

Do Not Be Afraid

MJCF

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Revelation 1:1-20

Well, Happy Mother's Day! It's too bad we can't meet each other in person, and we can't have our usual pot-luck or go eat out, but we look forward to the day we can worship together again in the same building. The mother is typically the one to whom young children run to for comfort when they are afraid. But, what if the mother is also afraid? For some people, mothers have not been a comforting presence during childhood. This can have the effect of causing problems in relationships later in life. The good news is that Jesus Christ, the One who hung on the cross for our sins so that we might be forgiven, fulfills our greatest need for comfort. He's the One who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest..." (Matthew 11:28) Today, we begin a series on the book of Revelation. In today's chapter we see that Jesus Christ is the main character. Near the end of the chapter, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid..." As we get into the chapter and the rest of the book, we'll see many reasons why we need not be afraid...

The other day, we got a phone call from a woman whom we eventually found out was a Jehovah Witness. Yes, with physical distancing they've now moved to bugging people on the phone! She was talking about the horsemen of the book of Revelation. My wife asked her if she was fearful, and she replied, "Yes, very fearful!"

Are you fearful? These days, with COVID-19 spreading, many people fear that the end of the world is coming. Many combine this fear with fearful images from the book of Revelation. Some people highlight the image of the horsemen coming and bringing terrible plagues and suffering to the earth, thinking that's what's happening now. Throughout history, though, there have been wide-spread suffering, plagues, and dying. There have been terrible wars. Here in North America, in our lifetimes, we have been fortunate to not have had terrible famines, plagues, or war, but there have always been parts of the world where people are suffering and may have thought that the end of the world was coming. When his disciples asked him when the end of the world would be, Jesus said, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet." (Matthew 24:6) He says that there would be all kinds of famines, earthquakes and people would be put to death for following Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean the end of the world has come. Jesus also said that no one knows when the end will come (not even the angels of heaven). It will come at an unexpected time, and so we are to be ready at anytime.

It's natural to be fearful of different things. We may be fearful that people we love may catch COVID-19 and die, so we try our best to keep physical distance from others, and we wash our hands frequently. Fear helps us be more careful rather than too relaxed. But, it's not healthy to be overly fearful. Makers of popular movies have distorted much of the Bible, in order to get people interested and watch. Often movies like the "Left Behind" series increase people's fears. The movie presents images of a "rapture" where the "good" people are all taken to heaven and the "bad" people are left behind to suffer the "tribulations." This is one extreme way to interpret parts of Revelation, but most Christian scholars interpret the message of Revelation differently.

A lot of people may see Revelation as a fearful book, but to the Christians in the time it was written, it was a book filled with hope and encouragement. As we go through this series on Revelation I pray you, too, will find hope and encouragement in this book. To understand Revelation, we need to look at what it meant for John, the one who wrote it, and for the people who read it. Revelation comes from the Greek word "Apocalypsis" meaning "uncovering." It's an uncovering or showing of what had been previously hidden.

Some see this book as a puzzle to be put together. Once it's all figured out they think that this will be a map of how the end of the world will happen. But, a more accepted, and more biblical, way to understand the book would be to see it as a series of paintings, images that present us with truths about reality. The main purpose is not to give everyone a description of how the world will end. It's more of

a revealing of how God is still at work when things seem to be out of control for us. It shows how, in the spiritual realm, God has the victory, even if we don't see the reality of what's happening behind the scenes. It's like the story of Elisha in 2nd Kings 6. An army has surrounded them, and his servant is fearful for their lives, so Elisha prays that God would open the servant's eyes. Suddenly, the servant sees that the army around them is surrounded by God's army of angels with chariots of fire. God was still in control. They would be OK, in the end.

When the Apostle John wrote Revelation, the Christians were being persecuted, both by the Roman rulers as well as the Jews. The Romans controlled all of Asia with law and order. It was the era of "Pax Romana," (peace under the Romans), where any hint of opposition would be met with brutal force. We can see that in their common manner of execution, where people were nailed to crosses. Yet, people appreciated the protection given by the Romans because there was law and order in society. So, they would pay taxes and honor the Emperor, calling him "Lord." But, Christians could only call Jesus "Lord." They were then seen as unpatriotic and so were persecuted.

Because of his faith, John had been exiled to the island of Patmos. This is where he received a vision from God, which he wrote down and sent as letters to churches, in order to encourage them. One reason he used many wild and unusual images and symbols to describe things is possibly the fact that he couldn't be too direct. If he had talked about "evil Roman rulers" being crushed by God, he himself could have possibly been killed. Instead he uses symbols and images. For the people reading his letter, they may have understood the Roman oppressors as the evil beast, described later, in Revelation. And, that may not have been a wrong interpretation. But, just like a painting can have multiple meanings, the conquering of the evil beast could fit with many different possible events in history, including the triumph of God over evil at the end of time. Another reason for the symbolic and wild imagery found in Revelation could be the fact that John was describing huge and unusual events. God gave him imagery to describe extreme events, such as the end of the world, imagery that the people of his time could understand. So, he'd describe a "loud voice like a trumpet", "eyes like a flame of fire," or "a face like the sun." He'd also use images of various animals, like eagles and horses.

Let's get deeper into the text. John starts the letter by saying that this revelation came from God to Jesus Christ, to an Angel, to John, and now John is writing this to be sent out to seven churches in Asia. The number seven symbolizes completeness, so this could be understood as the message going out from John to all churches. In fact all Christian churches now have this letter as part of the Bible.

John says that the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and the ones who hear it and keep what is written in it are blessed. Some Bibles say, "happy" but "blessed" fits better with this context. In spite of hardships there is always something for which to be thankful. God's blessings come no matter the circumstance. The instruction to read it aloud implies that this is to be used in the context of worship with others rather than to be just read silently. John starts the letter with a greeting, "Grace and peace to you." "Grace" is a common Greek greeting, and "Peace" (or Shalom) is a common Hebrew greeting, so the message is going out far and wide. The "seven spirits" could represent angels, or messengers who deliver the letters, but most likely, it represents God's complete Spirit which now lives in us.

A major part of this chapter talks about Jesus Christ. Three statements describe who Jesus is. He is "the faithful witness," the one with first-hand experience with God. He is "the first-born of the dead," the first one to be raised to life, never to die again. We, too, will rise to live with him after our life on earth is done. Jesus is also "the ruler of the kings of the earth." He is exalted as the One who is over all, though it may not have looked that way at the time, with the Romans oppressing Israelites and the Christian believers being persecuted and killed. In a similar way, do we see Jesus as ruling over all? It's easy to forget that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. We need not fear with him in control.

John continues with three statements to say what Jesus does. He loves us, not just loved us, but continues to love us now. Jesus freed us from our sins by his blood, shed on the cross. And, he “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father ...” We are all now like priests, having direct access to God. We no longer need priests to stand between us and God, to mediate our relationship. Jesus is now the one through whom we have a good relationship with God. We share in the priestly work of sharing God with others.

John then describes another image of Jesus returning to earth, “coming with the clouds.” Clouds were often associated with God’s presence, so this is putting Jesus on the same level as God. Clouds give a sense of mystery to the divine presence. There is so much about God that we don’t see, so much which is unknown. But someday, when Jesus returns, everyone will see him clearly. We read that “all the tribes of the earth will wail.” This is likely because Jesus will come with judgement. Those who have rejected him and decided to go their own selfish ways will feel deep shame and regret. At the end of this part, God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega...[the One] who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This describes God as being complete, inclusive, and eternal.

At this point, John gets into the vision he received from God. He is told to write it down and send it to seven churches. This is how an artist has shown the images. <picture> Near the beginning of John’s vision, he sees seven lampstands. Standing in their midst, John sees “one like the Son of Man.” This was a title often used with Jesus. He was clothed in a long robe, showing high status, and a golden sash, giving an image of royalty. Jesus is actually the “King of kings.” His white hair represents wisdom. And, his eyes being “like a flame of fire” connects him with judgement. Jesus is all-seeing and all-knowing. Nothing is hidden from him. And the “fire’ image represents purification. Through Jesus, things will be made right. With feet “like burnished bronze” we are given an image of stability. The feet won’t crumble like clay. In other visions some human leaders are portrayed as having feet of clay. With a voice “like the sound of many waters” we can imagine the power of his words. In fact, out of his mouth comes a sharp, double-edged sword. This is also an image of the power of the words of Christ, which are the words of God to us. In Hebrews 4:12 it says, “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Christ’s words have authority. In his words we find truth and clarity of what’s right or wrong.

Continuing with a few more images, the seven stars in his right hand symbolize Christ’s authority over the entire universe. And, his face shining like the sun, shows his glory. <end showing picture> At this vision, John is so overwhelmed that he falls down almost as if he’s dead. But, Jesus touches him and says, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” Jesus is the “first and the last” just like God, who is the Alpha and the Omega. He died, but now he is alive forever. He has the keys of Death and Hades (or the land of the dead). Ancient people thought that the realm of the dead had gates which control who gets in or out. Jesus is the one who has the keys, so he has authority over live and death. Even if we die for our faith, Jesus Christ has the power to save us.

Finally, we are told the seven stars represent the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The following chapters are the messages to each of the churches.

Well, we’ve already looked at a number of symbols in this first chapter of Revelation. The symbols show how Jesus is equal to God. Jesus is ruler of the universe. He is above all, and has the power of the Almighty God. He even has power over life and death. His judgements are true, and he has deep wisdom. We see how completely powerful and in control he is. Yet, he is not disengaged with people. In fact, he loves us! He even allowed himself to be crucified so that our sins could be forgiven. With

him on our side, what do we need to be afraid of? Whatever happens in our lives, his power is greater. Even death cannot separate us from the love of God, for us, in Christ Jesus. Let's pray.

Loving God, it's easy to fear many things. Especially these days, many worry about their health or the health of loved ones, with COVID-19 spreading around. Many people worry about whether they will have enough money. There are other fears. What if we run out of toilet paper? Or, what if we run out of certain foods? It's already tough to find yeast or flour. Needing to stay home, marriages and families have added stress. Children now need homeschooling and the list of challenges goes on. How can we live well? Yet, amidst the tensions, we hear your voice calling us. "Do not fear...I am in total control. I love you, and you are mine." Thank-you that we belong to you. Thank-you that you are stronger than any virus, than any challenge we may face, than even death. May we live with our hopes in you, through Christ our Lord, Amen.