

What a Sunday!

Special Delivery – Part III

Revelation 1:9-20

Introduction

Author Eugene Peterson wrote these thought-provoking words a few years ago,

God's revelation of Himself is rejected far more often than it is accepted, is dismissed by far more people than embrace it, and has been either attacked or ignored by every major culture or civilization in which it has given its witness: magnificent Egypt, fierce Assyria, beautiful Babylon, artistic Greece, political Rome, enlightened France, Nazi Germany, Renaissance Italy, Marxist Russia, Maoist China, and pursuit-of-happiness America. The community of God's people has survived in all of these cultures and civilizations but always as a minority, always marginal to the mainstream, never statistically significant.ⁱ

The apostle Paul made this very clear to the early church when this new revelation of the gospel was revealed through Christ. Paul said it would provoke spiritual warfare like no one could imagine and they had better suit up for the right kind of battle with the right kind of weapons and the right kind of attitude (Ephesians 6). He said that the gospel would be offensive to the unbeliever (I Corinthians 1:18).

In other words, those who believe that after people die they come back reincarnated as bugs and cows are all right. But those who believe that after death people give an account to the Creator of bugs and cows, are suddenly a problem.

All over the world today, the blood of martyrs is flowing like never before from those who will not deny the singularity of salvation through Jesus Christ

alone. Because of the satanic underpinnings of false religion, the religions of the world can tolerate anything and everything but true, gospel-believing, Christ-exalting Christianity.

Why? Because the cross of Christ; the gospel strikes at the root of mankind's guilty conscience; it reveals the utter futility of self-made religion; it exposes mankind's intuitive, God-created truth about sin; it condemns self-confidence and self-help; it requires humility, for it demands that mankind self-abdicate the throne room of their heart and offer it willingly to a crucified Carpenter who is none other, we believe, than the ascended, one-day-returning, true and living, deity-embodied Lord.

The world desperately wants to believe anything but this truth.

I came across an article in *USA Today*, dated April 2007, about a children's camp designed for children of agnostics, atheists and humanists. Imagine being a counselor in *that* camp! And you thought church camp was tough!

The camp director said, "The mission of our camp is to promote respect for others with different viewpoints, values, and beliefs." This is coded language today, is it not? He really means that he wants to promote respect for everyone but Christians. He tipped his hand later in the interview when he said, "We deplore efforts . . . to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms and to look outside nature for salvation."ⁱⁱ

What this camp director means is, "We deplore any viewpoint that demands salvation from sin."

It is interesting that this camp ends with an exercise in which every child invents their own religion – with the specific direction of creating a religion that will not be offensive to anyone.

This reminds me of the humorous quip, “God created man and man has returned the favor.”

The church in the world today is not only deplored, but openly hated and persecuted. And it started early. In fact, no sooner had the church been born, in Acts chapter 2, than were the seeds of persecution planted in the soil of the Roman Empire.

By the time John writes the Revelation of Jesus Christ, persecution has begun with demonically-inspired hatred.

Pliny, the Roman governor living around the close of the first century, wrote, “. . . [Christianity is] a depraved and extravagant superstition . . . the contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages . . . as well.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Another Roman author from the first century wrote, “Many thousands of Christians are being put to death, of which none of them did anything contrary to the Roman laws worthy of persecution.”^{iv}

Near the end of the first century, Domitian took the emperor’s throne from Titus, his brother, whom he murdered by poisoning his fish dinner. He then ratcheted up the persecution against Christians even further. He was as wicked as Nero, as well as nearly all the Roman emperors before him, most of whom were openly homosexual or bisexual.^v

We can only imagine the offensive nature of Paul’s letter to the Romans and his inspired judgment of any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage.

Domitian revived what he called treason trials and informants could turn in anyone suspected of subversive philosophies. He also conveniently determined he was deity and had coins stamped in honor of his divinity. Caesar worship was encouraged and was on the rise. Add to this the fact that he was paranoid and rather strange.

In his book The Twelve Caesars, Michael Grant revealed how petty Domitian had become. He was even obsessed with losing his hair. In fact, if he happened to overhear anyone making fun of someone going bald, Domitian would probably take the guy’s life.

I like that part. Nothing wrong with that?!

Last week, my assistant, Josh Wredberg, actually told me that he was going to give his son, Max, a haircut. Keep in mind, his son is only two years old. Josh said, “Max, I’m going to give you a haircut,”

and then teased him, “and I’m going to cut it all off.” Max’s eyes got real big and he said, “Like Passa Davey?”

I have banished Max to the nursery!

Domitian revered the ancient Roman religions and eventually, exiled the leading apostle of this superstition called Christianity, which refused to worship his deified status or any other Roman god.

John is the last of the apostles. The others have been martyred already.

According to traditions passed down:

- Matthew had been killed by the sword in Ethiopia;
- Nathanael had been flayed to death by a whip in Armenia;
- Andrew had been crucified on an x-shaped cross, having hung for two days before finally dying;
- Thomas had been stabbed to death with a spear during one of his missionary journeys to India;
- Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, had been stoned and then beheaded;
- Paul had been tortured and then beheaded by Nero;
- Peter had been executed by Nero a year earlier by being crucified upside down;
- James, the brother of Jesus (not one of the twelve), the leading elder of the church in Jerusalem, had been thrown off the temple wall and, when he survived the fall of more than one hundred feet, had been beaten to death with a club;
- John, the last living apostle of the twelve, is old and exiled to an island where criminals and political prisoners were sent to work in the mines.^{vi}

Imagine what this Revelation meant to the church. The prospects of the infant church looked bleak. What hope did they have? Where was the risen Lord? Did He really care? Was this the end?

These questions vanished after reading the opening paragraphs of this book of prophecy, in which Jesus Christ says,

I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty [sovereign God]. (Revelation 1:8)

“And, I have not abandoned you. In fact, I know everything about you.”

What hope this brings to people dying for their faith; what encouragement this is to Christians in need of courage and perseverance; what accountability it demands from those already straying from the truth.

Now, beginning in verse 9 of Revelation chapter 1, where we left off in our last study, John makes a few personal comments, which we will call his “biographical snapshots”.

Biographical Snapshots of the Apostle John

1. The first biographical snapshot of John is one of humility.

This is one that would be wonderfully encouraging to the believers. John calls himself, in Revelation 1:9a,

. . . your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom . . .

“I am with you, persevering in Jesus.”

John had every reason to lay out his résumé to get everyone’s attention. “I, John – the author of the gospel of our Lord’s life and ministry; the writer of three epistles; one among the three closest apostles to our Lord – sitting next to Him in the upper room; the only disciple to appear at the cross of Christ; the one our Lord gave custody of Mary, His mother.”

This is all remarkably true. However, John says, “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the struggles of life in Christ.”

Nathan Meyer wrote in his commentary on this text that one of the endearing things about Franklin Delano Roosevelt was that even though he was a millionaire and President of the United States, having lived for a time recovering from polio among the rural farmers in Georgia, he chose often to refer to himself as a farmer instead of the President. In fact, when he registered to vote, he registered as a farmer.^{vii}

John had every right to say, “Listen up . . . it is I, John, the beloved apostle of Christ . . .”

The point I want to make is that when you are captivated by the person of Christ and you are anticipating the return of Christ, who you are is not nearly as important as who He is. The fact that He is coming overshadows the fact that you have arrived.

More than likely, in verse 9, John is referring to the present tribulation of the first century, but is mindful of the coming kingdom of our Lord.

2. John provides another snapshot in which we see a picture not just of humility, but of tenacity.

John writes in Revelation 1:9b,

I, John . . . [am] on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

He makes it very clear. John is suffering because of his faithful, uncompromising, tenacious, courageous preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.^{viii}

John writes further, in Revelation 1:10a,

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day . . .

This is a reference to Sunday. There is a different Greek construction to refer to the future and terrible “day of the Lord”.

In this verse, John refers to “the Lord’s day” – a term used only here in the New Testament. However, it was further used in the church as a reference to the day the church specially worshiped, for it was the day the Lord rose from the dead.

This was, in a special sense, the Lord’s day of triumph. By the time of Acts chapter 20, as the church developed further and began to separate from the synagogue, they chose the Lord’s day as their day of special worship.

We can legitimately worship on any day (Romans 14:5-6), but the church was choosing this special day in commemoration of the Lord’s resurrection on Sunday.

Ignatius, writing just fifteen years after John wrote this Revelation, said, “the Christians ceased to keep the Jewish Sabbath and lived by the Lord’s Day, on which our life shines, thanks to Him.”

Pliny, the unbelieving Roman governor that I mentioned earlier, wrote around the same time – A.D. 110, and I quote, “The Christians gather on Sunday, the first day of the week, to sing praises to their Lord Jesus.”

Justin Martyr, a church leader, wrote forty-five years later, “We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the day when Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.”^{ix}

John writes, “On Sunday, I was in the Spirit.”

This is simply telling us that John received his first vision on the Lord’s day and the Spirit of God was the managing agent in these visions.^x

Before we get into this amazing vision, let us stop and take a good look at what this tells us about not only John, but you and me.

John was now serving, what he believed to be, his final round of persecution – on Patmos, which was first century Alcatraz. He was on a barren island, cut off from his family, separated from other believers, sleeping, many believe, in a cave, ill fed, ill clothed, working in the mines, at nearly ninety years of age.^{xi}

A couple in our church recently visited Patmos in a tour of that region. They brought back for me a keepsake and a book of full color pictures of the island. Though it is developed now and populated to some degree, I could easily imagine this rocky, barren island, far from friends and family and the church John had pastored in Ephesus.

Most believe John returned to Ephesus after Domitian died. However, do not forget that at this point in time, John did not know that. As far as he is concerned, his best days of ministry are behind him. God must be finished with his labor and love for the church and Christ, her chief Shepherd. This is it.

Imagine – John’s most significant ministry is still ahead of him.

God was not finished speaking through John – He was about to give John the future of human history, a glimpse of the judgments, and a tour of heaven. One author wrote these perceptive words, “Sometimes it is out of suffering that God’s people have some of their greatest triumphs. At times, when circumstances look their darkest, it is in the moment of such loneliness and despair that God shines the brightest.”^{xii}

There in the bleakness and loneliness and barrenness of Patmos, God came to John and revealed His greatest mysteries.

These began with a vision of none other than the Chief Shepherd of the church. Notice Revelation 1:10b-11.

. . . and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet,

saying, “Write in a book what you see, 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.

These are literal churches. These are not epochs of church history, but literal churches that represent all churches in any generation. It is possible in this generation, to be a church of Philadelphia with great opportunity or to be a church of Ephesus that lost her

love for the things of Christ. These are literal churches with literal problems and literal struggles and a need to literally repent and follow more closely after Christ.

However, the churches are spoken of figuratively as lampstands. John writes in Revelation 1:12,

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands;

The metaphor of the church’s testimony shining to the world is clearly explained in Revelation chapter 2 where the church is warned that Christ will take away their lampstand if they do not repent. Literally, He will remove their testimony as a light in a dark world. We will look at this more closely in our next discussion.

Notice Revelation 1:13a.

and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man . . .

This is the unmistakable Messianic title of Jesus Christ. He has not forgotten the church – He is in the middle of them all.

I discovered that this title was used by the early church as Christ’s title whenever the suffering of believers and Christ’s suffering were in view.^{xiii}

In other words, Jesus Christ understands what it means to suffer. And remember, He promised that those who followed Him would suffer persecution of some form (Matthew 10:34).

The apostle Paul promised,

. . . all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (II Timothy 3:12)

However, take heart, Jesus Christ is moving among the candlesticks – He is in the midst of His beloved bride, as they shine for His glory.

Let us move from the biographical snapshots of the apostle John to what we will call Christ’s “brilliant showcase”.

Brilliant Showcase of the Son of Man

John’s vision implies at least eight characteristics of Christ.

1. First, His robe and sash tell of His superiority.

John writes in Revelation 1:13b,

. . . [He was] clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.

A robe that reached to the ground was worn by royalty. The “podere (ποδηρη)” was an emblem of high rank and dignity.^{xiv}

Full length robes were the attire of King Jehoshaphat, the kings of Midian, and Jonathan, the prince of Israel, son of King Saul. Others point out that prophets also wore these robes.

Certainly, Jesus Christ is both Prophet and King and the “podere” would be perfectly suitable.

However, the most common usage of this word in the Old Testament was related to the robe of the high priest. The word was used to speak of the formal clothing and robe of the high priest when he served in the temple. The high priest also wore the golden sash when he served. (Exodus 28:4)

The idea that these garments pictured Christ in His present ministry as *the* Great High Priest is a wonderful thought.

Christ has not forgotten the persecuted believers. He has not abandoned His bride. He is currently in active duty as High Priest.

The writer of Hebrews pictured the superiority of the ongoing ministry of Christ when he wrote that our Great High Priest is,

. . . able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25).

We have a High Priest, who can,

. . . sympathize with our weaknesses, . . . One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

The apparel of Christ clearly speaks of His advocacy and His superiority in gaining our access to the court of heaven.

2. Secondly, His head and hair speak of His eternity.

Notice Revelation 1:14a.

His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow . . .

This is a clear reference to the throne of God and the image of Daniel who saw the Ancient of Days with white hair – suggesting the glory of his longevity.^{xv}

This same description is now, in this vision, attributed to Christ, who is equal with the Father.

The color white is translated from the word “leukos,” which has the connotation of “bright or

brilliant”. It symbolizes the glorious, holy, pure eternal existence of God the Son.^{xvi}

John sees Christ, physically manifesting this sense of age – One who was eternally past, present and future, without beginning or end.

3. Thirdly, His eyes show His perceptibility.

John mentions in Revelation 1:14b,

. . . His eyes were like a flame of fire.

Gabriel is also pictured similarly. This is that spiritually savvy gaze that perceives; discerns. Christ can cut through our very being – and see behind the mask and the facade.

Christ will be pictured with these flaming eyes later, in Revelation 2:18 and 19:12.

This is a striking picture of Christ’s perceptibility – or if you would prefer a smaller word – His perfect savvy. He does not miss anything.

Matthew Henry wrote, “God not only sees men, He sees through them.”^{xvii}

The perceptive, discerning Lord is walking among His candlesticks – His churches – and He sees everything and He sees everyone.

Imagine our Lord right now, though invisible to our eyes, robed in the regal gown of High Priest, King, and Prophet, walking up each aisle and passing through each section of our church – looking at us with eyes of divine savvy and discernment as He passes by and seeing our hearts and our thoughts; knowing our motives and our plans and our wishes.

There is a reason that when John sees the Lord, he falls to the ground like a dead man! (Revelation 1:17)

There is more to this vision.

4. Fourthly, His feet speak of His mastery.

John refers to the Lord’s feet in Revelation 1:15a.

His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace . . .

This speaks of Christ’s mastery; His divine right to judge the church.

In ancient times, kings sat on elevated thrones so those being judged by them would always be beneath their feet. The expression “the feet of kings” began to refer to authority. In this verse, there are the red hot, glowing feet of Christ, who moves through the church exercising His perfect review of everyone’s heart and stand and deeds and works.^{xviii}

5. Fifthly, His voice implies His divine authority.

John mentions in Revelation 1:15b,

. . . His voice was like the sound of many waters.

One day when Christ speaks, all the world will listen, even though they now mute His gospel and mock His words.

Imagine trying to argue with Niagara Falls.^{xix}

Try drowning out the sound of Niagara Falls with your own puny little voice. Go ahead and ride to the base of Niagara Falls on the *Maid of the Mist* and stand on the deck and yell and scream and stomp your feet.

Christ's voice will drown out the puny voice of man. In fact, in His presence at the final judgment, the world will be struck silent as they recognize in utter terror that they are, before Him, eternally accountable (Romans 3:19).

6. Sixthly, His right hand refers to His sovereignty.

John tell us in Revelation 1:16a,

In His right hand He held seven stars . . .

This is a reference to the leadership of the churches – which Christ controls by His sovereign hand.

Look at Revelation 1:20, where Christ explains these metaphors.

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels ["angeloi" – the "messengers"] of the seven churches.

In other words, these messengers, which were responsible to deliver the message of Christ to the church, represented the leading authority in the church. This is a reference to the office holders of the church – the "presbuteroi," or the elders of the church, and even more specifically, the leading elder in the church, as we will see in Revelation chapter 2.

7. Seventh, His mouth refers to His indestructibility.

John writes of the mouth of Christ in Revelation 1:16b,

. . . and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword . . .

This refers to defense of the church by Christ, who defeats all the threats against His bride – both

outside the church and inside the church, as we will see in the letters that follow this vision.

John MacArthur wrote of this vision, "Those who attack Christ's church; those who sow lies, create discord, harm His people, will be personally dealt with by the Lord of the church. His word is potent."^{xx}

Isaiah prophesied that one day our Lord will,

. . . strike the earth with the rod of His mouth... (Isaiah 11:4)

Paul said that the antichrist shall be defeated one day,

. . . with the breath of [Christ's] mouth . . . (II Thessalonians 2:8)

John Phillips commented on this vision of Christ's word, "Nothing can stand against God's word. Whether as Creator, Comforter, or Conqueror, that mighty word of Christ is invincible."^{xxi}

This is the indestructibility of the word of our Lord.

Imagine what this meant to Christians living under Domitian. His word could take everything away from them. Rome was in control, not the church.

Oh, but they had no need to fear, for their lives were under Christ's protection and He was sovereign.

Christ was revealed to them and us,

- First, in His superiority;
- Secondly, in His eternity;
- Thirdly, in His perceptibility;
- Fourthly, in His mastery;
- Fifthly, in His authority;
- Sixthly, in His sovereignty;
- Seventh, in His indestructibility.

Let us look at one more.

8. Finally, eighth, His face displays His majesty.

John writes in Revelation 1:16c.

. . . and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

Christ's face is like our sun? Our sun radiates four million tons of heat a second.

The brilliant showcase of the risen Lord was so glorious and so terrifying and so majestic that John said in Revelation 1:17a,

. . . I fell at His feet like a dead man . . .

How do we approach *Him*?

However, there on the ground, with his face buried in his arms, John hears,

... ***“Do not be afraid . . .” (Revelation 1:17b)***

He had heard these words before – when he was terrified in the middle of a storm at sea with the other disciples and the Lord walked out on the water to them and said,

... ***“It is I; do not be afraid.” (John 6:20)***

“John, don’t be afraid; it is I,”

... ***the first and the last,
and the living One; and I was dead, and
behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have
the keys of death and of Hades.***

(Revelation 1:17b-18)

Have you ever lost your keys? Have you ever gotten locked out of your car; your office; your house?

Jesus says, “I have the keys to death and Hades.”

In other words, “Christian, they can’t lock you out; they can’t lock you in. They can’t keep you out of heaven and they can’t lock you in.”

Application

1. Even when life is interrupted, our Lord is interceding.

Are you in some barren place – unsure and unsettled? Your High Priest is moving in the middle of it all – whispering to the Father your needs and holding every aspect in the grip of His gracious hands.

For those who suffer injustice; uncertainty; tribulation – you are never alone.

When Jim Denison was in college, he went on a summer mission trip to East Malaysia. While there, he worked in a small church. At one of the church’s worship services, a baptism had been planned for one of the teenage girls who attended. She had announced to the pastor and the church, in their custom, that she had decided to commit her life to Christ and wanted to be baptized publicly as a statement of her faith in Christ. During the service, Jim noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the back wall of the church building. After the service, he asked the pastor about it. The pastor pointed to the young lady that had just been baptized and said, “Her father told her that if she was ever baptized as a Christian, she could never come home again. So, she brought her luggage.”^{xxii}

2. Even when life is at its darkest, we can continue to follow our Lord with confidence.

What a Sunday this was for John. As far as he was concerned, he would never go home again.

At this time for John and now for us, when Christians face their greatest times of insecurity, God reminds us of His supremacy. God revealed it to John and to us on the Lord’s day.

Beloved, Christian friend,

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

*Look full in His wonderful face
[see Him here!],*

*And the things of earth will grow strangely
dim,*

In the light of His glory and grace.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/27/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 288.

ⁱⁱ Richard Chin, “Camps Sign up Free Thinkers,” 4/11/07, <http://www.usatoday.com>.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Revelation Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 38.

^{iv} “Israel my Glory,” Jan/Feb 2008, p. 19.

^v Michael Grant, The Twelve Caesars (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975), p. 6.

^{vi} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody, 1992), p. 88.

^{vii} Nathan M. Meyer, From Now to Eternity (BMH, 1976), p. 29.

^{viii} MacArthur, Revelation, p. 41.

^{ix} Robert J. Morgan, Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes (Nelson, 2000), p. 719.

^x Thomas, p. 91.

^{xi} Sam Gordon, Worthy is the Lamb: A Walk Through Revelation (Ambassador, 2000), p. 38.

^{xii} Ibid., p. 38.

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- xiii Thomas, p. 98.
xiv Ibid., p. 99.
xv Ibid., p. 101.
xvi MacArthur, Revelation, p. 46.
xvii Gordon, p. 45.
xviii John MacArthur, Because the Time is Near (Moody, 2007), p. 37.
xix John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux, 1991), p. 28.
xx MacArthur, Revelation, p. 48.
xxi Phillips, p. 29.
xxii Raymond McHenry, Stories for the Soul (Hendrickson, 2001), p. 48.