

of priests to serve his God and Father.” We are not just saved from sin, but saved to serve! “To Jesus Christ be the glory and power for ever and ever!” – another strong statement of his divinity.

But Jesus is coming again. There will be the visible return foretold in Acts 1.11. It will no longer be the time for salvation, but for judgment.

vv. 9-20 John’s vision of Jesus is no longer as the teacher from Nazareth, but as the Son of God with all his glory restored – a truly awesome vision. He describes himself as “the first and the last” (the same words used by the Lord God Almighty in v. 8). Having been dead but now alive for ever and ever, “I have authority over death and the world of the dead”. Jesus is Saviour and Lord.

He stands among seven gold lamp-stands and holds seven stars in his right hand. “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp-stands are the seven churches”.

The word “angel” literally means “messenger” and refers here to the responsible leader of each church.

The “lamp-stand” reminds us that Jesus called himself “the light of the world” (Jn 8.12). He is the source of light for us all (1.9). But he also said, “You are like light for the whole world. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lamp-stand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5.14-16). It is only his light that we can shine into this darkened world. The “lamp-stand” is a very graphic picture of what the Church is intended to be!

Jesus is the Lord of the Church.

- If the local church is to be a “lamp-stand”, what is that going to mean for what we do together and as individuals?
- We have congregations, elders, church councils, presbyteries, synods and assembly. What should it mean for us that Jesus is the Head of the Body, the Lord of the Church? How do we find out his will? To whom are we accountable?

Study 2: Letters to the Churches – Revelation 2-3

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The Victory of the Lamb

1. Introduction

A number of years ago a senior minister confided in me that he (and others of his era) had preached very little on the subject of the Second Coming of Christ for fear of the extremism that would simply be looking for times and dates. Sadly that meant that certain passages that **are** in the Scriptures became the exclusive hunting ground of the extremists.

A camp speaker commented that, over the years, he had picked up some thirty books on the end times – and they disagreed with one another.

Jesus himself has certainly warned us that “no one knows when that day or hour will come – neither the angels in heaven nor the Son; the Father alone knows” (Mt.24.36). Writing about the Day of the Lord, Peter comments on what Paul has written on the subject and adds, “There are some difficult things in his letters which ignorant and unstable people explain falsely, as they do with other passages of the Scriptures. So they bring on their own destruction” (2 Pet.3.16).

Most of us know Revelation only from the letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 and the ascriptions of praise that have been used in oratorios and anthems. I believe that, while much of the symbolic detail of Revelation will remain a mystery until the end times, there is much of its broad sweep that we can and ought to grasp. It is for our instruction and blessing that we do so.

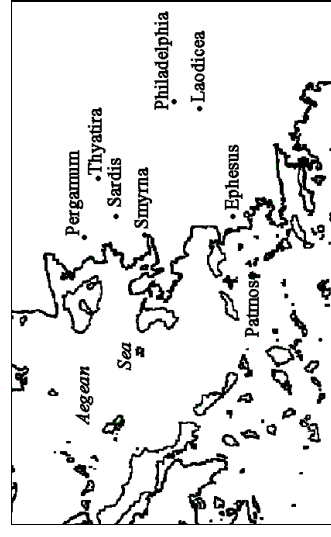
Who, When and Where

Read: Revelation 1.1-11

Until recent times it has been universally accepted that Revelation was written by John, the beloved disciple.

He lived to a great age and was leader and overseer of the Church in Ephesus, chief city of the Roman province of Asia.

Late in his life, perhaps in the early nineties of the first century, John was arrested and sent into exile on the island of Patmos (1.9). While he was



there God gave him this series of remarkable visions. He wrote down a description of them and sent it as a circular letter to seven churches on the mainland (v. 11).

Understanding Apocalypse

The Greek word for “revelation” is *apocalypsis* – an unveiling or revealing of what has been hidden. The book of Revelation is not the only “apocalyptic” literature in the Bible. We find it in the visions of Daniel 7-12. This kind of writing is marked by graphic, figurative language. Usually it has been written in times of hard testing. There may be “code-words”, lost to us but known to people of the time of writing. Because the key concern is to pull aside the veil between earth and heaven, there is no newspaper account of human history, but the human scene is interpreted in the light of God, his angels and his adversaries.

There have been a number of different basic approaches to understanding Revelation.

- Some have seen it entirely in terms of the immediate history of the early Church and especially the situation and circumstances of the seven churches of the province of Asia.
- Others have related the book to the whole age of the Church from Pentecost to the Second Coming. The seven churches are seen to represent the Church at seven stages of Church history.
- Another group view the book as being entirely about the future and the end times.
- Yet others look for poetic rather than literal meanings in the various visions.

None of these views represents the final word. All have their measure of truth.

Personally I am convinced that there are many things we cannot yet understand which will become clear in God’s time. It is still not for us to know his “times and seasons” (Acts 1.7). I read recently a comment by British Old Testament scholar, Norman Snaith, at an international conference in 1951 – six years after the end of World War II. He was thankful for America’s help, but found much American Christianity full of an out-of-date liberalism which had been found to be bankrupt. He said, “It has taken two major wars to teach Europe, including Britain, that we cannot save ourselves... We on this side, especially in this last war, with our

resources greatly impaired, once more were in at the beginning, and, alone of all the contestants, kept on right through to the end – and we have been badly mauled. Just at present, for one reason or another, we seem to be worse off than anybody else so far as material blessings within the country are concerned. This has given us an advantage nearly equal to our German friends. We are finding ourselves driven away from the idea that we ourselves, by ourselves, can build the New Jerusalem...” (*Proceedings of the Eighth Ecumenical Methodist Conference 1951*, p.233).

- To what extent do our circumstances make us ready to understand this (or any other) part of God’s Word?
- What are our particular expectations as we begin to study the book of Revelation?

Looking at the Text

vv. 1-3 “... what must happen very soon”. In the Gospels, we hear Jesus telling his disciples that they had to be alert, ready, and doing his will – “The Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him” (Mt. 24.36-44). We can too easily say that it’s almost 2000 years and nothing has happened. Be warned – he is coming soon! (Note 2 Pet. 3).

“... obey what is written”. “Obey” means to listen and to take appropriate action. We tend to live with the assumption that this whole order of things will go on for ever. Eternity is closer than we think. These verses are reminding us to live this present life in the light of eternity.

vv. 4-8 The greeting is similar to that used by Paul in his letters (e.g. in Rom.1.7). It is very intentional. The eternal God, the I AM, offers us “grace and peace” – it is of eternal importance how we respond to his offer. It is important to grasp this gracious offer as we read this book which has so much about judgment.

Notice how Jesus and his work are described. He is the “faithful witness” – John wrote of him, “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (Jn 1.18). He is “the first to be raised from death.” Jesus himself raised the widow’s son, Jairus’ daughter, Lazarus... but these all died again. Jesus was the first to be raised to eternal life. He is “the ruler of the kings of the world” – he has ultimate, divine authority.

“He loves us, and by his death he has freed us from our sins.” It is on that basis he comes to us with grace and peace. “... and made us a kingdom