

Letters to the Churches, Pt. 1
Three Questions Underneath
Revelation 1: 4-10

**First Presbyterian Church
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We're beginning a mini-series on the letters to the churches found in the book of Revelation. We want to focus on what Jesus had to say to the seven churches named in the book. Based on what Jesus said to those churches, what might he be saying to us today? If Jesus wrote our church a letter, what would be in it? That's what we'll be listening for these next five weeks. Today, we'll look at the set-up to the letters. As we consider some of what he said, we're going to organize around three crucial life questions. Questions that lie underneath what John wrote. Questions asked of both believers and unbelievers.

1) Is this the way it's always going to be?

John himself would have been asking that question. He wrote from the island of Patmos. It was a Roman penal colony, little more than a big rock, and 40 miles off the coast of what is now Turkey. There was no way off the island unless a Roman warship took you. That's how it seemed the rest of his life would be.

The Christians of the day were also asking the question. Revelation was written around the year AD95. At that time, there were only about 7500 Christians in the entire world. In an empire of 60 million, we made up less than one hundredth of a per cent. Persecution had been rampant. Social and economic prospects were poor. The believers in Jesus were out of step with everyone else. Is this the way it's always going to be?

To them, John wrote in the name of the one who is, who was, and who will always be. He wrote in praise of Jesus Christ who is the ruler of the kings of earth. Is this the way it's always going to be? Rome in charge? The name of Christ ridiculed? Our people despised or tortured? No, said the old man exiled in a rock on the sea. Jesus is the ruler of the kings of earth. Right now. And he will triumph. When it seems nothing can change, it helps to know that.

Around age 11, my friends and I got very interested in launching model rockets. There was a field, an empty lot, near my friend's house that became mission control. We spent hours setting up. More hours trying to get the engines to

fire, and then some frantic seconds after launch where we prayed like crazy that the parachutes would open. Often the nose cone didn't pop, so the chutes didn't come out and our beautiful models crashed into pieces. That was all part of it. We loved the field where we spent so many summer days.

Less than a decade later the field was gone. A huge building rose above our launch site. The place where we played was now occupied by people who looked down on us. We were scruffy adolescents. We had no financial standing. No social worth to those in the building. The door man would not let me in to the lobby of the building. It was as if he said, "You are nothing. We are. We always have been. And we always will be here. And you will never be worthy to come in here with important people." Pretty good bluff. Of course he did have the power in the moment to keep me out. But I knew better. I knew that before the foundation was laid, I had launched rockets there. I owned the truth of that field. You have not always been. You will not always be. Your building is showy, but it's a sham. I know better in spite of the appearance of your pride.

Imagine that John smuggled his letter onto a Roman ship. Imagine that it was discovered and a Roman captain read his words. While the shields of his soldiers gleamed in the Mediterranean sun, he read, "From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of earth." He would have laughed til his helmet fell off. Jesus the ruler! Caesar rules and the mightiest army on earth backs him up. But John knew better. Before there was Rome, God existed. Long after Rome, the Lord God will reign. And now, even now, the man Jesus that Rome put to death is up from the grave. He lives. And he reigns. Before you laid the foundations of empire he was playing with the cosmos, shaping the creation. Long after your buildings crumble, he will still be reigning.

News for believers and nonbelievers alike. This is not how it will always be. The powers that appear to rule now will pass away. This is bad news if you are a present power in the world: you don't really control anything. You're not really getting away with anything. Good news if you are being squeezed, squashed or overlooked by the powers of the earth. You are not forgotten. It will not always be this way. You belong to the true ruler. Serving him is of eternal value.

2) What if I got it wrong about Jesus?

This is another haunting question underlying our passage, haunting for nonbeliever and believer alike. What if I got it wrong about Jesus? John writes, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him,

and all the tribes of earth will wail on account of him.” John is echoing the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10, “They will look on him whom they pierced.” This same passage was quoted in the Gospel of John right after the soldier stabbed the heart of the deceased Jesus and both blood and water came out. The verse pierces *us*: “See what you’ve done! Just look at what you did!” The authorities thought that by killing Jesus, they had gotten rid of him. But dead Jesus got up. And when he returns, everyone will be forced to gaze upon him. To see the wounds of his piercing. Now blindingly glorious. To see and realize, “I did that! Those wounds are from me.” And the question of great urgency will be “What if I got it wrong about Jesus?”

Another tale from my youth. In my college summers, I worked in the men’s department at J.C. Penny’s. One day I went to deposit my check and decided to use the drive through. I put in my check. The teller told me that she couldn’t find an account for me. I urged her to look again. “Idiot!” I thought. “My family has banked here for half a century.” I told her just that after she once more said she couldn’t find the account. What’s the matter with people? She said again she was sorry but there was no record. Well, I was at the age when I knew everything there was to know. And I felt a strong sense of mission to correct the ignorant and mistaken. “Look, my family has been banking at the Coral Gables Federal Savings and Loan Association for decades. How can you possibly not be able to find my account?” Silence. That’s it, she’s going to crack. She’s going to be in big trouble. “Sir,” she said. “This is the First National Bank of Coral Gables.” Oh. Oh my. I was at the wrong bank. And I didn’t just get it wrong. I got it arrogantly, angrily, colossally wrong. I was cut to the quick. I wanted to howl with the embarrassment.

They will look on him whom they pierced. And every tribe on earth will wail on account of him. This is news for unbelievers. You can dismiss Jesus. You can ignore him. You can try to say he didn’t say what he said. You can try to wave away this talk of resurrection as the fantasies of fools. But you will see him. You will see him whom you pierced. And it will cut you to the heart to know you got it wrong about Jesus. Of course, that truth does not allow me to be smug. For I too will look on him whom I pierced. I will see those wounds and know that I caused them. Oh, yes, I love Jesus, and I will thrill to the sight of Christ Jesus in all his glory when he returns. But the more I gaze at the wounds, the more I will see how deep they are. How painful they were. How horrifying was the price he paid for me. And I will know, even as a believer, how I have tried to avoid Jesus. I will see all the times I still lived for myself even though I knew better. I will come face to face with how neglecting his little ones was neglecting Jesus, and I pierced him

with my indulgence, self-centeredness, pride, indifference, and distraction. There will be so many ways in which I know I got it wrong about Jesus my Lord.

John puts it right in our faces: it's all about Jesus. Every eye will see him. The Lord. The crucified one, pierced by human sin. The risen one, reigning in glory and ready to set all things right, whether they want to be set right or not. Charles Wesley said it poignantly:

Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty.
Those who set at naught, and sold him, pierced and nailed him to the tree.
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.

Jesus is the one with whom we have to do. He is the reality we must confront. For he will confront us, each of us, with his reality. I want to be aligned with the truth of Christ Jesus.

3) How is this all going to end?

The third underlying question has to do with where the world is going. Is history just circular? Going round and round. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. The faces change but everything is the same. We live, we suffer, we have children, we die, our children live, suffer, have children, and they die, and on it goes with no hope that anything will ever be any different?

Certainly that handful of Christians might have been tempted to think so. But John reminds them, "He is coming on the clouds." Jesus will return. And the book of Revelation tells us Christ will call this present way of the world to a halt. He will render just judgement. He will set things right. He will remake the heavens and the earth to all they were meant to be. This gives us tremendous hope now to be envisioning what will be. And if we envision it, we can work to show it forth.

One more story, this from high school. In the intricate yet ridiculous hierarchies of high school, I crossed a lot of boundaries. Yet my closest friends were skinny smart guys. I hung out the most with Joe Raine. He was a 6'4" bean pole who took the SAT once and got a perfect 800 on the math test. We knew to avoid the lower level tough guy wanna-be's who figured the purpose of skinny smart guys was to get pushed around. It was humiliating and annoying if you had to acknowledge their superior physical strength. By senior year, though, Joe had been filling out. He'd made the basketball team and those long spider arms had gotten steel strong. Joe was also getting tired of taking it. One afternoon, one of

these tough guys, let's call him Swindell, started mouthing at Joe. This time, Joe looked Swindell right in the eyes and mouthed right back at him. Then he walked away. Swindell wasn't super swift. So it took him a minute to realize what had happened. The old order was changing. "Hey," said Swindell. "You shut up!" Joe said, "Why don't you come over here and make me?" Swindell said, "I said shut up Raine." Joe replied, quite calmly, "And I said why don't you come over here and make me!" Was this really happening? Were we going to have a showdown? A crowd was gathering. Reputations were on the line. Swindell started looking a little confused. But he couldn't quit now. So he blurted back, "No! Why don't you come over here and shut up!" Joe let the absurdity of that line just hang in the air. Then he started laughing. And everyone else started laughing. Swindell looked confused. So he started laughing too. But his little bit of power was gone. Things would never be the same. Joe had broken the cycle. He was on his way to Furman, to a distinguished career with the NSA, to being an elder in his church and having a large healthy family.

Where is the world going? How's it all going to end? In spite of many appearances to the contrary. It's not going to the bullies. It's not going to the abyss. It's not going to belong to the devil. It's not an endless cycle of death and futility. Not ultimately. Jesus Christ will return. The world will cry out with the angels in Revelation 11, "The kingdom of this earth is become, the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

This is good news to us when we are tempted to pride. My personal kingdom will not last. Not all the security I can accumulate can keep me from death. Not all my wisdom can make my children do what I want. Not all my power can make the world how I want it to be. Not all my wealth can save me from suffering. Only what partakes of Christ's everlasting kingdom will last.

And that is good news when I feel frustrated about the present, burdened by the past or pessimistic about the future. For we can turn this around another way. Everything which *does* partake of Christ's kingdom will last. It will not be lost. It will go on. Every act of love. Every drooling mouth wiped; every diaper changed; every meal prepared, every dish cleaned, lawn mowed, bill paid and assignment completed. Every song of praise. Every appeal for forgiveness. Every prayer for another. Every work done in good faith and for good cause. Every wholesome exploration. Every duty fulfilled. Every moment of worship. Every second we believe and exercise faith in the Lord Jesus. It all counts. It's not lost. It all counts.

Despair, futility, bullies, manipulators, tyrants, death, boredom and frustration—all of those surround us, but none of those rule. Jesus Christ is ruler of the kings of earth. He was pierced for our transgressions, and wounded for our iniquities. He died, and he rose, and he reigns. He will come again. It is with him that we must deal. He is the reality. He is the death of pride. He is all our hope. We dare not get it wrong about Jesus. Look on him whom we pierced. Drop to your knees. Know that you pierced him. Look further and know that he forgives. That in his wounds is our healing. Rise, then, with him, and rejoice. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. He is the one who loves us and has cleansed us from all sins in his blood. And we are to bring his gospel, in word and deed and worship, to the ends of the earth.