

Blessed Are Those Who Keep the Word

Revelation 1:3; 22:7

“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.”

Revelation is the only book in the Bible that promises a blessing just for reading it and keeping its words. There is a progression to this blessing: read → hear → keep. Most of John’s original audience would not have been able to read Revelation for themselves. A large percentage of the population could not read, and so it would have been read publically to them. However, just sitting in church while it was read was not sufficient to be blessed. It must be heard. It must be listened to. To “keep” means to watch carefully or to guard. The idea is that after paying attention to hear what Revelation says, you take care to obey and respond to what it says. It has to pass through your ears in through your head, and into your heart.

Blessing comes to the reader when his or her life is changed by what they hear. Too much of our modern study of Revelation is to gather information, and not life-change. We study Revelation to solve a puzzle, not to grow in faith, or grow our relationship with Jesus. If there was urgency for John’s readers in the 1st Century to hear and keep the words of this vision, that urgency has only increased for us.

Meaning of Blessing

The word *blessed* mean happy, but it more than mere happiness. Blessing is a state of happiness that extends beyond the circumstances of life. It is state of fullness and contentment that is beyond the cares and worries of life. Blessing goes beyond our circumstances, because it means we have been touched by the favor of God.

And Revelation promises you this blessing, this favor of God, if you read its words, hear its words, and keep its words. It not only does this once. It does it twice. The first is right here at the beginning of the book. It does it again at the end. The whole vision is bookended in these promises of blessing. What makes these words such a blessing? What is about the message of Revelation that John says we need to read it, hear it, and keep it?

A Vision of Jesus

Revelation begins with a picture of Jesus in his powerful glory, and it ends with a picture of Jesus' return in power and glory. More than anything else, Revelation is a vision of Jesus. More than it was meant to show us the beast, or the bowls of wrath, the abyss or the millennium, Revelation was meant to show us Jesus. Look at the very first verse, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." It's a vision of Jesus. Before we see this as a vision of the future, the end times, the identity of the antichrist, or an outline of events in the 21st Century, we need to see Jesus. Everything else in between Revelation 1 and Revelation 22 needs to be understood in light of who Jesus is. Revelation is a blessing because it shows us who Jesus is.

Revelation doesn't just contain these two blessings. It contains seven blessings, and all of them have to do with who Jesus is and our relationship with him. Blessed are those who hear and keep the words of this revelation of Jesus. Blessed are those who die in Jesus. Blessed are those who stay awake ready for his coming. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb, and who is the Lamb? Jesus. Blessed are those who wash their robes in his blood. It all points to Jesus and who he is, and what he has done for us.

Challenges to the Church

And so Revelation opens with a vision of Jesus. And that's what we'll be looking at this morning. Think of what this means for John and these seven churches. John is prisoner. He is in chains for the sake of the Gospel. He has been sent to exile in a penal colony on the tiny island of Patmos. The Roman emperor, Domitian, sits on throne. He is the first of the emperors who will unleash a savage, empire-wide **PERSECUTION** against the church. This persecution falls hard on the churches of Asia Minor, where it most severe.

The persecution has already begun. Some have already been imprisoned, not just John. Some who've already died for their faith, but the persecution is still in its early stages.

It is about to get much worse. Christians will die by the hundreds and the thousands. Satan is about to attack the church like a ferocious beast with all claws extended and teeth bared. This is only one of the challenges the church faces. They were surrounded by what we would call **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**. There was this idea that you could worship anything you wanted and all religions were equally valid. Every city, every nation, every region had its own gods. Every city was filled with multiple temples to many different idols. In addition to the

idolatry, there was emperor worship, where everyone regardless of their religious preference was expected to also bow their knee to the emperor and worship him as god. Domitian had declared himself to be “lord and god.” When his baby was born, he minted coins declaring his son to be “the son of god.”

Meanwhile, there are **FALSE TEACHERS** in the church; wolves in sheep’s clothing that are trying to lead the faithful astray. They teach things like maybe it’s okay worship Jesus and the emperor. They taught that it was okay to compromise their ethics to fit in with the world around them. They faced **RELIGIOUS ATTACKS** from the Jews who denied Christ, rebelled against God and tried to turn the empire against the church. Their attacks against the church are so severe that Jesus in Revelation twice calls them the synagogue of Satan.

In addition to all of this, they are surrounded by all the **TEMPTATIONS** and enticements of a seductive and indulgent empire that has nearly reached her peak. Sexual immorality is rampant. In the city of Ephesus, for instance, you could go to the market, say your wife was doing some shopping. On one side of the street was the library; on the other side was a brothel. You could tell your wife, you were going to the library to catch up on the latest scroll, but inside there was hidden tunnel leading you back to the brothel. The temples for many of the idols employed temple prostitutes by the thousands. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus had sacred prostitutes. It was the largest building in ancient Rome. It was said that a thousand prostitutes served at the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth. The Prostitution was a part of your worship. Revelation describes people as being drunk on sexual immorality. It was the internet porn of the day.

There was the greed of a prosperous empire with its vast wealth. Extensive trade routes brought luxury items from the furthest reaches of the empire that stretched from modern Britain to Iran, from Germany to North Africa. The allure of materialism was great. There is a passage in Revelation 18 that reads like a cargo manifest of a Roman ship carrying the finest gold, silver, linen, silk, ivory, premium woods, expensive perfumes, fine wine, and rare oil. Included in this cargo manifest were human souls which were traded like livestock. Revelation portrays the merchants, traders, and ship captains as those that had prostituted themselves to the harlot Rome and sold their souls for the sake of profit.

Imagine being a Christian in this 1st Century world. Imagine seeing this stuff every day as you went to work or went to the market. Imagine trying to be the church and do ministry in this environment. Then you get this letter from John, and he explains just how bad things are, and he paints a vivid picture of how bad they're going to get, and then he has the audacity to tell you, not once, not twice, but seven times that you are blessed. Is this beginning to give you some perspective?

Revelation's not a book we normally associate with blessing. It's full of fiery, end of the world stuff. It's war and damnation. It's filled dragons and beasts and plagues. It's soaked in blood. How can John say it's a blessing? How can John say this and how can he expect his readers to actually believe it? Because he has seen Jesus in his power and glory, and he wrote this letter because he wants us to see Jesus too.

The Lord's Day

There is John in exile when he receives this vision. It's not by accident. First of all, it happened on the Lord's Day. That means it was a Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection. Sunday was the day of the church's birth when God poured out His Spirit on Pentecost. And so Christians called it the Lord's Day, the day of worship, prayer, teaching, and communion. I imagine that John is doing what Christians do on Sundays. Perhaps he was singing some Psalms. He could have been reading and meditating on a passage of Scripture. Maybe he was in the middle of taking communion. Maybe he was praying for the church in Ephesus, one of the seven churches of Revelation, and John was thinking about what he wrote them in 1st John, *"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."* This is when he comes under the inspiration of the Spirit and receives this vision of just how Jesus is.

Never underestimate what might happen in church on Sunday. Sundays can change your life. God can show up here on a Sunday morning in any number of ways. Any given Sunday shouldn't be about football. Any given Sunday, should be about what God could do in your life because you are worshipping him on the Lord's Day.

There John is doing his Sunday morning routine and he hears a voice. It's the voice of Jesus and Jesus tells him, *"write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches."* John

turns around to see who is speaking to him and he sees Jesus. It's an amazing vision of Jesus that he says is like staring at the sun.

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

A Picture's Worth A Thousand Words

Words fail John. Mere human language cannot communicate the immensity of what his eyes beheld. Notice how often the word "like" is used— "hair **like** white wool, **like** snow, eyes **like** a flame of fire, feet **like** burnished bronze, and a voice **like** the roar of many waters." The best John can do is telling us it is like something we know. Jesus' isn't wearing some wool wig like a founding father. He doesn't have Superman laser eyes. He's not wearing red-hot bronze shoes. Water doesn't come gushing out every time Jesus speaks.

This is indicative of the figurative language John uses throughout Revelation. The apocalypse is filled with symbols, signs, metaphors and similes. You've heard the expression "a picture is worth a thousand words." This is not a news reporter's description of accident scene; this is an artist's portrait of majestic beauty.

Jesus Like We've Never Seen Him Before

This is Jesus like we've never seen him before. This isn't the Son of Man we find in the gospels. This is no longer baby Jesus in a manger. This is not Jesus tired from a day of walking. This is not Jesus on the cross, or even Jesus performing miracles. This is Jesus, the Son of God in his full glory and majesty. On earth, his divine glory was concealed behind a veil of human flesh. Now the veil is lifted and we see the King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is Jesus in all of his heavenly majesty. John sees what no living human still on earth has ever seen – his divine presence full on. Some of us know a Jesus that's far too small. He's a friend, not a Lord. He's a therapist, not a Savior. He's a bumper sticker that makes us smile, a Facebook meme that we share, but not the almighty Lord of all time and space that completely redefines our lives.

The Jesus we see here is not someone to be lukewarm or indecisive about. As vivid as John's vision is, his description of it sounds rather strange to our 21st century ears. What's with all the lampstands and fiery eyes, blazing face, and stars held in his hand?

1st Century Eyes

An important question we must ask is— how did John's original readers see this imagery? I'm about to give you the most important key in interpreting and understanding Revelation. You have to try to understand what it meant to John's original audience. Revelation was written to these seven churches. These were seven historic churches that really existed. These were very real places. We know these places from history and archaeology. Before Revelation was written to us in the 21st Century, it was written to these Christians in the 1st Century. John wrote it to them so they could hear its words, read its words, and keep its words. How was it supposed to be a blessing to them, if they couldn't understand it?

As vivid as the imagery is, it is neither wild, nor random. John is shown visions filled with specific symbols that have specific meanings. These images are painted from an O.T. palette drawn mainly from Daniel's vision of one like a son of Man in Daniel 7 and 10. All that John sees is deeply rooted in the Old Testament imagery and early Christian teaching that he and his readers would have readily understood.

When we look through their eyes, it starts to make sense. Seven lampstands reminds us of the seven-stemmed lamp that stood in the tabernacle and the temple. The shining face represents the glory of God. A sash was a mark of high rank in the ancient world, as well as something worn by the high priest. The long robe recalls the robe of the priest. White hair signifies wisdom and honor. Flaming eyes symbolize a piercing vision that sees all things. Bronze feet symbolized triumph over one's enemies. The sword, of course, symbolizes the word of God.

Jesus also explains some of these symbols for John in verse 20. The seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches. Think about that for a moment. Each one of the churches has an angel. God loves his people, his church enough that he assigns an angel to keep watch over them. That is a blessing in and of itself, that there is an angel of Son-Rise Christian church, or an angel watching over the body of Christ in Marshfield, Missouri.

The seven lampstands represent the churches themselves. This makes sense. We're called to be a light to the world. Where is Jesus in relation to the churches? Look at verse 13. He is in their midst. Jesus is present amongst his church. He is neither distant nor disconnected. He has neither abandoned nor neglected his people, but Jesus is with us, among us, in our midst. This is underscored by the fact that these descriptions of Jesus are used in the salutations of each of the seven letters. This isn't just who Jesus is, it is who Jesus is to his church. This is who he is for us.

Now let me help you see this through the eyes of John's readers. Imagine you are a Christian in one of the seven churches. Let's say you are a part of the church in Smyrna. One day you go to the market to buy some food. You go to pay and you reach into your pocket. Okay, you probably don't have a pocket. You reach into your coin purse and you pull out a denarius.

This is the coin you pull out. It is an official denarius of Emperor Domitian. On the face is the Caesar's image and the inscription says Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Pontifex Maximus. It's his position, family name, name, lineage, and a title, which meant that he was the highest religious figure in the land. Remember, I said earlier he was worshipped as Lord and God. On the back side of the coin is Domitian's son, who he declared to be the son of god. He is depicted as the god Jupiter, with the earth as his throne. And what is he holding in his hands? Count them— seven stars.

This coin was Domitian's way of bragging to the world that he was a god, that he controlled the world, and he held the stars in his hands. And here in Revelation 1, Jesus reveals himself as the one who holds the seven stars. What do you think this message meant to the Christians in Smyrna, in Ephesus, in Pergamum, in Thyatira, in Sardis, in Philadelphia, in Laodicea?

Regardless of what a godless government may claim or do, they do not possess ultimate power over the church or anything else, for that matter. Jesus is Lord over his church, and he has angels that assist in his oversight of his body.

This was something that John's readers in the 1st Century desperately needed to know. It seemed as if the empire held their lives in the palm of the emperor's hand. With a whim, it

seemed as though he could wipe out the church. But Jesus tells his church not all is as it seems. Rome does not control the church. Jesus is in control of his church.

This truth would have been a tremendous blessing to John's readers who were under attack both spiritually and physically. It is also a great blessing to us as well. Communist dictators do not control the church. Oppressive Islamic regimes do not control the church. A corrupt government controlled by power hungry, self-seeking elites, godless judges and greedy cronies do not control the church. Jesus holds the church in his hand! No matter how it might seem at the moment, Jesus is in control. It is his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her. He protects and he provides.

Does it affect your view of our congregation to know that Jesus has appointed one of his angels to keep watch over us? Does it instill more confidence in our efforts to know we're not going at it alone? Jesus exercises no less care for his church today. He saw them through these fiery challenges, and he can see us through whatever challenges we face. We only need to hear his words, read his words and keep his words.

His blessing is real. His blessing is powerful. It makes a difference not just in this present darkness, but for all of eternity. We desperately need to see and know the Jesus of Revelation, because he's not coming back as a baby. The Jesus that's coming back isn't the itinerant teacher from Galilee. It's this Jesus from Revelation. He's kicking butt and taking names. How you see his coming then depends entirely on what you decide about him now.