

Jesus on 9/11

Revelation 1:1-8

The attack on the World Trade Center on Sept 11, 2001, shook the collective American psyche. The sudden death of three thousand, the collapse of the twin towers, the fear of lurking terrorists, the blow to the economy, all underscored the fragility and fearfulness of life. While in sheer number of victims, 9/11 eclipsed the persecution experienced by the Christians to whom Revelation was written, the two generations of Christians share a common terror, and helplessness in the face of terror. In fact, for most of us, 9/11 was more a distant psychological blow, than an actual physical one. The Christians of Revelation did not have it so good: their properties were confiscated; their families were at risk; their lives were in jeopardy. Given the commonality of suffering at the hands of vindictive, uncontrollable forces, God's word to the suffering Christians of Revelation is directly relevant to our circumstance also.

Revelation 1 provides an introduction to the book as a whole. Overall, it has two purposes: (1) establishing its own authority as the Word of God, and (2) reorienting attention away from crisis and onto Christ.

Day 1: Revelation 1:1-3 What must soon take place

Much of American Christendom – and this is a peculiarity of *American* Christendom which puzzles and amuses our British and Australian counterparts – reads Revelation to discern the timing of Christ's Second Coming. For the most part, this is directly at odds with its original purpose, and the author's intent. This approach is wrong on two counts. For one, the document was written to address a first-century – not a twenty-first century – circumstance. Note, for instance, 1:1, "what must *soon* take place" ... not what must take place twenty centuries later. Note also, 1:3, "because the time is *near*" ... not distant. For the other, it was written to encourage and exhort, not to predict events of the distant future. Note 1:3, "Blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it," not, "Blessed are those who can decipher its cues about the future."

So as we read Revelation together, we read it indirectly. It speaks to us and our circumstance, but only through first understanding what it said to its original audience in their circumstance. Moreover, it speaks to us, as to them, not to satisfy our curiosity about the timing of future events, but to call us to faithful obedience. When we read it, we ask *not*, "What is going to happen, when?", *but* "How does God call us to live now?"

Day 2: Revelation 1:1-3 Says who?!

The primary purpose of 1:1-3 is to underscore the authority of this missive. John highlights both the source and the 'chain of custody' of his writing. The letter originates from the highest authority. Not simply from an apostle, as authoritative as that would be, but from the omnipotent God himself: "The revelation from Jesus Christ, which *God* gave him" (1:1). Moreover, while the message necessarily passes through a series of intermediaries (God -> Jesus -> angel -> apostle John -> original readers), the point is not the indirectness of the revelatory process, but its reliability. Like a well-conducted police investigation, the chain of custody is ironclad. The message delivered to the original readers is exactly the same message that God originally revealed to Jesus himself: John 'testifies' (note the legal term), and his witness consists of 'the word of God which Jesus himself 'testified' (the same legal term). That is, what John tells his readers is identical to what God told Jesus. Nothing could be more authoritative.

What John tells his original readers is identical to what God told Jesus. And we read that very same message today. Revelation is the direct word of God. We do well to study it closely, and to live it faithfully.

Day 3: Revelation 1:1-3 Whom can we trust to speak to our situation?

Whether the issue is the significance of 9/11, personal morality, or the solution to America's economic morass, competing voices claim to provide authoritative interpretation and direction. Whom can we trust?

Revelation offers one answer, in two forms; the first, by example, and the second, explicit. First, by example, when the apostle John seeks authoritative interpretation and direction for his life and his church, where does he turn? To the Word of God available to him; that is, to Scripture, to the Old Testament, to the Hebrew Bible. While modern readers – myself included – generally do not know Scripture well enough to pick it up unaided, Revelation is full of references to Ezekiel, and to Daniel. Which is to say, as the apostle John and his contemporaries faced mortal crisis, where did they turn for answers? To the impulses, instincts, and logic of their own human nature? To the wisdom of their culture? No, but to what God told previous generations, six hundred years earlier, as the nation of Israel faced the mortal crisis of invasion, military defeat, and exile. Where do we find authoritative guidance for life and crisis: in the Old Testament.

The apostle John turns to a second source for authoritative guidance in crisis: to the Word of God revealed to him in a vision. Does this mean that we, too, should ask God for visions to guide us in our lives and through today's crises? No. Occasionally – perhaps rarely – God does guide

through vision. We do not disallow that. But John did not tell his readers, “God spoke to me through a vision; ask him to give you a vision also, so that you know how to live.” John told his original readers – and us, as well – “God spoke to me through a vision; I wrote this vision down so you can read it and know how to live.” John calls us not each to his own vision, but to obey the Word of God to us through his vision.

So who offers authoritative interpretation of our circumstance and crisis, and authoritative direction for our lives? God in Scripture, Old Testament and New.

Day 4: Revelation 1:4-5a Refocusing attention away from crisis, and onto Christ. The first three verses of Revelation establish its authority as the Word of God. The remainder of the first chapter reorients attention away from the crisis and onto Christ.

In a time of crisis, it is natural – even inevitable – to focus full attention on the precipitating event, whether terrorist bombing or autocrat’s persecution, or some other condition. In contrast, John does not start Revelation by focusing on the crisis at hand. Instead, he redirects attention to Christ. This redirection entails a shift of focus in three new directions.

First, John shifts the focus from the danger to God. In his day, the crisis was precipitated by the most powerful man in the most powerful empire of the world. The Roman emperor demanded Christians to venerate him, and threatened them with execution if they refused. John is not cowed by imperial power, and he implicitly urges his reader not to be cowed either. Toward that end, he reminds them where true power lies: with the God ‘who is’, who existed before all things (‘who was’), and who will exist after all things (‘who is to come’). He also reminds them of Christ: who modeled faithful witness to God even though it led him to execution, who rose from the dead as they will one day rise, and who is the emperor above all emperors. Compared to their God, worldly emperors count for nothing.

John’s point relates equally to any other crisis. Whatever can possibly threaten us counts for nothing compared to the eternal God and the faithful incarnate, crucified, and risen Son. Crisis demands our attention, and anxiety redirects our focus. John pushes the reset button, reminding his readers and us, that God -- not crisis – is supreme over all, and Christ rose victorious over the fatal disaster that befell him.

Day 5: Revelation 1:5b-6 Refocusing attention away from what we stand to lose, and onto what we have already gained. With persecution underway and likely to worsen, John’s audience was at risk of losing

freedom, property, and life. If a husband and father were imprisoned, or killed, his family would be left not only in sorrow, but also in abject poverty. The pressures to renounce faith were as severe as the consequences of not renouncing faith. So John refocuses his audiences' attention off what they stand to lose for Christ and onto what they have gained from Christ.

What have they gained? First, they have been loved by Jesus, faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, and ruler of all kings of the earth. Second, they have been freed from their sins, by his death on their behalf. Though the emperor may imprison them, he cannot take away this freedom. Though they may be killed for Christ, they live because Christ was killed for them. Thirdly, they are both kingdom and priests, serving God the Father. Though rejected by the Roman empire, they are citizens of a higher kingdom; though persecuted for not offering sacrifice to the emperor, they are priests who offer present sacrifice to the true God.

In short, the believers of Revelation stand to lose much. But they have gained more. Much the same could be said of us in the face of any crisis that we face. Rather than focus on what we stand to lose, John calls us to focus on all that we have gained in Christ.

Day 6: Revelation 1:7 Refocusing attention away from the present, and onto the eternal. In the third reorientation, the apostle John shifts attention from the present to the future, and thus, from the persecution of the Church to its eventual vindication. While at present the believers suffer, as did their master, a day is coming when Jesus will be publicly vindicated before all the world, and his followers with him. He will come on the clouds, publicly revealed in his supernatural glory, and all who crucified him, along with those who currently oppose him, will see him as he truly is, and mourn their lost opportunity. The present will expire; the future remains eternally.

This reorientation, along with the preceding two, applies most directly to Christians who suffer for Jesus still today. Still, even if less directly, all three correctives apply in any crisis or suffering that we endure. In times of great difficulty, the threat tends to loom large, fostering a sense of panic and doom. In such circumstance, John reminds us that God still reigns and Christ with him, that we have gained far more from Christ than we stand to lose, and that the final outcome is written not in the present but in eternity. Crisis tends to distort reality. Revelation 1:1-7 reshapes it: reality is defined by God who reigns, and by Christ who died and who will return in glory.