

Unveiled Majesty

by Steve Zeisler

A small room in our home serves as my study. It is so cramped that just the book-lined shelves, a desk and a chair totally fill the available space. It's amazing, though, how much of my life is contained in that small area. Sitting there the other day, I realized that just about everything in my life is represented in one way or another in that tiny room. Photographs of my wife and children, scribbled notes about forthcoming events, decisions to be made, things to do as a family, little League rosters even the occasional attempt at making a budget all of these personal things are part of that room. Included also are items that represent my attempts to understand the world we live in the radio that I occasionally listen to, news magazines, newspapers, journals, and works of Literature.

Much of the paperwork on my desk pertains to Peninsula Bible Church. There are my notes of studies I am working on, the church telephone directory, phone messages I have received, names of people I need to call even last Sunday's bulletin is sitting there. All of these sundry items give evidence that a large part of my life is taken up in concern for this church and the people of the church. Despite the fact that the quarters are cramped, much is represented in that small space.

As I was studying the book of Revelation recently, I was struck by the fact that the apostle John, writing this book on the barren, almost deserted island of Patmos, may even have had similar feelings about his cramped living space. In verse 9 of chapter I of his book he identifies his surroundings:

I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

"I, John," as the apostle identifies himself, was a very old man, perhaps in his 80's or 90's, when he wrote these words. "I, John," the apostle who left us his magnificent biography of Jesus Christ: the writer of three other New Testament letters and the last surviving member of the apostolic band had, as a result of the testimony of Christ and because of the faithfulness of his own witness, been banished to a rocky island to spend the remaining years of his life.

Patmos is a small bit of rock (eight miles in length at its longest point) that lies in the Mediterranean Sea, southwest of Ephesus. John makes no mention of any companions. We do not know in what other ways he found his circumstances cramped. We do know, however, that he was banished from society and was living in reduced, barren circumstances. Yet the smallness of that space could not prevent him from seeing magnificent visions of the Lord--visions that revealed the great sweep of human history. It did not prevent him from seeing the Lordship of Christ in the heavenly places, nor did it keep him from seeing into the future to the end of time.

Several copies of the Bible sit on my desk in my small study. How privileged we are to have the Scriptures available to us! Because we have the written word of God we are never restricted in our ability to see what life is about. Although John had been banished to an island, he had yet been transported to heavenly places. That can be our experience as well when we see what he saw and hear what he heard. In Ephesians Paul prays that the "eyes of his readers' hearts would be enlightened," so that they would see the surpassing greatness of God's power and the magnificent hope to which they had been called. As we begin a study in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, our prayer too should be, "Lord, let us see Christ revealed." That is what this book is about, as its opening words announce, the unveiling of Jesus Christ.

Any study in this book usually evokes mixed reactions. The book of Revelation has always had its detractors, yet it clearly identifies itself as a clarification of the person of Jesus Christ. I pray that as we study it together we will indeed see Jesus more clearly than ever before. The people who have difficulty with this book general!!

tall into two camps. First, there are those who are intimidated by it. The symbolism is difficult to understand. "There is something big going on here. We feel, but they haven't been given the information they need to make sense of what they are reading." Thus they avoid studying it and stay with the easier, more familiar books of the Bible. Others, however, are so turned on by this book they read it almost to the exclusion of every other book in Scripture. They spend their days trying to solve its mysterious symbols and numbers coming up at times with ingenious guesses as to which mysterious political figure fits the number 666. Many who set out on that path, unfortunately, very often fail to benefit spiritually from their efforts.

But both of these extremes are particularly sad when we realize that John's intention in writing Revelation was that his readers would grow in their commitment to the Lord Jesus. While Revelation concerns the future of earth and the future of mankind, it is also very much concerned with the present. It deals with the nature of the God we serve and with his church. It has a message for the age in which we live as well as for the age to come. So I urge you to view this book with confidence and hope as we begin this study.

John traveled the road of faith longer than any of the original followers of Jesus. Because we all have undertaken the same adventure, it is gratifying to realize what the Lord did for him while he was on that journey. John met Jesus at a time when he was a follower of John the Baptist. Following the experience of Jesus in the wilderness, John the Baptist declared to John and Andrew and others, "That one is the Lamb of God." John and the others began to follow Jesus more out of curiosity than anything else. Jesus had just spent forty days fasting. He probably looked haggard and emaciated. He did not have any followers, nor was he a great prophet at that point. John, however, followed him. In time he became devoted to him, no longer an interested companion but a disciple of Jesus, convinced that this Man had the words of life. Later John saw him transfigured on a mountain top. He witnessed his crucifixion, his resurrection and his ascension into glory. The interested follower had become a committed disciple and finally an apostle, a representative of his Lord. This is the John who left us his gospel, his letters and this book of Revelation.

Now nearing the end of his life on the island of Patmos, he is allowed to see a vision of Christ that is even more remarkable than anything he experienced during his association with Jesus on earth. He sees him as the "Lord in Heaven taken to heaven itself a Lamb standing as if slain. He sees him astride a white horse, the magnificent One who will end human history and destroy all wickedness. What had begun with curiosity ended with his recognition that the One he had undertaken to follow was the Lord of lords and King of kings.

That is the path that we too have undertaken. I do not know how far along that path you find yourself. My own journey with this One began out of curiosity. That curiosity later led to belief in him, to discipleship, and later to opportunity to speak in his name. Now, years later, the more I am allowed to see his greatness the more my heart desires to respond in worship of him. That was John's path and that is our path. Here in this book we are privileged to see some of the end of that journey of faith, as John shares his greatest vision of his Lord.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond--servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near

Notice that we are on the verge of a blessing. I am reading and you are hearing and if we heed what is written, according to this account, we will be blessed.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Even so. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Ray Stedman once described these verses as the "title page and author's preface" of the book. The title page, verses 1 through 3, is an invitation to the broadest possible readership, while verses 4 through 8 are more particularly addressed to "seven churches which are in Asia." In the opening paragraph of the book, John declares that not only those seven churches but everyone who reads these words and heeds them will be hearing something of great value.

Notice, too, in verses 1 through 3, that the process of passing on the truth receives a significant amount of attention. The revelation was given by God the Father to the Son, who gave it to an angel, who gave it to John, who bore witness to others. There is an insistence that we see that these truths were passed from one messenger to another. God does not ordinarily invade the mind of an individual directly. He does not usually speak in visions to people, nor does he cause thoughts to form in our minds directly by his hand. He usually uses messengers. As we see the message being passed from one to the other, even as John describes it here, I hope that the burden to pass on this message will be heard by us as well. What you see and learn of the Lord in this book you are responsible to pass on to someone else. It is supremely important that we are part of that process of communicating the gospel we have heard.

Verses 4 through 8 are intensely focused theology. The doctrine of God is given as much concentrated attention here as almost any other place in Scripture. >From these verses we can learn a tremendous amount about the character of God, descriptions of his nature his heart, and how the triune (God exists together and are all referred to here. God the Father is mentioned in verse 4 and again in verse 8 What is pointed out about him primarily is his immutability. God does not change. One of the greatest announcements of Scripture is that our God is eternally perfect. He "was and is and is to come." He is the beginning and the end, "the Alpha and the Omega." We can count on him not to fail, not to lose track of what he is committed to, to not be capricious in answering our prayers to not be different tomorrow than he is today Our God is everlastingly The same because he is everlastingly perfect God the Father who "was and who is and who is to come Alpha and Omega."

John then speaks of the seven Spirits who are before His throne" You can hardly escape noticing in the book of Revelation that the number seven stands for something that is full and complete and perfect The fullness of the Spirit the great, powerful, quiet unobtrusive fullness of the Spirit that causes the Son and the Father to be glorified (never Himself) The sevenfold fullness of the Spirit is identified here before the throne of God, calling attention to God, lighting the throne on which God the Father sits and illuminating the magnificence of his Son

Then in verse 5 we read of "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness first-born from the dead, ruler of the kings of the earth." Verse 6, "He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to his God . . . to Him be glory." I here is more said of Jesus Christ the Son of God than either the Father or the Spirit. Perhaps John means to suggest here, as other passages suggest, that when men and women are the audience, Jesus is the One who is focused upon primarily. He was the member of the Trinity who became flesh and bore our sins. He knows our weaknesses. He walks with us, understands us and identifies with us. But this Jesus is also the Ruler of the kings of the earth the sovereign Victor over death. Thus he is the heart of our worship. So in these brief verses we have the great theology of the doctrine of God.

I want to say two things by way of application concerning the verses we have read. John, who is at the end of his journey of faith, is writing in exalted terms, terms that defy our imagination. He began to follow Jesus out of curiosity, but he is now supremely caught up with the greatness of Christ. I think I can safely say that most of us do not have such an exalted view of Christ. I confess I don't. I take him too lightly, even as I read and believe these words. In practical, daily terms I am not caught up with his greatness. I am not dominated by his glory. He is not as weighty a presence as he ought to be in my day--to--day life.

The closest I ever came to death was when I was about 19 or 20 years old. One weekend I took a trip to the Sierras in winter. As I drove up Highway 80 into the mountains it began to snow very heavily. Coming as I do from southern California, I had never before driven in snow. Although I had snow chains, I didn't have a clue how to install them. When I finally did put them on I did it wrong and they broke and tore up the side of the car. As I lay on freezing ice under the car trying to repair the damage, somebody rear-- ended me and I had to

abandon the car. There I was in the middle of the night, lost and freezing on the highway. I think it is safe to say that ever since that night I have had the utmost respect for snowstorms in the Sierras. As far as mountain weather is concerned, I have never again said, "I can handle it."

In a sense the same lesson can be learned here in Revelation. Too many of us treat lightly the greatness, the frightening power, the sovereignty of our Lord and his control of history. We think we are really more capable than we are and that he is less effective than he claims to be. The lesson I learned that night in the Sierras is insignificant compared to the lessons all of us ought to learn about the power of the exalted One whom John is writing about.

Jesus Christ is neither soft, ineffective, forgetful, unconcerned nor distant. He is a much more frightening presence than any snowstorm or natural disaster. And yet too many of us think of him and attend to him as if he were of minor importance. So many other things are more important to us. We care more about what our neighbors think than about what the Lord thinks. We are more frightened of the power of our boss than we are of the power of God. We do not find Jesus Christ to be as dominant as John did by the end of his life. Jesus was the great figure in John's life now. So what if Rome banished him to Patmos. What is Rome by comparison to the "ruler of the kings of the earth"!

Yes, John was caught up with this One whom we are still learning to see and understand. Let us also choose to give briefly weight to the greatness of Jesus Christ, learning to see him as he is, being willing to be humbled by him and awakened to his majesty.

The second thing I would like to suggest by way of application is that John saw this message as urgent. In verse 1 he says the revelation was given of "things which must shortly take place"; at the end of verse 3 he says, "the time is near": in--verse 7 he says, "Behold," as he sees Jesus coming in the clouds. The pace quickens all through this book. Things happen fast, everything has an urgency about it. For John, the gospel had an urgency about it. It was not something he was going to get around to later. He was not waiting until he retired to get serious about it. He was not putting it off until the end of the summer when other projects were out of the way. He was not waiting until he had more money, until he had bought the house or had made the final payment on the car.

Each one of us is a heartbeat away from all the events of the seven seals, the seven bowls and the seven trumpets. If we die tonight, we are going to be present at the end of the story. It is that near to us. Every day that passes brings it that much closer. This is critical material, deserving of our urgent attention.

My oldest son is sometimes affectionately known in our house as "Crash Crenshaw." He is forever running into something, falling off of something, or breaking something, and we regularly dash him off to the hospital, the dentist or whatever. I never fail to grasp the urgency of the situation when he does something like I have just mentioned. No one has to tell me I should rush him to the doctor. But there are other things that I need to be reminded of. For instance, conversations we ought to have that I keep putting off, sharing things that burden my heart, listening to him, that I never quite seem to have the time or energy to fully do as I ought to do. Yet I fully believe that those things are as important and as urgent as his physical well--being. It is very important for me to know what is going on in his heart and what he is learning. Yet because these things do not seem quite so urgent it is easy for me to put them off. Are you like that? In Harry Chapin's song, "The Cat's in the Hat," the father never quite had time for his son. The son grew up and the father became an old man who by this time dearly longed to have a relationship with his son, but by then the son had turned out just like his father he just didn't have the time.

One reason I have mentioned this is to urge those of you who are parents to remember to make these things a priority in life. But I hope it also illustrates what John is saying here about the place the Lord Jesus occupies in our lives. We frequently do not treat as urgent what the Scriptures say is urgent. But these issues cannot wait. Our involvement with the things of Christ, our willingness to say what needs to be said, to obey what ought to be obeyed, to serve where we ought to serve end to use our gifts cannot wait until we retire or when things are more convenient. If we put them off we will wake up one day and feel the awful loss of missed opportunities. The Lord will honor himself anyway and somebody else will have the joy of it, but we will have missed out. We cannot help but sense the urgency John brings to bear in this book.

Let me read the final verses of this chapter and comment briefly

I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos' because of the word of Cod and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, 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." And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am 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. Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. 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 of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

John saw this vision of Christ at the beginning of the first main section of this book Directed to particular churches in seven cities (v 11) chapters two and three of Re\ elation are. Jesus analysis of the needs of the church, his body on earth Jesus' message in this book will eventually concern the world , the end of' human history and the vanquishing of evil that has existed in mankind since Adam But first it is going to tell us of the attention Christ gives his church. "I am concerned," says the Lord. 'about the quality of' life in the church." Jesus is standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands. each of which represents a church in a certain community As he walks among the lampstands \\c will see that he comments on them. challenging commending encouraging and even threatening them kc is very concerned about them.

We are at a critical point in our life as a congregation Peninsula Bible Church is attamping things it has never tried before We exist in two locations no\\. We are expecting younger people to take more leadership in this church. We are stopping some things and beginning others. Thus it is a tremendously appropriate time for us as a congregation to ask, "What does Jesus have concern for in the church? What does he want to see happen? What is he loath to see happen?" I trust that the time we spend over the next seven weeks studying the words of Jesus to these churches will have a penetrating effect on us. We need to know what a church ought to be. We need that kind of understanding.

John "fell on his face as a dead man." we are told, when he saw this vision of Christ. This is the same John, one of the "Sons of Thunder," who once had the temerity to tell Jesus to rain down fire and brimstone on the cities that had resisted him the same John who once argued whether he would sit at Jesus' right or left hand in glory. But none of that is in evidence here. He has learned a lot since those days. Here he falls on his feet as a dead man and says nothing until the Lord reaches down and lifts him Up. It was .Jesus who said. "I am the lifegiver. Do not be afraid. john. I am your friend. I am the same one." The hand that reached down for him had the sears of crucifixion in it. hut John did not now dare to tell the Lord what he should do with his world and his church. Something of' that humble willingness to learn, to admit we do not know everything we ought to know. that we have need of inspection. insight and correction ought to be our stance as a church as well.

Although my office is small, I have noted that it has much more to it than meets the eye John was banished to a small. barren island. but from there he was taken into the heavens. As a church we arc at a point where we need to learn from the Lord and realize that there are awesome. wonderful opportunities for growth among us, if we will hear and obey. Each one of us contributes to making this lamp stand what it is. Maythe Lord use this ancient vision of John to be life--giving to us.

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Steve Zeisler
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