

Loving Evaluation for Lasting Change

Revelation 1

"Blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near"

Introduction: What we value we plan for, and what we plan for we put into practice, and what we practice we evaluate, and what we evaluate we celebrate. This progression is something we try to implement here at Grace and also in the Bakker home. We often take time to discuss the **strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats** that we face as a church, and Erin and I will have similar discussions when we go away for a weekend or two during the year (like one coming up to celebrate our anniversary!). This process helps ensure that we are not simply going through the motions, that we are improving, and that we are not drifting from our mission and purpose. People often bristle at the idea of **evaluation**, since by nature it will identify short comings and areas that need to change, but that is exactly the point. Whether its my marriage, parenting, personal life, or this church as a whole, we all have areas that need evaluation, which allows us to **celebrate** some things and begin a process of **working on changing** others.

Last week we celebrated a historic day in the life of this church, commissioning three families who will move to New Hampshire to plant a new church, Grace Church of Dover, and commit to reaching the people of New England. This came as a result of **the value** of equipping and sending demanded much **planning**, which bred the execution of that plan, allowing us to celebrate well. But complacency can easily kill, as can lingering too long over success. It is right and good in the life of Grace church to spend some time in **evaluation**, not to point out failure, but to ensure that we don't. We want to spend some time in God's Word, taking a bit of a hiatus from our study in Ephesians, to look at Christ's commitment to His church, and see what He expects, what He gives commendation for, and what He criticizes, calling the church to repentance. Revelation 1-3 plays out like a big evaluation of the church, both in celebration and call for change. We want this to be a time of honest, clear, and robust evaluation for Grace church.

We are going to take the next 9 weeks to look at these first 3 chapters of this explosively glorious book. You will see different pastors address different sections each week, since this section is written to **7 different real churches** in Asia Minor that each had areas that Jesus evaluated, some for commendations and others for criticism. Revelation deals primarily with what is to come, but also dealt with present issues in the churches present at the time, which allows us to glean lessons and principles. **Our goal is to evaluate where we are doing well as a church, where change is needed, and what opportunities there are to grasp.**

Revealing the Purpose of the Letter (1-3)

The book of Revelation has intrigued many and confused more. The reality, however, is that to understand Christ truly and deeply we must understand all of Scripture, especially this book. The word "Revelation" is an English translation of the original word "Apocalypse", which means to 'uncover' or 'lay bare', and sets the category of literature to be studied, called apocalyptic. This matters since we always translate Scripture literally, grammatically, and historically, but in this genre, there will be particular parts of speech, metaphors, and picture that must be taken prophetically. Notice a few things about these first 3 verses:

- **The purpose and point of the book** – The apostle John was clearly the author of this book, but he was simply the recipient. Notice that the Revelation is "of Jesus Christ", which functions both

objectively and subjectively. In other words, the whole point of it is to **reveal Jesus Christ**, as the One who will rule and reign, but also that **He is the one who is doing the revealing!** Jesus is the point of it all, and He is in control of the whole universe, and His church. Many like to study Revelation because of the vivid language, strange descriptions, and the timing and sequence of the end of the world, but completely miss Jesus Christ in the pursuit. Jesus is revealed in His second advent, not as a humble son of a carpenter but as the glorious, powerful, ruler King who will physically and personally be present to reign. In other words, if you want to know and love Jesus fully, this helps us understand Jesus not only how Jesus was revealed the first time, but we want to know and love the Jesus who will be revealed soon.

- **Progress of the message** – The Revelation that we receive came from the Father (v. 1), to Jesus the Son, to the messengers (angel), to John, to the churches, to us.
- **Blessing and Judgment are both real and possible** – Notice that this is a book about **blessing!** For all the scary images and vast judgment contained in the 22 chapters of Revelation, it ultimately is a message of happiness or blessing (much like the Beatitudes of Matt. 5). The pathway of blessing is clear: *read, hear, and keep* the commands contained in the message. However, failure to disobey will not mean a loss of salvation for true believers, but of a loss of blessing, of taking the lamp stand away, and missing out on blessing. This is an oft repeated pattern in the Old Testament, from the time of the Kings (2 Chron. 21:12-15) and Prophets (Jer. 29:1-23), blessing was found in following God His way, and justice and judgment following a failure to do so. This must be remembered as clear and dire warnings are given, as well as judgment promised. God is NOT against but FOR, but He will always uphold His glory and will never compromise.

Reveling in the Person of Christ (4-8, 12-18)

*“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before the throne, and from **Jesus Christ** the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who **loves us** and has **freed us** from our sins by his blood and **made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen**”*

Before understanding the message to the churches, John takes time to describe **who Jesus is** and **what He does**. Notice that the Godhead is represented here (much like in 1 Peter) where God is seen as eternal and the Holy Spirit who serves the Father before the throne. The “seven spirits” is an interesting description and has caused some confusion, but based on **Isaiah 11:2**, which gives a seven-fold (though some would say six) ministry of the Holy Spirit, and **Zechariah 4:1-10**, which connects golden lamp stands to the work of the Holy Spirit, the seven being the eyes of the Lord. But the focus clearly lands on **Jesus Christ**, which captures the point of the entire book.

- **Who Jesus is** – He is a 1) **Faithful witness** – John had outlasted but felt the sting of persecution, and the vision of what is to come reveals much persecution to come. This life is hard, and God has promised that those strive to live a godly life WILL be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). But we do not face persecution alone, as Jesus is FAITHFUL, faithful to fulfill the Law and all righteousness, to never leave or forsake, and to bring every promise to pass. We can stand in faithfulness because HE HAS given us His righteousness and established perfect faithfulness 2) **Firstborn of the dead** – Jesus is sovereign over life and death. The ‘firstborn’ was the next head of the family in Judaism, the one who controlled the inheritance. Christ has taken control of death and will destroy it (Rev. 20:14) so that death will be no more (Rev. 21:4), and all the faithful will share in

his resurrection and exaltation (Rev. 2:7, 11, 20:6; 22:2-3). 3) **Ruler of the kings on earth** – Many have postured themselves as sovereign and powerful on the earth, from dictators to tyrants, kings to generals, conquerors and monarchs. But each has met his demise, since there is only one sovereign and glorious king over all others, and one day He will literally reign over them all as king of the earth (Psa. 89:27)

This is who He is, and that lays a foundation for what He DOES:

- **What Jesus does –**

- 1) **HE LOVES US** – There are two phenomenal aspects of this phrase, as we do not often think of Revelation as a love letter. One, the word love here is in the **present tense**, meaning He did not just love us in the past, but continues to love us in an ongoing way in the present. The second is that the object of this love is **US!** He loves His church, which means He loves each individual that makes up His church. Perhaps one of the best, clearest, most theologically sound songs ever written is simply this: ***“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”*** If you are a follower of Jesus today, you are an object of His vast, incomprehensible love for you. When we have kids, they often try to express their love in understandable ways: “How much do you love me?” “This much!”, with arms opened as wide as they will go. Or they will say “I love you infinity”, or “3000”, or “soooo much”. But Jesus gave an even more tangible way to express His love: “I love you all the way to the cross. Look at the cross and you will know the height and depth of my love for you, my child. I love you so much I willingly placed myself on an instrument of terror and torture, bearing the weight of your sin, putting myself under the wrath of God poured out, so that you can have life.” He demonstrated His love that while we were still sinners, He died for us (Rom. 5:8). He has “freed us from our sins by His blood.”

In this ongoing love, there is a desire for us to be with Him. *“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, **that where I am you may be also.**”* (John 14:6). *“Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. **He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God**”* (Rev. 21:3). He has made us a **kingdom, priests to his God and Father**, meaning that His desire is that we will be with Him, ruling, serving, and worshipping Him forever. He did not simply love us to death and then detach. He wants to BE WITH us. In the midst of all the “good-bye’s” we’ve been saying lately, it’s encouraging to know that there will come a time where those will be no more, but love will be expressed by perpetual and eternal togetherness.

Finally, His ongoing love is expressed in His desire and willingness to **discipline us**. *“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline”* (Heb. 12:6-7). Show me an unhappy, insecure, and disobedient child and I will guarantee that child has not been consistently disciplined by a loving parent. Discipline is an ultimate expression of love since it is selfless, correcting, and directing. If God did not love us, He’d leave us alone. The whole message of Revelation 2-3 to the churches is an expression of love, not mean-spirited vitriol. Discipline does involve pain, but that pain in the short run is far greater than future or eternal pain. A call to change, repent, or deal with evil people in the midst of the church is an expression of love, as is any parent who has made his child cry through correcting discipline.

- 2) **He is our High Priest** – Jesus has made us to be a **kingdom of priests**, which means we are in the service of God the Father, but we can join in this function since Christ is our great High Priest. In

Rev. 2:13b-16, we see a picture of the glorious Christ, one that we saw earlier in Daniel 10:5-6. His long robe and golden sash pictured the garb worn by the high priest (see Exod. 28:4; 39:29). His white head and hair indicate dignity and wisdom, His blazing eyes His fierce judgment, bronze feet His glory and strength, powerful voice his divine glory and power, the sword his control and judgment, and radiant face summing up all of the others. Being our high priest means there are implications for us today:

He Sympathizes with our weakness – *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need.”* (Heb. 4:15-16) Jesus ultimately understands us because He became like us, and though He was not born into sin, did not have a sin nature, nor did He ever sin, He experienced all forms of temptation faced with the same humanity that we do. He knew the sting of betrayal, the pain of hunger, the shame of persecution, and the barrage of the enemy's schemes. He got tired and sad, He wept and celebrated, He went to weddings and funerals. He was disappointed by those closest to Him, and looked forward to sharing fellowship with those He loved. He did all of this perfectly, not to provide distance from us, but rather that we could draw near to Him, since He understands anything and everything that we are going through, from hurt to temptation, from dealing with failure to our greatest joys.

He Advocates for us – Not only is Jesus a high priest but an Advocate between us and the Father, since He made propitiation on the cross, satisfying God's wrath through His blood. *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an **advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous**”* (1 John 2:1). He functions on our behalf before the Father, and each time we sin and may be accused, He stands in with His finished work so that our sin does not disqualify us. We still must confess and repent of our sin after salvation, but Jesus being our Advocate means that our sin will never separate us from God or His love.

He Intercedes for us – *“But He holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever. Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them”* (Heb. 7:24-25). There are two major takeaways from His intercessory work: 1) He is able to save to the uttermost! What a promise. We cannot forget that Christ's love and work are not just for us but enliven our mission to make Him known. Knowing the Revelation of Jesus Christ should instruct and inspire us to share the good news of the gospel to the uttermost since Christ promised to save to that extent. Second, we take comfort in the fact that Christ prays for us. In John 17:20, He prayed for us while He was going to the cross. He prayed that we'd be unified with Him, know His glory, and be with Him one day. Know that today, Jesus prays for you out of His love and faithful priestly work.

3) He Rules and Controls Everything, especially the Church –

Jesus is ruling now in the sense that all things have been put under His feet and He is far above all rulers and power and dominion (Eph. 1:21-22), seated at the right hand of the Father in a position of authority (Eph. 1:20). However, there will come a day in the future (soon) where He will reign in person. He will come in the clouds, and every eye will see and every tribe will wail on account of Him (Rev. 1:7). The picture of the son of Man ruling is not one that is quiet, demure, and reserved, but one who rules openly, with a sword and overt authority. He will take His rightful place as King of the universe, since He is the one by whom the world was created, exists, and sustains (Col. 1:15-17). He will exercise justice and judgment and will rule forever.

This also means that He is the One who controls and owns His church, His Bride, His own. He purchased her with His own blood and has absolute authority to raise it up or tear it down. But He also is coming to bring comfort and encouragement to His church: *"Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore and I have the keys to both Death and Hades."* Notice that for believers, His return and action within the church is NOT a reason to fear, but a reason for hope and rejoicing. He is "in the midst of" the lamp stands, and that brings us to the final point of this first section.

Representing the Message to the Churches (9-11, 19-20)

Why was this letter written? Why were these first few chapters penned? John was in exile on a rock island called Patmos, worshipping on a Sunday when he was "in the Spirit", which means in the midst of worshipping the Spirit communicated with him this new revelation, not in a dream or while sleeping (see Acts 10:10, 16:9), but while he was awake. He was told to write letters to **seven real churches of Asia Minor, both for their sake and representative of all churches**. These would have laid on a travel route and were addressed in order of the route taken. The seven churches were represented by a **lamp stand**, which depicted the church as shining lights in the midst of a hostile world. The **seven stars in his right hand** represented angels, messengers on behalf of Christ to the churches (the word means "angel" or "messenger", and while some argue for earthly messengers, every other use of the word in Revelation points to an angelic being). As we look at these seven churches over the next seven weeks, there are a few highlights to keep in mind:

- **The letters all follow a similar pattern** – Introduction – Identifying strengths and weaknesses – a call to action or solution offered – a call to listen or overcome. The issues are diverse but the pattern is consistent.
- **The call to repent is prevalent** – In five of the churches, they are called to *repentance*, a turning of mind, heart, and action. This would be a corporate call, a directional change for the church as a whole. Only 2 are not called, but Smyrna is called to "Be faithful unto death" and Philadelphia "Hold fast to what you have", while the church at Laodicea does not have any strengths.
- **The issues faced were contextual** (they happened in a particular time and space) **but are also relevant to all churches in all eras** – Dealing with false teachers, sexual immorality, loss of passion for Christ, these are not just first century issues.
- **The lessons learned are imperative today** – The church at Ephesus was doing great, but they had a fundamental problem of loving Christ, and that church ended up going out of existence. We are one generation away from losing the truth, and one false teacher or doctrine away from losing the gospel. So, evaluation for any church is not a token exercise but a vital part of present and future health.

Christ rules the world, and reigns in His church. He is committed to her, because He loves her. He loves His church so much that He is willing to discipline, call out, and warn her against future drift and besetting sin. But He also gives us the solution, which is Himself. He reveals Himself in full glory, who died for us and raised up again in the past, to rule and reign in the future. So, we consider His word to us, and we pray we have ears to hear and hearts to respond.