamped lampstand that was in the temple, but seven separate lampstands which he is told later represent the seven churches and standing in the middle of the lampstands is one like a son of man.

We know this to be a heavenly depiction and description of Jesus, the risen, ascended Savior and Lord. John’s vision of him blends different regal, righteous and glorious images from the Scripture. He describes him as one like the Son of Man. This was the familiar phrase that Jesus most often used in referring to himself. We hear Son of Man and we think of a humble figure. I’ve always said it identified the full humanity of Jesus who was fully God and fully man, which it does. But it seems when the Jews heard that phrase, it reminded them of Daniel’s prophecy of one coming with the clouds of heaven. In Daniel’s vision he saw “one like a son of man and he came to the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples and nations worshiped him...and his kingdom will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13-14. The Son of Man was an image of importance to them. It suggested something entirely different to them. Messianic, powerful, authoritative. It was always confusing then as to how the one who called himself the Son of Man would be eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, or touching lepers and the sick, or wasting time blessing children. Why wasn’t he spending time with the people of power and influence like the Pharisees, the Saducees, the scribes and teachers of the law? And how could it be that the Son of Man, ends up nailed to a Roman cross? The image of Jesus as Son of Man gets all messed up.

How do we see Jesus? John is the last living disciple. He knew Jesus, lived with him. He was described as the disciple whom Jesus loved. How did he see Jesus from his perspective in

exile on Patmos? Did he still see him as the miracle worker he knew, the Savior? Or had time and circumstances altered his view? How did the suffering church in Turkey see him? Did they just see him as the poor broken Savior hanging on the cross? Did they see him as the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep? Did they see him in his gentleness but also in his weakness, vulnerable, the suffering servant of Isaiah? Did they see him as the Son of Man in power, like Daniel did? How did the church see him and given the circumstances, how would Jesus reveal himself to bring encouragement to the church and to John, his disciple? When John looks around, the Jesus he sees is not someone to be pitied or to be ignored, instead, in the words of N. T. Wright, the Jesus he sees is “mind-blowing.”

Before we know what he looks like, we know what he does by how he is dressed. He is dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet with a sash around his chest. He is wearing the garment worn by the high priest, or a king or a judge and Jesus is all of those things. For sure Jesus is our high priest. He is our mediator. He presents God to us and us to God. Eugene Peterson said “If the son of Man does the work of priest, there is much to be in awe of but nothing to be afraid of...”

He was wearing a golden sash like a king. His hair was white like snow which speaks of dignity and wisdom. He is dressed as the priest, as the king who rules over all, as the judge who alone can dispense justice and judgment. His eyes were like blazing fire. In the intensity of his scrutiny, nothing escapes his vision, nothing and no one can hide from his sight. Peterson said, **“Christ’s gaze penetrates and purifies. He doesn’t look at us, he looks into us. We are not a spectacle to Christ, we are invaded by him.” Eugene Peterson** His eye is on us, his church.

John says his feet were like polished bronze, strong, unmovable. This suggests nothing can shake him or remove him from his place. The rule of Christ is built upon a base, upon feet that have been tried by fire and cannot be shaken or broken. His voice, which had roused John from his place like a trumpet now sounded like the roar of rushing waters. Perhaps like the breakers that crashed onto the shores of Patmos or maybe like the sound of a waterfall. Before we know the specific words he is speaking, we know the sound of his voice. It is commanding, awesome. His voice and therefore his words are not to be ignored, they are to be heard, heeded, responded to, obeyed. Whoever has ears, let them hear what our Lord the Spirit is saying to us! Are you getting the picture, the image that John and the churches would see? We aren’t talking

about some little forgotten rabbi from Nazareth that was executed by the Romans. We are talking about the king of kings and Lord of Lords. Commanding. Mind blowing!

He held seven stars in his right hand. Mythology said the stars controlled our fate but Jesus holds the stars in his hand. From his mouth came a two-edged sword, his word, powerful, sharp. His face shown like the sun in all its brilliance. It reminds you of what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration as his glory was revealed. His very countenance was too much to look upon - radiant, supreme, overwhelming.

John says, **“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.’” Revelation 1:17-18**

John was one of the closest disciples to Jesus, one of the inner circle of Peter, James and John. John was with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration, had seen the risen Christ on Easter morning and afterwards, watched him ascend into heaven, but now, seeing Jesus in all his splendor and glory, it was too much for John and he fell like a dead man. Jesus placed his hand on John. A familiar touch and familiar words, words that John had often heard Him speak, “Don’t be afraid.” John had heard Jesus say it before in hopeless situations, to grieving parents of a little girl who had died, to grieving sisters who lost their brother, to frightened disciples in a boat in a storm, to disciples hiding in an upper room wondering about their future. Now in this moment he says it again. “Do not be afraid”. Why?

Here is why you have no need to fear. “Because I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead and behold I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and hell. I’ve got the keys!” Do you hear me? He has the keys. Jesus has total authority, dominion and power over life and death and hell itself. Jesus is Lord over everything, Lord over all! He has the keys to whatever is trying to lock us in or lock us out! No door, nothing can stop him or keep him out. He has the keys!

And look where we find him. Verse 13 says He is standing among the lampstands! Jesus tells John **“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Revelation 1:19-20.** The angels of the churches, we

don't know exactly what that means. Perhaps those are angels that guard the churches, perhaps he is referring to the pastors and ministers of the church. But what we do know is that Jesus is standing among the churches. He is right where he wants to be. He is with us, with his church and he has the keys! He is with us and he rules and reigns, forever.

Jesus is setting the context for the message to the church. "I am the first and the last, the risen, ruling, reigning living Lord. I was dead and behold I am alive forever and I have the keys. Consequently, don't fear the emperor or the powers and dark forces of this world. Don't fear the devil. Don't fear death. Don't compromise with the unholy. Don't compromise with sin. Be diligent about the things of God!"

Are you hearing what John is telling us? Are you hearing what Jesus is telling us? Are you hearing what the Spirit is saying? This one like the son of man, this Jesus the Christ, this faithful witness, the first born of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, the one who loved us and has released us from our sins by his own blood, the one who has made us a kingdom of priests, the one to whom belongs the glory and authority and dominion forever, the one who is coming with clouds, the one who is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, the Almighty, this Son of Man and the Ancient of Days, the Living One, the one whose voice is like a trumpet that awakens us from our slumber, whose eyes are like blazing fire, the one who was dead but is alive forevermore, the one who holds the keys of death and hell, the one who holds the stars in his hand, the one who stands with us and walks among the lampstands, his churches, He is here and He has something to say! He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches! I think we had better listen and pay attention don't you?

What is the Spirit saying to you? Is he calling you to a closer walk with Jesus? Is he calling you to repentance? Is he calling you to cast your cares upon the One who is with you in your trouble, in your hopelessness, in your despair? You may feel exiled like John, cast out, cast off, rejected, but hear what the Spirit is saying, "Jesus is with you!" Be encouraged!