

“Experiencing Jesus”

Revelation 1

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Do you live in a family where any word you speak about the Lord is ridiculed?

Do you live as the outsider in your own family because of your relationship to Jesus?

Even though you are careful not to wear it on your sleeve, at work is your faith a cause of abuse and discrimination - do you get so tired of it that some days you don't know if you can stand it anymore?

Is your own body or the body of a loved one so racked with pain that you would do almost anything for it to stop - you don't know how much longer you can go on?

Do you have days when discouragement with life is so great that you don't know if you can make it through another day?

Maybe you are an exception but I think most people hit a “wall” sooner or later in life - or maybe they experience that many times - when life, as we expect it, just falls apart.

For a lot of time in my youth, life was just attractive -

My prospects for success in education and employment were good.

I had a strong family background, I was reasonably well-liked by enough people to feel I belonged somewhere.

The future looked bright.

I was healthy and energetic, looking for the next challenge.

My past experience with life left me expecting the future would be likewise enjoyable, successful and largely pain free.

I liked the positive, aggressive, optimistic approach to life so much and I so wanted everything to keep going that way that I just ignored the things that didn't fit with my approach and my desires.

If others didn't share my optimistic outlook it must be because of a

character flaw in them - after all how could anyone in his or her right mind not see a bright future for all of us.

And my naive understanding of Christianity just added to the positive expectations

- Now we not only had this life of opportunity and enjoyment but we also had the prospect of heaven when this good life was over.

But as I grew older I was no longer able to ignore the things that didn't go so well in life.

I was also faced with the death of people I loved.

And I grew increasingly aware of the world around me - places and people whose experience was very different than mine - people who suffered intensely and intractably.

I could only play the part of the emperor with no clothes for so long.

Sooner or later our own experience in life, if not the experiences of hundreds around us, begins to make us realize - life isn't a succession of success, enjoyment, comfort and freedom from pressure, frustration, pain and suffering.

You can only read, so long, the accounts of the Rwandans, Bosnians, Haitians, the murders, child abuse, betrayals, before you realize life isn't coming up roses for most people.

Even if you ignore all that, ignore the obvious most of your life, the death of a relationship or of a loved one or your own imminent death will finally rip those rose colored glasses from your eyes and stare you starkly in the face.

Somewhere along the line unfounded optimism gives way to reality.
What do we do then?

NO, I've not turned from Tigger into Eeyore.

It is not that youthful optimism has given way to pessimism.

It is that I've learned that **what** you hope for and what you trust in are very important.

The hope of my youth and the hope of much of the world is misplaced - it is hope in the future but it is a hope in a future that is defined by or that is contingent on things working out according to our plans or at least working out in a way that leaves us relatively comfortable.

When you stand back and look at this world with, yes, its beauty and opportunities but also see the wretched suffering you are forced to attempt to intellectually and emotionally accommodate it all. How do you do that?

There are some people who bravely insist on an unfounded optimism: Listen to this quote from the book, The Growth of the Liberal Soul

***“It is perhaps the most deeply ingrained part of our modern outlook that we can, through our concerted efforts, overcome the vicissitudes of the human condition. Nothing stands in the way of a final victory over our own finitude. The path we have already traveled has demonstrated that the meek do not inherit the earth. Only those with the temerity to prevail, to test their wills against the recalcitrant reality can compel nature to yield the secrets by which we become its masters.”

Do you believe that?

Do you believe that by our combined efforts we can overcome life and death.

That if we persist and we fight for it we can truly become the captains of our own ships of fate?

That if you are just smarter and try harder you can overcome those obstacles to your vision of the good life?

Many people believe it.

They would probably not be so audacious as to say it but they believe it and who they put their faith in proves it.

Well if you don't believe that - if you don't have that optimistic, though unfounded, outlook on life how can you cope with it?

Some people don't. They despair. They curl up emotionally and numbly wait life out - doing the routine, just hanging on - but no expectations, no joy, no hope.

But there is yet another way to look at life.

There is another perspective.

Despair and unfounded optimism are not the only two alternatives.

There is a founded, well-grounded optimism.

This optimism is not anchored in a belief that we human beings individually can guarantee ourselves the good life or that we can collectively bring about justice and peace if we work hard enough

but this optimism is anchored in our belief that there is a sovereign God who is now ordering all of history and will one day bring it to a just and lasting peace.

This optimism is founded not on our ability but on the ability of the almighty God.

This optimism is based on the belief that our story is not over and that when it is over it will be right and good.

The book of Revelation is the rest of the story.

When I was quite young - probably no older than 6 or 7 my father, in addition to running a farm business worked part-time at a stone quarry - a place where large stones were dug from the earth and then crushed into smaller ones for use in making roads.

I loved to go with him to the quarry where the walls of earth were high and the machinery large and awesomely loud. It was nearly overwhelming for a little boy.

One rainy day my father was working high in the air on some conveyor equipment when he slipped on wet metal.

He plunged off the machine, falling nearly 40 feet and landed on a caterpillar tractor.

When he regained consciousness after momentarily blacking out, he realized he could not move - one hip and leg were

grotesquely out of shape and then he remembered he was all alone in the quarry.

This is a true story. What would you think if I stopped the story at this point and told you no more about it?

Even though it doesn't affect you directly, you'd say the story needs an ending.

My father was found hours later by his boss, he was hospitalized, surgery was performed and after months of recovery he was nearly as good as new. It was hard time in the life of our family - but God was faithful.

I played with not ending the story only to make the point that when it is our lives we are talking about, when it is our futures that hang in the balance - we desperately long to know the end of the story.

The book of Revelation is the end of the story - it tells us how it all comes out - it assures us that history is not in our hands or the hands of fate but is in the certain hands of Jesus - the almighty God.

*Look please at Revelation 1:1 "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place."

*Look also at Revelation 1:19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."

This is not fanciful conjecture, this is not wishful thinking - this is God telling the end of the story - It has my attention because he's telling my story and yours!

When I understand that it is my story God is talking about, my interest is no longer simple curiosity.

When the complexity of life, its beauty and its ugliness, finally pierce through to my thinking - I long to see how it can all work out.

But God's description of the end is not only intensely interesting it is preponderantly puzzling.

Who of us has not been somewhat stymied by the references to bowls and beasts, dragons and devils, trumpets and thunders, and seals and

censors?

Romans I can read with understanding with the help sometimes from a dictionary.

But Revelation with its grotesque images, indescribable beings, and impossible combinations causes us to soon give up any hope of reading with understanding.

But it shouldn't. God through John, the author, is just using a different kind of literary style - it's called apocalyptic literature - that word apocalypse is *taken from the second word of the book. (Revelation 1:1 "The revelation of...")

We've heard variations on that word before: "Apocalypse Now" , "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and so on.

Contrary to those popular uses of the word - the word simply means "revelation" - hence the name given to the book.

This is God revealing what we need to know about where history is going.

But the book of Revelation uses so much symbolism and imagery that that very style of writing has taken on the name "apocalyptic literature".

Most of us are comfortable with straight prose writing like the apostle Paul's letters.

We do well with narrative like the gospels or the books of Kings which tell the stories of historical incidents.

We even do fairly well with proverbs and parables.

But poetic language begins to stretch some of us because it uses words very symbolically.

And so here with the literary style of Revelation.

It's a style of writing that employs not only words with explicit content but words that describe experience which surpasses words but is nonetheless real.

It's like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time - you can tell about it in words but you can't communicate the fullness of the experience with words alone unless with your words you begin to create a picture in the listener's mind.

Except poor John, he's describing things no one has ever seen or heard. He's describing the indescribable.

Someone might then ask, "Can we take Revelation literally?"

And the answer is: "Absolutely if we understand what "literal" means."

A literal interpretation understands the use and importance of figures of speech.

*We might say "I was walking along the beach as the sun went down."

What do we literally mean? Do we mean that the sun revolves around the earth?

Or do we understand "the sun went down" is a figure of speech for describing the rotation of the earth on its axis so that the sun was no longer visible from where you were on the beach?

To interpret the sentence literally is to take into account the figure of speech that is used.

So with Revelation - John uses much symbolism, signs, word pictures, etc to communicate what he literally means.

When John in 1:14-17 describes Jesus as having white hair, fire eyes, bronze feet and a waterfall's voice holding stars in his hands - can he be taken literally?

Yes, if we understand it is symbolic language to describe a literal truth - Jesus, in all his glory and power is awesome and awesome to behold.

But the question still remains, "How are we to interpret all those fantastic images?"

The answer is "very carefully".

Careful to understand the truth John is picturing rather than trying to decipher every detail of the image.

Imagine describing a rainbow - you can focus so much on the detail that you no longer see the beauty of the whole.

When we read Revelation we must watch for when John is writing in straight forward prose and when he slips into picture language - and

handle each accordingly just as we do when we read any other literature of today.

Why did John write the book?

First of all because he was told to.

And I suspect that if you or I had been commissioned in the way John was we too would have obeyed promptly.

*But John had another reason.

(Rev 1:4 "John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia:...")
The Christians in western Turkey (then called Asia) were going through a time of intense persecution.

They were discriminated against in the work place, they were ejected from their families or homes, and some were being killed because of their commitment to Jesus.

Similar to many in our world today, as testimony before our own congress is pointing out, these Christians had reason to wonder what would become of them.

John's major interest is in writing to encourage these believers.

They had reason to be discouraged!

From where they stand it doesn't look good.

But John writes to tell them the rest of the story.

Now mind you, their interest was not idle curiosity.

**A.W. Tozer writes: "Some are interested in the book of Revelation but just out of human curiosity. "They look upon all the minor details of prophecy as the details of an amazing jigsaw puzzle. They will spend much time and effort trying to put the various pieces together, hoping to be the first to arrive at some new prophetic twist or surprising suggestion. But that motive is improper..." (Tozer 31)

I call that eschatological voyeurism or peeping toms into the future.

*Pastor Scotty Smith wrote “Revelation is not written to amuse us but to transform us.” (Smith p23)

And it will transform us if we come to this book to learn what it is God is saying.

John was writing to people whose world was falling apart.

John wrote to show them Jesus!

Jesus, not only as they had heard about him when he was first here - the lamb of God who came to die for the sins of his people - but also the Jesus who is coming again.

In this book John wants us to see Jesus.

He doesn't want to give us a calendar of some kind on which we can check off the events as the end nears.

He wants to make certain that in the midst of whatever comes (whether in your life now or in the future) you will know in whom you have believed and will be persuaded that he is able to keep what you have committed to him until that day.

I want to have such a clear understanding and mental picture of who Jesus is,

of his power to make his will happen,
such a clear impression of his sovereign control of all history
that I will not fear no matter what happens -
that I will persevere - that I will be a faithful follower of
Jesus Christ.

It is not a detailed accounting of what will happen and when it will happen that will quell the fear in our hearts when our world seems like it is coming to an end or actually comes to an end- it is knowing we are safe in the protection of Jesus.

John will show us Jesus at every step of the way.

**AND When we finish we should have one overwhelming cry of hope:
Jesus wins and I belong to Jesus!**

Look at the Jesus John shows us.

In verses 4-7 we get a short history of the world (from beginning to end).

*Here the past, the present and the future are all compacted into four verses. **And notice who is central all the way through it!**

Verses 4-5 speak of God eternally existing in the past, present and future.

Verses 5-6 speak of our current relationship to Jesus through his actions in the past.

And Verse 7 speaks of the future when Jesus comes again.

*In fact in verses 4-5 we get an even shorter history of the world.

After introducing the Father, the Spirit, and the Son in these verses we have a summary of the work of Jesus in verse 5:

Jesus came to earth as a faithful witness - God himself coming to us to reveal himself to us as the one who would die for us.

Jesus was the firstborn from the dead - the one who has the power over death itself as demonstrated by his own resurrection.

And Jesus who now is and will come as the ruler over the kings of the earth.

But the end of verse 5 and all of verse 6 John makes it very personal.

Jesus is not only God who has always existed, who came to earth to die, rose from the dead and is coming again in power - He is Jesus to you.

He loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

This eternally existent God has chosen to love us - you matter to him!

And, John reminds them, in his love for us, **he died** to pay the penalty for our sin that we might be freed from the sentence of eternal death.

Not only that, he then brought us into his family - has made us part of his kingdom, his people.

And not only that, he has made us priests - people with direct access into his presence.

John was writing to people whose faith was in Jesus - who were trusting Jesus.

And John is reminding them that the Jesus he will show them in a minute is the Jesus who loves them personally and deeply and eternally.

So when you see him, though it may frighten you nearly to death, don't be afraid - He loves you!! You belong to him by his grace.

*Then in verse 7 we see Jesus in the future.

"Look he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be. Amen."

John sees into the future.

Did he promise his first coming? Did it happen? YES.

Does he promise his second coming? Will it happen? YES

Can you imagine it? Where will you be when it happens.

What will it be like? Will you be in a library studying for an exam, or standing at the kitchen sink washing up some left-over dishes, or driving to make that next appointment, or at your desk trying to decipher what the boss meant by that last e-mail?

All of the sudden you become aware of a sound - is that a trumpet?

And then it comes to mind - Jesus said he would come.

Is this it?

Is it true after all?

Can you imagine and savor that moment! Can you anticipate it.

Everything you believe and hope for has been pinned to this event and now it is happening. Wow!!

"Look" John says, "I can see it".

So certain is this event that John says he can see it in his mind's eye - later he will have a God-given vision of it when he doesn't have to just imagine it. But here his imagination is informed by Scripture and he can just see it!

In the OT the presence of God was often indicated by the massing of clouds - even the cloud pillar by day and cloud pillar of fire by night let the Israelites in the wilderness when they left Egypt.

Daniel had said that the Lord would be "coming with the clouds"

Zechariah has said the world would look on him whom they had pierced. God gives John these two OT images together in his mind's eye to imagine the coming again of Jesus.

Will it be television cameras focused on his return with people from the entire world watching like they do a space mission or a celebrity funeral?

However it is accomplished - the result is that many in the world will mourn his coming - the coming of Jesus will mean that the Scriptures were right all along and it would have been far better to have heeded God's Word earlier because now it is too late - judgment has arrived.

"So shall it be"

"Amen"

A Greek and a Hebrew way of saying "Yes!!" - It is a hearty approval of what has just been said - Even so come Lord Jesus.

Having reminded us of the centrality of Jesus in all of history,
Having reminded us of his love for us - and that we belong to him,
John now describes the first vision he has.

I think the first vision is so intense that his first readers and we should be very grateful that he reminded us of our relationship to Jesus first.

* In verse 9 John writes that he, like his readers, is also suffering for the sake of Christ.

In fact, John is a prisoner on the rocky island of Patmos about 50 miles out to sea from western Turkey where the churches are.

*He writes that on the Lord's Day, a Sunday he was "in the Spirit" - or in other words he, like Peter when he was in Joppa and Paul when he was in

Jerusalem, was ushered by God into a trance of sorts where he experienced what he next describes.

He says, "I heard a loud voice behind me like a trumpet."

In other words the voice was so clear, so distinct and so loud that it grabbed his attention.

John turned around - who wouldn't?

He said he wanted to see the voice.

*And what he saw according to verse 17 caused him to drop to his face on the ground or floor as though he was dead.

Now I can't begin to adequately describe what John saw.

I don't think John can adequately describe what John saw.

He says, the one I saw was "like" this and he was "like" that. And furthermore he was "like" and he keeps going on about him with "like" this and "like" that.

Now we've all seen enough special effects on television or movies to imagine something of what this might have been like.

Listen to it with all your imagination operating:

**Read "Someone like a son of man dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

Oh, yes it is possible that the robe and sash speak of royalty, that the white hair refers to wisdom, that the blazing eyes speak of omniscience, that the bronze feet speak of stability and the double-edged sword speaks of justice

But what's the point?

Seeing Jesus in all his majesty, in that incredible display of power, how could anyone doubt He has the might to overcome all opposition, to keep

his people no matter what they are experiencing at the moment, to bring about the end he has determined?

The Jesus who is in control of history past, present and future is without doubt able to save his people.

The whole book is centered on Jesus.
He is our hope.

*As I said, John uncontrollably fell to his face, but look at what Jesus does. Verse 17b “He placed his right hand on me and said, ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and hades.’”

Right from the very start of this book it is not what you know it is who you know.

And if your trust is in Jesus then you are trusting the one who is in control of life and death. He made it all, he controls it all, and he will bring it all to a conclusion. And with his right hand on you - he says - and you belong to me.

With that vision firmly in mind those early Christians and we can face anything.

An outline of Revelation:

- 1** **Introduction/Purpose**
- 2-3** **Letters to 7 churches**
- 4-5** **A scene in heaven**
- 6-18** **Just before the end**
- 19** **Jesus comes again**
- 20-22** **The new heavens and earth**