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Christ is all!

Please read Revelation 1:1–18

The whole of the Bible is full of Christ. It testifies to Him. Whether you turn to the Old Testament or the New Testament, to the Law or the Prophets, to the Psalms or the Gospels, to the historical books or the epistles, ‘These are the Scriptures that testify about me,’ says Jesus (John 5:39). And this is gloriously so with the book of Revelation. John does not dominate the book. It is not his revelation. Everything focuses upon the One who is the Lord of glory—the Lord Jesus Christ. We can see that clearly from the very moment the book opens.

1. The beginning of the revelation (1:1–3)

The title of the book

First words, like last words, are always important. The very first words of this, the last book of the Bible, are those we usually take as its title: ‘*the revelation of Jesus Christ*’. The word translated ‘revelation’ is crucial. It means ‘unveiling’, and is

used in Scripture of the uncovering of something that is hidden and, in particular, of the making known by God of what, left to himself, man would be permanently incapable of finding out. That gives us a vital clue to the nature and interpretation of this whole book. We are introduced here to amazing, wonderful and mysterious matters which our natural eyes cannot see, our natural ears cannot hear and our natural unaided minds and hearts cannot begin to understand or appreciate.

But it is not just any revelation, but ‘the revelation of *Jesus Christ*’. We should take ‘of’ in the sense of ‘about’ or ‘concerning’, and this gives us a second vital clue about the book. It reveals the Lord Jesus Christ to us. Indeed it does—in all His glory as the sinner’s Saviour (1:5), the eternal God (1:8), the Conqueror of death and Hades who is alive for ever and ever (1:18), the glorious Head of the church who dwells and walks in the midst of his people (2:1), the Overcomer of all His enemies and the One through whom all believers are victorious (17:14), the One who invites us to His marriage supper (19:9) and the glorious Coming One (1:7; 22:20). How that should whet our spiritual appetites!

The communication of the book

God is the Author of the book of Revelation, as He is of the whole of Scripture. That is, God in His triune glory and splendour, not just the First Person of the Trinity. But it is still correct to speak of God ‘giving’ the revelation ‘to’ the Son, for God is described elsewhere as ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Peter 1:3). Christ then, in His turn, ‘*made it known*’ (literally ‘signified it’, for the book is full of visions, signs and symbols, which is what makes it at first glance less straightforward than some other parts of the Bible) by ‘*his angel*’ (for the angels are Christ’s messengers who do His bidding) ‘*to his servant John*’.

By John we understand ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ (John 13:23), he who leaned on Jesus’ bosom at the Last Supper and who penned the Gospel and the three epistles which bear his name. Before Christ called John to be a disciple he had been a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee with his father and brother. During his years as a disciple he had been privileged, along with Peter and James, to share and witness those intimate moments with the Saviour in the home of Jairus, on the mount of transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane. He had been at the foot of the cross when Jesus died at Calvary and one of the first at the tomb from which Jesus had risen. This is the traditional view of authorship and there are no persuasive reasons for changing it. And John, in his turn, ‘*testifies to everything he saw*’, writing it down.

How we can rejoice, therefore, at the security of the transmission and formation of Scripture! We have indeed ‘*the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ*’—and that word and testimony are sure and true.

The blessing of the book

There is great encouragement arising from verse 3. Blessing is promised for those who ‘*read ... hear ... and take to heart*’ the words of the book. What a mouth-watering incentive to carry our study on through to the end!

But mark well that ascending scale. We must not only read (eyes) and hear (ears), but take to heart the Word of God (cf. Psalm 119:11; Colossians 3:16), and this must lead to the response of personal, practical submission and obedience (James 1:22).

Surely among the blessings in store are a greater prizing and appreciation of the Lord Jesus Christ as He is set before us as our all-in-all, a greater encouragement to faith in Him and a more realistic and informed view of all that is going on around us in

history and current affairs. For we must learn to see everything (whether it be wars, nuclear threats, economic collapse, personal trials, the persecution of believers, or whatever) in the perspective that the book of Revelation gives us. All things will and must lead to the final manifestation of Christ in His glory. The song of 11:15 will be sung: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’ With regard to all this, *‘the time is near’*, with which we need to compare the statement in verse 1: *‘what must soon take place’*. That does not mean that the book is to be to us a pocket calculator or that we should start predicting dates. Together these two remarks remind us that in the first instance the message of Revelation was addressed to the believers of John’s own day; but they also speak of the constant relevance of the book and the fact that all things are hastening to the end. But remember that God’s measure of time is very different from our own (2 Peter 3:8–10).

2. Glorious gospel and glorious Saviour (1:4–8)

This great section of chapter 1 focuses first upon the glorious gospel of God (4–8) and then upon the glorious vision of Christ (9–18), but before considering these themes let us gather up the details furnished in verse 4 and verses 9–10 with regard to the revelation itself.

We have already spoken of John and who he is, but now we learn also where he was when he received the revelation (*‘on the island of Patmos’*), why he was there (*‘because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’*), what day of the week it was (*‘the Lord’s Day’*—when better?), what condition he was in (*‘in the Spirit’*) and to whom the revelation was to be delivered (*‘the seven churches in the province of Asia’* that are then named). Each of these details is important and together they heighten the reality of all that happened.

Patmos was an island in the Aegean Sea, roughly four miles by eight miles, and a desolate, uninviting and inhospitable place of mountains and marble quarries. John had no Christian fellowship there, having been removed at a great age from the church at Ephesus, yet the very wilderness of his exile proved for him to be the gate of heaven. Things are not always as they seem!

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

The whole of that fine hymn by William Cowper, beginning with the line 'God moves in a mysterious way', is worthy of careful meditation in this connection.

It was around the year AD 96 and the Roman Emperor Domitian hated the sight and sound of the gospel and was sorely persecuting the church of Christ. Hence John's banishment for gospel faithfulness. As his thoughts went back to his beloved flock, from whom he was now separated, see how warmly he describes himself as '*your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus*'. What a powerful triad is there! Suffering, in one form or another and to one degree or another, is a 'given' for the Christian, and this will call for great patience and endurance. But another 'given' is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, which no one can take away from Him and no one can take from His people. The young, greatly afflicted believer James Laing once remarked, 'Five minutes in glory will make up for all this suffering.'¹

On the Lord's Day (the first day of the week, the day of resurrection) John was '*in the Spirit*'. What does that mean? 'He sees, indeed, but not with physical eyes. He hears, but not with physical ears. He is in direct spiritual contact with his Saviour.

He is alone ... with God! He is wide awake and every avenue of his soul is wide open to the direct communication coming from God,' writes William Hendriksen.² William Still observes that he was 'taken over by the Spirit and elevated ... to a high degree of spiritual sensitivity and reception, which led to divine insight into the holy mysteries of God.'³ What he received he was commanded to write and send to the churches, just as Paul the apostle wrote, in the first instance, to particular churches. We shall look at those churches individually later on.

The glorious gospel of God

A magnificent contemporary hymn by W. Vernon Higham begins: 'Great is the gospel of our glorious God,' and that should be our own feeling upon the matter as we consider the picture of the gospel given here.

It originates in grace and issues in peace (4). The gospel is the gospel of grace from start to finish. Grace is the love, mercy and favour of God to sinners—those who not only do not deserve it but actually and positively deserve the exact opposite—His wrath and condemnation. And grace is not done with at conversion. We continue in utter dependence upon it all our days. Peace has been described by Matthew Henry in his famous commentary as 'the sweet evidence and assurance of His grace', and by Dr Hendriksen as 'the reflection of the smile of God in the heart of the believer who has been reconciled to God through the Lord Jesus Christ'. It follows grace. The two are mentioned side by side on various occasions in the Bible (cf. Romans 5:1-2).

It derives from the Godhead (4-5). Each of the three Persons of the Godhead is involved in our salvation and they are mentioned here in the order Father, Spirit, Son. The phrase '*the seven spirits*' is a familiar designation for the Holy Spirit in the book of

Revelation, pointing to the fulness of His work and the variety of His operations. If you should be wondering why the order of the Persons of the Godhead is not the usual one, then the reason ordinarily given (and probably the correct one) is that John's vision will involve him looking, or peeping, into heaven itself. Now the Jewish tabernacle was 'a copy and shadow of what is in heaven' (Hebrews 8:5), and in that tabernacle the ark in the Holy of Holies represented the throne of God, the lampstand with the seven branches in front of the ark represented the Spirit, while the altar, whose priests and sacrifices pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ, was in the courtyard in front of the Holy Place.

Two grand descriptions of God are given. In verse 4 He is the One '*who is, and who was, and who is to come*', which is a reminder of His eternal self-existence. He was never created, nor will He ever end. And in verse 8 He Himself speaks and says, '*I am the Alpha and the Omega.*' One writer likens this verse to 'the publisher's imprint at the bottom of the title page of a book'.⁴ Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In a book which treats of the great span of God's dealings down the ages, as Revelation does, this title is particularly appropriate for the God who is the beginning and the end of history and rules and controls all things according to the counsel of His own will. The application of the same title to Christ in 22:13 is yet another Scripture affirmation of His deity.

It focuses upon the Lord Jesus Christ (5-6). Three titles are given to Christ in verse 5. He is '*the faithful witness*', manifesting God with a reliable and true testimony at all times. He is '*the firstborn from the dead*', for not only has He been raised from the dead, but by that same power we too shall be raised up. Compare Paul's great argument on this very point in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. And He is '*the ruler of the kings of the earth*', for He is 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (19:16), and all earthly kings receive

their authority from Him and are accountable to Him. As verse 6 continues we find how utterly indebted we are to Christ and how absolutely complete in Him we are—loved, washed, freed from sin and guilt. He has turned us into kings in His royal kingdom, for we reign in life through Christ (Romans 5:17), and how much more so when we shall be in glory with Him! And He has given us the character of priests, which speaks of our access to the Father through Him, our prevailing power in prayer because of Him and the spiritual worship of our lips and our lives which we are to bring to Him.

It looks forward to His coming again (7). History is not just drifting aimlessly along. Everything is moving deliberately and irrevocably towards the return of Christ, an event He often spoke of Himself in the Gospels. There will be no doubt about it when it comes—it will be a decisive, supernatural event for all to see. And it will affect all people, for He comes to gather His people to Himself, but to judge those who have rejected Him. The Old Testament background to this verse includes Zechariah 12:10. That rich prophetic announcement had a poignant fulfilment at the crucifixion (John 19:37), when the Jews literally pierced the Son of God in His human nature. They did that out of malice and hatred, though in God's saving grace at Pentecost some cast a saving look upon Him and experienced true repentance. But Zechariah's prophecy looks on further than that as well—even to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory to judge the world. But the mourning of those who have pierced Him will then be very different, for the mourning of verse 7 is a mourning of anguish, misery and wasted opportunity, not of repentance. Repentance has been left too late. How 'the eye of saint and sinner [should] be fixed more steadily and believingly on this coming day of wrath and terror to every impenitent soul and of glory and perfected bliss to every child of God!'⁵ Scripture is always the best expounder

of Scripture, so have a look at 2 Thessalonians 1:6–10 for a fuller commentary upon this.

The glorious vision of Christ

You cannot get away from the ‘Christ is all!’ theme! John heard behind him ‘*a loud voice like a trumpet*’—remember how in the Old Testament the people would often be gathered together by the blowing of a trumpet in order to hear what God had to say to them. He turned around and the Mediterranean sights that he had been getting used to in his exile began to fade and instead what immediately met his gaze and increasingly ravished his sight was a most glorious view of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! Christ was walking among seven golden lampstands, which, as we shall see, represent the seven churches already mentioned, and which, in turn, are representative of the whole church of Christ throughout history. John’s eyes fell upon one aspect of Christ’s glory after another and the overwhelming and overpowering effect of the whole view is described in verse 17: ‘When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.’ It is most significant that the first chapter of the book begins in this way, for what we need at all times—and most especially in times which call for particular endurance—is a view of the Lord Jesus Christ as He is. There is profound truth in the old familiar lines:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face;
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace

(H. H. Lemmel).

To analyse the different elements of the vision is to run into the danger of losing that total picture and effect which so struck John. So we shall not pry too closely—and before doing anything else at all read through verses 12–16 several times and meditate upon those verses. What did John see?

v. 13. The expression '*like a son of man*' (cf. Daniel 7:13-14 and Jesus' own use of the title) speaks of the real manhood and humanness of Christ, sympathizing, tempted as we are (though without sin), and touched with a feeling of our infirmities. But He is no longer the humiliated and suffering servant but the glorified Lord, having received a kingdom and an everlasting dominion from the Father. The robe and sash speak of His high-priestly character both past and present—the finished sacrificial work at Calvary along with the present intercessory ministry in glory.

v. 14. The whiteness declares the eternity and divinity and purity of the One who is the Ancient of Days. He does not decay, grow old or lose His power. And the eyes set forth His heart-searching omniscience—you know the power of a gaze, but no one has a gaze like Jesus!

v. 15. The feet represent what someone has called His '*resistless providence*', as He works out all His purposes, treads down all His enemies and executes all His judgements. The voice is of the God who makes Himself heard in words of salvation and comfort, of warning and judgement. In comparison, the sound of Niagara Falls is small fry!

v. 16. We shall come to the stars a little later. The sword is the symbol of His authority and power to teach and judge, and the fact that it is sharp and double-edged shows that He cannot be avoided. And the final note of the verse displays the Holy One, too intense for sinful human eyes to behold! Christ's absolute perfection is the keynote all the way through.

As we prostrate ourselves with the apostle John, so we cry out, 'Hallelujah! What a Saviour!' Oh, for a grander, more glorious view of the Lord Jesus Christ in our own day and in our own life and worship—more raptures of joy in His presence and more

awesome, trembling, godly fear before Him! Do we really know what it is to be 'lost in wonder, love and praise'?

Christ's words to John in verses 17-18 provide a wonderful application of the vision he has just received. For seeing who Christ is, knowing that 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Hebrews 1:3), how can we stand before Him? How could such glory as this ever bring itself into any association or union with a sinful wretch like me? So Christ, graciously placing His hand upon John, directs him afresh to Calvary and the empty tomb. Christ is the divine Son of God (*'I am the First and the Last'*) who, having become man for us, died in our place for our sins (*'I was dead'*) and rose again (*'behold I am alive for ever and ever!'*). The glorious result is that our sins are forgiven, death no longer has dominion over us and the terrors of hell are vanquished (*'I hold the keys of death and Hades'*).

He controls when we die and how we die and He has been through death for us. The keys in Christ's possession underscore this. Just as a gaoler with his bunch of keys locks or opens the prison door (you don't, if you're the prisoner!), so the Lord Jesus Christ has this mighty unlocking power over sin, death and the grave. This was intended to drive out John's fears, and nothing less can do the same with ours. Here is good news for living and good news for dying! Nothing 'will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:39).

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