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The First and the Last

Revelation 1:9-20

Introduction

Permit me to share a story from my own experience that helps explain why it took me so long to preach a sermon series on the book of Revelation. When I was twenty-eight, I had been ordained as a minister of the gospel only a short time earlier and was serving as an interim pastor at Calvary Baptist Church, a congregation of roughly three hundred people. The church was struggling. Years of poor leadership decisions and the dismissal of one of its senior pastors had left it in a fragile state. I was young, inexperienced, and keenly aware that I had far more to learn than to offer.

When Calvary eventually called its next senior pastor—whom I will refer to as “Bob”—he inherited both me and another assistant pastor. Less than a year into his tenure, Bob called me into his office to discuss my future. He asked what I hoped for in ministry, and I told him I planned to finish seminary and learn as much as I could from him, given his decades of pastoral experience. Then, without warning, he asked me what I believed about the rapture. Caught off guard, I answered honestly: I believed Christ would return for His people, but I was not yet certain whether that would be before, during, or after the tribulation. Bob paused, looked at me, and said simply, “Well, that’s a problem.”

It was a problem because Calvary’s doctrinal statement treated a pre-tribulation rapture not as a point of discussion, but as a nonnegotiable. One passage often cited in support of that view is 1 Thessalonians 5:9—“**For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.**” Yet the “wrath” Paul describes there is not the suffering believers endure in this world, but the final judgment reserved for the condemned. That conversation marked me deeply. It revealed how quickly the book of Revelation—and the questions surrounding it—can become a test of loyalty rather than a call to faithfulness. And it helps explain why I approached Revelation for so many years with caution, hesitation, and no small measure of pastoral concern.

Suffering (Tribulation) is a Part of the Christian Life (v. 9)

What troubled me about Pastor Bob and the doctrinal statement Calvary Baptist Church has since removed is that this view is difficult to reconcile with Jesus’ own teaching on what Christians should expect as His followers. Jesus said plainly, “**You will be hated by all for my name’s sake**” (Matt. 10:22). And again, “**In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world**” (John 16:33).

The apostles echoed the same expectation. Paul warned new believers, “**Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God**” just after he was stoned and left for dead outside of the city of Lystra (Acts 14:22). Peter likewise urged Christians not to be shocked by suffering, but to see it as participation in Christ’s own path: “**Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you... rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings**” (1 Pet. 4:12–13).

The word tribulation simply means affliction. In Revelation, tribulation is never portrayed as some vague or theoretical idea, but as a real and immediate experience for faithful believers.¹ It is the context of John’s exile, the churches’ suffering, and the cry of the martyrs. Tribulation is the setting in which the church endures, bears witness, and waits for Christ’s victory.

Let me press this one step further. In Matthew 24, Jesus warned His disciples, “**And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains**” (vv. 6–8). Then He said,

“**They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come**” (vv. 9–14).

Jesus then went on to prophesy about events we know with certainty occurred in AD 70: “**So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains... For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be**” (vv. 15–21).

History records that everything Jesus warned would happen did, in fact, occur. Roman soldiers under Titus breached Jerusalem, entered the temple, slaughtered priests while sacrifices were being offered, piled bodies in the sanctuary, erected pagan images, and offered sacrifices to Roman gods, including sacrifices to the emperor himself. The temple was dismantled stone by stone, fulfilling Jesus’ words: “**Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down**” (Matt. 24:2).

¹ Revelation consistently presents tribulation not as a distant, isolated future event, but as the lived experience of faithful believers—expressed through imprisonment, martyrdom, deception, and violent opposition—beginning in the first century and continuing until the final vindication of God’s people (Rev. 1:9; 2:9–10; 6:9–11; 12:17; 13:7; 17:6; 20:4).

John lived through those events. More than twenty years later, he wrote to seven churches not as a distant observer but as a participant: “**I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.**” The question to consider until we reach Revelation 6 is: What tribulation is John participating in? The persecution of Christians didn’t end in AD 70. What began as local opposition has become global. Some regions where the gospel once flourished—such as North Korea and Nigeria—are now among the most dangerous for Christians. A challenging reality of the Christian life is that faithfulness to Jesus often leads to suffering. John introduces himself not as an exception, but as a fellow participant in this tribulation.

Whatever view of the tribulation you currently hold, know that John and the first-century church were convinced they were living in it—not as a fixed or future timetable, but as a present season of suffering that began with Christ’s ascension and will end only with His return.

Jesus Will Not Abandon the Christian in Life (vv. 9-16)

When John received his visions, it was **on the Lord’s Day**. Before anything was revealed about God’s plan for the world, it was a day set apart for worship. Many believe this is the earliest technical use of *the Lord’s Day* to refer to Sunday—the day of Christ’s resurrection and the dawn of the new creation. What is most significant is that **John hears from the Lord while worshiping the Lord.**

While in a state of worship, John hears a loud voice behind him like a trumpet. This recalls Sinai, where we are told, “**there were thunders and lightnings... and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled**” (Exod. 19:16). The trumpet-like voice commands John: “**Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches**” (v. 11). When John turns, he does not see a trumpet, but **seven golden lampstands**, and “**in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man**” (v. 12).

Do not miss the significance: the lampstands represent the churches (v. 20), and Jesus stands **in their midst**. The Greek word *mesos* means *among* and *in the middle*. In other words, **in the midst of tribulation and suffering, Jesus has not abandoned His people.** This is the fulfillment of His promise: “**Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**” (Matt. 28:20).

The long golden sash Jesus wears is that of a priest (cf. Exod. 28:4; 29:5). His golden sash is not a fashion statement but a firm reminder that He is our great High Priest, who intercedes on our behalf as the One who advocates for all those He has redeemed through the shedding of His blood once and for all. As Hebrews 7 tells us, “**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**” (vv. 24–25).

The hairs on Jesus' head are white like the whitest wool, as Daniel describes the Ancient of Days: "**His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire**" (Dan. 7:9). Here Jesus is identified with eternal wisdom and divine purity—equal with the Father, yet uniquely the Son. He is the Everlasting One, and His wisdom is infinite.

Jesus' eyes are like a flame of fire. This does not mean He has literal beams shooting from His eyes any more than the sharp two-edged sword from His mouth is a literal sword (v. 16). His eyes blaze like fire, revealing that nothing escapes His sight—no motive hidden, no deed overlooked, and no wound His people suffer that will go unnoticed. His knowledge knows no bounds.

Our Savior's feet are like burnished bronze. There is no tiptoeing with Him. Our great High Priest and awesome King embodies unshakable strength as the One who will judge the nations with perfect justice and holy resolve. He is omnipotent—solid, sure, and infinitely strong.

The voice of our Savior matches His divine wisdom, all-encompassing knowledge, and unequalled strength as Yahweh. When He speaks, He does so with pervasive power: "**For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him**" (Col. 1:16). His word—every word—carries divine weight.

Why does this matter in light of what John and the churches suffered? Why does this matter for your brothers and sisters in North Korea or Nigeria? Why does this matter for us today? It matters because in the right hand of the Divine Son—who is infinitely wise, who sees His bride perfectly and completely, and who stands with omnipotent strength—the seven angels of the seven churches are held. Whether these refer to messengers who shepherd the churches or to angels with a particular charge, the point is unmistakable: His servants belong to Him. They are His, and they serve under His protection.

We are told that Jesus not only holds the seven stars and stands among His churches, but that from His mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword (see Heb. 4:12). There are no dull edges on this sword, because it is the Word of God—living and powerful, with the authority to judge, cut, cure, wound, and heal. And if that were not enough, His face shines like the sun in full strength. What John sees is Jesus in His glory—holy, majestic, and awesome, worthy of all our worship. This Jesus is not the one often presented as safe, domesticated, or passive. This is the glorified Lord, whose word creates, sustains, and brings all things to account. Richard Phillips wrote of these verses: "This vision does not show us what Jesus *looks* like but rather what Jesus *is* like,

symbolically depicting his person and work. Biblically trained Christians organize the work of Christ in his three offices of Prophet, Priest, and King.”²

With Jesus, there is No Need to Fear in Life or in Death (vv. 17-20)

It is no wonder, then, that when John sees this Jesus, he falls at His feet as though dead (v. 17). The beloved disciple, who once leaned against Jesus’ chest during His earthly ministry, is now an old man—weathered, worn, and wiser. Confronted with the risen and exalted Christ, John collapses in reverent awe. Yet it is this Jesus, standing in the midst of His church, who places the same right hand that holds His servants upon John.

John’s response is both right and appropriate. It echoes Isaiah’s encounter with the Holy One, in which he saw the Lord seated on the throne and heard the seraphim cry, “Holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3). Isaiah responded in terror, “**Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips... for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!**” (Isa. 6:5). John’s response also mirrors Habakkuk’s reaction before a holy God: “**I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble**” (Hab. 3:16). Throughout Scripture, when sinful people encounter God’s holiness, fear is the natural response.

But notice Jesus’ response to John’s terror: “**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 of Death and Hades**” (vv. 17–18). *Fear not*. Why? Because unlike Caesar, the Roman Empire, or any power that seeks to silence Christ’s church, John—and all who belong to the true church—belong to Jesus. He is the One who died to save John from his sins, the One who rose again to secure his salvation and resurrection, and the One who now holds the keys of Death and Hades.

This is why Jesus can promise all who belong to Him: “**My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand... I and the Father are one**” (John 10:27–30). With Jesus, there is no need to fear—not in life, and not in death.

Conclusion

Let me leave you with three points of application in light of all that we have seen in these verses:

First: Don’t be surprised by suffering—faithful Christians have always faced tribulation. If tribulation is the normal setting of the Christian life, then suffering is not a sign that something has gone wrong; it is often a sign that something has gone right. John does not present himself as an exception but as a partner in tribulation, reminding us that faithfulness to Jesus does not remove us from affliction but places us squarely within it. So when hardship comes—pressure to

² Richard D. Phillips, *Revelation*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 64.

compromise, opposition at work, isolation for following Christ, or quiet endurance no one else sees—we are not abandoned; we are walking the same path marked out by the apostles, the early church, and believers around the world today.

Second: Find your security in Christ, not in your circumstances.

Revelation does not calm our fears by minimizing danger but by revealing Christ. John is not comforted by explanations or timelines but by the presence and power of Jesus—the eternal Son, our great High Priest, the all-seeing Judge, the omnipotent King, and the living Lord who has conquered death itself. Fear loosens its grip not when life becomes safe but when Jesus becomes central, because the size of our fear is always tied to how clearly we see Christ.

Third: Do not fear death—the One who died and rose again holds the keys of life and death.

Because this Jesus holds the keys of Death and Hades, nothing—not persecution, loss, or even death—has the final word over those who belong to Him. The same hand that holds the stars touches His servants, and the same voice that thunders like many waters speaks reassurance to fearful saints. So we need not fear what tomorrow brings or what awaits us at the end. With Jesus, there is no need to fear—not in life, nor in death.