

## *Christ in the Middle*

The Revelation of Jesus Christ:

Discipleship on the edge

Revelation 1:9-20

9.17.23

*"The only thing we have to fear is...is fear itself."*

-32nd President of the U.S., Franklin D. Roosevelt.

By late winter 1933, our nation had already endured more than three years of economic depression. Statistics revealing the depth of the Great Depression were staggering. More than 11,000 of 24,000 banks had failed, destroying depositors' savings. Millions were out of work and seeking jobs; additional millions were working at jobs that barely provided subsistence.

In his inaugural speech, President Roosevelt said

*"The withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone. Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment."*

**We, too,** would be foolish optimists to deny the dark realities of our moment.

My heart breaks for the people of Lybia and the flooding there. Reporters say the devastation is like a war zone.

**Does the Bible have anything to say to us at this moment?** Whether you are seeking, you may have a hunch that it might. As followers of Jesus, we believe God's word has something to say to us now.

**If you're able, please stand for the reading of God's word. Revelation 1:9-20.**

"I, John, your brother who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a

long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire; his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "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 of Hades. Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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."

We learn from this that the believers in AD 96 also needed a word. John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, was now in his mid-80s. He's been exiled to the prison island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

Four years earlier, life had become extremely difficult for Christians living in the Roman Empire. Undoubtedly, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus had set off an explosion in the Roman Empire. In AD 67, Nero was infamous for feeding Christians to lions. The apostles Paul and Peter had been murdered. Timothy had been beaten to Death.

Then, in AD 96, Christians were undergoing intense pressure. The emperor Domitian was an insecure tyrant leader terrified of being overthrown. He demanded that all his subjects worship him as Lord and God. IN AD 92, we know that Domitian had roughly 40,000 Christians killed.

The beloved disciple John refused to bow his knee to Domitian. From Rome's perspective, he was a dissident and a troublemaker. Possibly, John was banished to this island because murdering him outright would cause a stir in the empire. Better to quietly exile him to die on a prison island.

So, John is on a prison island separated by the waters of the Aegean Sea from the churches he loves. He knew Christians were confused, discouraged, and fearful. He's a pastor who feels the suffering and ache of his flock. Even more, heresy and immorality were gaining a foothold in the churches.

***V9: I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation.***

John is not referring to a future tribulation here but to what is happening. This word "tribulation", or "suffering," John will use five times, primarily to refer to what faithful followers of Jesus were experiencing at the hands of the empire.

I want you to see that John is following in the footsteps of his Savior and Lord. God in the flesh. He knew Jesus as God in the flesh (John 1:14). John did not experience God aloof, simply winding up the universe and then sitting on the sidelines to watch things play out.

No, God sent Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, to *be with us*. John has been changed by this character of Jesus, who wasn't too significant or mighty to come and live among his people. John knows the truth of the Incarnation, God with us.

So he can say to his churches, "I'm your brother and your partner in this suffering. You're not alone. I'm with you. I hold you in my heart and mind. I pray for you.

***V10: I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...***

John was in prison, banished from his church, but that wouldn't stop him from worshipping. It's Sunday, and he's at worship. No doubt he's crying out to God on behalf of his churches, and he encounters Jesus Christ.

When we gather for worship, whether in person or online, I, too, pray that we will encounter our crucified and risen Savior.

### **The curtain pulled back:**

I want you to see something essential to properly reading this book.

Remember, John's letter title is "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." Literally, this is translated as "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ." The word Apocalypse means "unveiling." The word "apocalypse" is not rightly used often. Reporters call what is happening in Lybia "apocalyptic," as in this bad, end-of-time thing is happening.

However, the word means "unveiling, opening, making fully known, disclosure, revelation"

It is like pulling back the curtain on what is happening despite what you see.

### **Illustration:**

We have an "apocalypse" on our church campus! Pulling the curtain back in the Fireside Room, you see beautiful stained glass behind it.

This is what Jesus is doing for John and us. Jesus is pulling back the curtain on our actual reality, even when darkness seems to win.

John had pictures and experiences of Jesus that certainly would encourage him. For example, the day he sat on a hillside above the Sea of Galilee and, Jesus multiplied the fish and loaves. Or the time Jesus calmed the raging waves and sea with only his voice. He had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. John had seen the empty tomb. But he needed a vision, a picture of Jesus NOW, in this frightful moment of John and Christians everywhere. We need that vision, too- if only our eyes could see and be opened to the actual reality of Jesus in this moment of 2023!

So, Jesus pulls back the curtain and shows his beloved disciple a vision of Jesus Christ.

***V10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying write what you see to the seven churches...."***

John turns around, and he sees the first of five pictures of Jesus Christ.

John sees seven golden lamp stands, and in the midst of the lamp stands, one is like a son of man.

Anyone in that day would know what John means when referring to one like a son of man. This is the central way that the OT prophets point toward Jesus...

### **Look with me in Daniel 7:13-14**

As I watched in the night visions,

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

### **Jesus in Matthew 24:29-31**

"Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light;

the stars will fall from heaven,

and the powers of heaven will be shaken. "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

John is seeing Jesus - the Son of Man !

### **Look where Jesus is standing! Jesus is standing in the Middle of his church.**

Jesus is in the Middle of the lampstands. He is in the Middle of his Church!

Jesus isn't outside looking in.

Jesus isn't above, looking down.

Jesus is in the Middle, right in the Middle of his church.

Despite what we see...

After COVID 19, many, many churches lost people on Sundays. The global shutdown halved many churches. It impacted our church, too.

If you were to look around the world...

It *seems* the church is shrinking and losing its ability to be effective in this generation.

It seems as though darkness is winning.

It seems as though maybe the church has nothing more to say or do in a suffering world.

OH, but here is Jesus! Right in the Middle. He's not panicked. He's not fearful. He not defeated.

He is standing!

He is standing in the Middle!

**HE IS STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS CHURCH!**

You can see that in describing Jesus, John is reaching for words. What he sees is almost indescribable; it's beyond words, but he will do his best to tell us what he sees.

**Jesus is standing in a long robe**

***V13 He's clothed with a long robe and a golden sash around his chest.***

His long robe reminds us of a PRIESTLY ROBE.

This is a priestly robe, Hebrews 4:14-16 tells, "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested[e] as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

In Latin, the word for priest is "pontifex," which is an engineering term meaning bridgebuilder.

Isn't this what Jesus has done? He's built a bridge across both sides of the canyon. He knows the human side of the canyon because he's lived as one, experiencing all we do, except without sin. And he knows the God side of the canyon because he is fully God.

Jesus our High Priest entered the Holy place once and for all with his blood securing our eternal redemption. Jesus has interceded for us. He's gone to the other side and won our forgiveness and eternal life.

**His robe**, is also one of a KING. Jesus the High priest is also King.

In John's day, the emperor could claim to be the King, the chief, the big cheese.

Leaders can strive for all the power in the world. They can set themselves up as rulers and tyrants over their fiefdoms, but behind all that, just beyond a thin veil, there is a curtainm opened up and we see the the High Priest and Ruler, Jesus Christ!

**Jesus is standing with a golden sash around his chest.**

John sees this also in a golden sash around the chest of Jesus. Our modern-day word "sash" doesn't quite get us there. This isn't a sash from Marshalls or Joanne fabric aisle, as nice as that can be.

In those times, this was a supportive work belt. A "sash" is a workmen's belt. It's more like a Carhartt stiff oil waxed belt that you put your tools in and get to work.

When you're working, you wear that belt around your waist, but when you're done working, you untie that belt, and you sling it over your shoulder. You wipe the sweat off your brow with the satisfaction of completing a task.

This High priest went to the cross and said, "IT IS FINISHED!" The work is done!

John is reaching for words again. He sees Jesus standing with white hair, like white wool, like snow.

John refers to what we read in Daniel: The Ancient of Days. This Jesus has always been. He was in the beginning, and he's in the end. He's seen it all. He's seen great, ancient empires come and go. He's not rattled. He's not afraid. He's not confused or confounded with what goes on in the world today. He has a wisdom deep beyond the sea, wide beyond the invisible borders of East and WEST.

**HE'S STANDING IN THE MIDDLE!**

V14 Jesus is standing with eyes like a flame of fire. Fire cleanses and burns away impurities. When Jesus looks at us this fire cleanses and purifies us.

Darrell Johnson says,

*"The eyes of the glorified Lord not only look at us...they look through us, 'penetrating the masks and veils behind which we hide our true being.' That is so good to know. Very scary and painful, but so liberating. Jesus can look right through all my facades-and see the junk that is ruining my life and burn it away."*

**Jesus is standing in the Middle with feet like burnished bronze.**

These feet are not like the iron and clay feet King Nebuchadnezzar saw in his vision, where the world's kingdoms were a statue with iron and clay feet that couldn't hold the weight of those kingdoms.

Jesus' feet have gone through the fire, bronze tested by fire and come out strong and steady. They are as firm as steel-toed boots. He is standing!

**Jesus is standing in the Middle of His church, speaking with a voice like mighty waters.**

His voice is like the roar of mighty waters, but it won't overwhelm you. It will also bring you peace like the rushing waters of an Eastern Sierra stream.

**He is standing, holding the entire cosmos!** His hands outstretched in his right hand holding seven stars, representing that he has the whole world in his hands,

*He's got the whole world in his hands...*

*He's got you and me, brother in his hands...*

*He's got you and me, sister, in his hands...*

*He's got the whole world in his hands.*

**Out of his mouth is a two-edged sword.** His words can cut to the heart, but like a surgeon's knife makes a cut to heal, so Christ's words are spoken to heal us.

**Jesus is standing in the Middle of his church, with his face shining on John,** reminding us that Jesus' face is not turned from us, but as we hear in a Benediction,

"The Lord Bless you and keep, the Lord make his face shine upon you...."

*V17 "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying 'Fear not. I am the first and the last, and the living on. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys of Death and Hades.'"*

Jesus puts his right hand on John and speaks, "**Fear Not.**"

I believe he says this to John not only over this terrifying moment for John but as to say, I'm going to show you many things right now,...**but FEAR NOT.**

**It's been said there are over 365 "Fear Nots" in the Bible in some way or another. 365 for every day of the year.**

This word from Jesus is something that we'll need to hold throughout our study of Revelation.

So are we just a bunch of foolish optimists denying the dark realities of the moment?

NO. WE ARE NOT. Because just behind this thin veil. Jesus is standing in the Middle of his church.

He is clothed in a victorious priestly robe. He has said his work is finished. Though the enemy tried to defeat our Savior and he continues to persecute our Lord's church, Jesus' feet are secure and holding ground. His voice shakes the earth's foundations, and his face is turned toward us.

Despite whatever circumstances you face and how bleak things may seem, Jesus will not let the darkness win.

Jesus is standing with you.

And he is standing *with us* **right in the Middle of THIS church.**