

Hear What The Spirit Says Part 1

We are starting a new sermon series today. If I asked you what the final words of Jesus were to his disciples, his last words to the church, what would you say? Where would you turn? To the gospels? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? That's where we find most of the words of Jesus, right? Or we know Luke gives us some final words in the first chapter of Acts. "Don't leave Jerusalem until you receive the gift of Holy Spirit baptism. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:8 The bible says "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight." Sounds like last words to me. But is there a later word, a later message from Jesus to us? A message that comes to the church say 65 years after his ascension into heaven, 65 years after Pentecost, after the gospel spreads and after churches are established in different cultures and different nations, after Gentiles as well as Jews become part of the church. What if we could hear from Jesus himself about what mattered in the life of the church? We can. We did. Turns out his last word to the church isn't found in the gospels or in Acts, but in the last book of the New Testament. The book called Revelation. Jesus sends a message to his church. Seven churches to be exact. Each message includes this command: **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** We believe the word he spoke to churches at the end of the first century still has relevance for us today. We believe his word to the church is timeless. This is the word of God. It's not just what he said to the church but what he is saying to the church. To the church in every century, every culture, the Spirit speaks and the obligation falls on us, "to hear what the Spirit says to the churches." For the next eight weeks I want us to open our spiritual ears and our minds to hear what Jesus, by His Holy Spirit, is saying to the church.

Turn to Revelation 1. (I must tell you out of respect for my New Testament professor at ORU, Dr. Jerry Horner, there is no "s" on the end of the word Revelation. It is not multiple revelations. Only one.)

Let me give you a bit of background. We believe the author of the book was the apostle John. "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." John had been exiled to this little Greek island in the Aegean Sea, about 35 miles

West of Modern Turkey (what was then called Asia Minor), by the Emperor Domitian. Most scholars estimate the time of the writing around the year 95 ACE.

The Emperor Domitian had unleashed violent persecution against the church. He had ordered all citizens of the Roman Empire to proclaim him as a god of the world. Jews had at times been unofficially exempted from the order because everyone knew they worshiped only one God. Because Christians had been considered a sect of the Jews they had been protected by that unofficial exemption, however, there was growing tension between the Jews that had rejected Jesus as Messiah and the followers of Christ. Jewish Christians were no longer welcome in the synagogue and that exposed them to persecution. The Jews figured “why should we provide protection for these heretics from Judaism” so they were happy to report them to the Roman authorities. Now the Christians, even if they were Jewish, couldn’t prove they were Jewish because they were no longer accepted in the synagogue! In addition, the church had grown to the point that pagan temples were being forsaken and it threatened the businesses that had grown up around these false religions and their temples that had been built throughout Asia. Christianity was bad for business. (An example is what happened in Ephesus in Acts 19. We will talk about that more next week.) The bottom line, Christians were being persecuted, forced to worship Caesar’s image, to offer sacrifice to him and call Caesar Lord. It’s during this time John is exiled to the island of Patmos. The authorities were hoping to silence him and minimize his influence in the churches of the region. It’s also in this climate that Jesus speaks to His church to strengthen their resistance and their resolve against persecution and to comfort and encourage them. He also speaks to correct them, to point them to what is truly important.

John is given this word for each of seven leading churches. The letters remind them that Jesus is King and Lord alone, that he is coming again, that he is victor and he will share his victory with all who continue to trust in Him and endure to the end! Before we study what was said to the churches, we need to look at the One who is doing the speaking and understand a bit of the context in which he speaks.

“The revelation of 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, who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.”
Revelation 1:1-2

Notice the way it begins – the revelation of Jesus Christ. What is the purpose of the book of Revelation? To give us something to argue about with Christian friends? To give us a mystery to solve every few years, like a biblical game of Clue with new characters and countries to suggest. Hitler and Mussolini, Stalin, then Henry Kissinger... “I think it’s Putin with France’s Macron as the false prophet...” It’s the Illuminati and Donald Trump... The point of the book is stated in the first verse – The Revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the subject of this book! He’s the central focus. It’s not about trumpets and bowls and seals and white horses. John uses that kind of imagery as the book unfolds, but it’s all about Jesus. John says **“For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Revelation 19:10.** If Jesus gets lost in your study of biblical prophecy and end time events and when or if it’s going to take place or who the world players are, then you’ve missed the whole point. It’s about Jesus.

John says this testimony has been given to him to share. God the Father gave this revelation to Jesus the Son. Jesus made it known by giving it to an angel to deliver to John who faithfully records all that’s said and delivers it to the church, “his servants.” John testifies, verifies, (as he did in 1 John 1:2), that this is true and accurate. The plan is to speak to “his servants”, those who are fully committed to Christ. He is speaking to them to show them the things that must soon take place. It’s hard to say what he means by soon since it’s been 1900 years and some of these things have not happened yet. If nothing less, it suggests a certain approach to handling this word from Jesus. We are to be ready, watching, attentive and careful to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. There is a blessing added as well.

“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” Revelation 1:3

There is a blessing, there is favor upon those who read, hear and take to heart what is written. To every believer Jesus says, “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says.” Not just the words of Revelation, but all of the Word of God. We need to read and hear and take to heart the word of God. We need to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying through His Word and even more so because the time is near.

Let me add a word about John’s phrase that the time is near. We don’t know when the Lord will return. No one knows the day or the hour but certainly, as Bro. McQueen used to say, “It’s later than it’s ever been!” Whenever the end will come, whenever the rapture of the church, whenever the second coming of Christ will occur, it is certain that we are closer than any

generation has ever been. Whatever else we draw from this statement, we should understand that his coming will be unexpected and we should live prepared, ready at any moment, anticipating his return and busying ourselves with the work and business of His kingdom until he returns.

John extends this greeting now, making clear who the letter or the message is to and gives us a greater understanding of the One who is sending the revelation. Imagine if you are suffering persecution, threatened by everyone around you because of your faith in Jesus Christ, you don't know who you can trust, your future is dark and uncertain, and then you get this word of encouragement from John and he says, by the Holy Spirit this is a message from the triune God, from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Look at this.

“John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” Revelation 1:4-6

It's addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Asia was what the Roman province of Asia Minor was called. It is now the area of Western Turkey. Christianity was flourishing at that time in the area. These were likely house churches and there were far more than seven churches in the area, but these churches were in prominent and strategic cities along a kind of arc. From these cities the message could spread throughout the region.

Grace and peace from the Father, the one who is and who was and who is to come – the I Am - and from the seven spirits before his throne. This is not referring to seven distinct spirits, but likely a reference to the sevenfold Spirit of God. The prophet Isaiah refers to the Spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (Is. 11:2).

Grace and peace from the Father, and from the Holy Spirit of God and from Jesus, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Think about this again. You are facing persecution, unable to work, to buy food, subject to arrest, prison, torture, death. Now to a suffering, frightened church comes this word of encouragement. There is grace and peace for you in your trouble. The one you serve, the one for whom you are suffering, he is the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is the

faithful witness, i.e. his very existence is a testimony to his power, his authority, his victory. Don't be frightened by soldiers that threaten you with death. Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. He rose from the dead, the first of many to follow, trust Him. Death isn't final, because of Jesus, life is final!

He is the ruler over the kings of the earth. Domitian says he is a god, but he is going to die and be forgotten, but Jesus lives and rules and reigns. Temples are built for the worship of the Emperor and for the worship of Artemis and other gods, but Jesus is king and Lord over all. He is the king of all those who will read this letter and who refuse to bow to any earthly Caesar or king. In any age, in every age, our allegiance belongs to Him, the king of kings. Not to a party, not to a president, not to a country or a nation, but to Jesus!

What does John say? "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father." He's talking about Jesus. He loves us! Do you hear that church? Child of God that's suffering, that's being persecuted, that feels forgotten and abandoned. "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his own blood." By his own blood, his personal sacrifice, He has released us from our sin and has made us to be a kingdom and priests. John is reminding us that Jesus didn't just save us from something, he saved us for something. He saved us for a reason and a purpose, to be agents and emissaries of his kingdom and priests to serve and worship Him. You've got a reason for living. You've got a purpose. You may be living in Domitian's Rome, or in Trump's America, but you belong to a heavenly kingdom. You're an emissary of the King of Kings. That's where your ultimate allegiance lies and because of that, you don't have to fear the wrath of a Roman Caesar or any other power. Jesus has given us a royal and righteous identity and destiny. To Jesus alone be glory, power, dominion and authority forever and ever! Amen!

If that isn't enough. John says, **"Look, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."** Revelation 1:7

Look, he is coming with the clouds. Jesus made this statement concerning himself in Matthew 24:30, quoting from passages in Daniel 7:13. The angels said of him in Acts 1, that he was caught up in the clouds and they would see him coming in the same way, coming in the clouds, coming in glory. Remember the setting in which these words were spoken in Daniel. The people were in exile, away from home, suffering, but they received this vision of one like

the Son of Man, coming in the clouds of glory and he will be seated next to the ancient of Days, God himself and he will rule and make things right. That was the message in Daniel's time and it was the message John would deliver to a persecuted church and it is the message for the church today. Jesus is coming. This is the message of revelation. This is actually the last words we hear Jesus speak in the Scripture. **“Yes, I am coming soon.” Revelation 22:20.** Amen. Come Lord Jesus! Jesus is coming. This is the good news. This is the blessed hope.

Notice, he isn't coming in secret. John says every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. Who pierced him? The Romans. The Jews who turned him over to the Romans for execution. What about all of us? Our sins pierced him. Everyone who rejects him, we've pierced him. Everyone who persecutes the church has pierced him. Remember Jesus question to Saul, “Why do you persecute me?” Even those who don't believe will see him. Then John says, “All the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” We can hope they are mourning in the sense of repentance but it is more likely they are mourning in fear. There will be a recognition of his Supremacy, his authority as the judge of the universe comes in power and with authority to make things right and those who rejected him will be found without his righteousness and without hope. Craig Keener writes, “No assurance could better encourage suffering believers than the knowledge that Jesus will come to set matters right and the church's oppressors will have to acknowledge the wrong they have done to God's servants.”

Finally, John affirms once again that everything, all of history, rests in God's hands. **“‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” Revelation 1:8** Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is declaring that God is the first and the last, he was - before all things began; by him all things were created; he is in control and he will still be in control throughout eternity. Of his kingdom and his reign there will be no end so don't be afraid. Trust the one who was and is and is to come, the Almighty!

I don't know what is going on in your life. Maybe you feel abandoned, persecuted, maybe it feels like the devil is winning, things are out of control. Stop and hear what the Spirit says. Listen to what he is telling you about Jesus and about your circumstances. You aren't defeated. The Alpha and the Omega will have the final word. Look up, trust and be encouraged.