

**“A Sweeter Christmas”**  
**Revelation 1:1-3, 12-20**  
**December 17, 2006**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Everyone wants to have a merry Christmas, and we often confer upon one another our wishes for such a happy experience. But not everyone has a merry Christmas, for the simple reason that the source of all lasting joy is missed. Notice two significant things taught in the first three verses of this chapter. First, the book opens with this statement about its contents: it is the “revelation of Jesus Christ.” Because the original language here is vague, there are two possible ways to understand this phrase. “The revelation of Jesus Christ” could mean the revelation from Jesus Christ, or it could mean the revelation about Jesus Christ. I believe it is the latter. We should understand this book to be all about revealing Jesus to us. Then notice verse 3, where it pronounces a blessing upon the one who reads, hears and keeps what is written here. Since the idea of blessing here is similar to our word “Happy”, the idea is that real happiness comes as Jesus is revealed to us. The only way to have a sweeter, more joy-filled Christmas is to find Jesus sweeter and more satisfying than anything or anyone else.

Does your joy at this time of year require happy circumstances? Or to say it the other way around, would suffering ruin your Christmas celebration? There is an imitation Christmas joy that we could call Christmas escapism. This is the attempt to erect a bubble around our Christmas celebration in which we make it an oasis of peace and joy in the midst of a life of chaos and misery. We labor long and hard for just a few hours when we can pretend that life is filled with peace and joy. But the problem with all escapism is that it doesn't last. For those of you who are too young to remember this, there used to be a variety show on television called the Ed Sullivan show. One of the famous acts appearing there was this guy who could spin a whole series of plates atop these sticks. He would run from plate to plate to keep them spinning, because if one stopped, it would come crashing to the floor. Christmas escapism requires just that kind energy, and it is impossible to sustain. That's why this passage is such good news to us. It speaks of a type of joy that can coexist with suffering.

People often think of the book of Revelation as this really strange, hard to understand book that somehow reveals the future to us. But, they think, that revelation of the future requires some kind of decoder. While it's true that Revelation does show the future to us, it has a very down-to-earth setting. It was written by a suffering man to a church that was suffering in order to show them that Jesus was ruling the heavens and the earth. This book isn't written in order to satisfy our curiosity about the future, but to meet the very practical need of God's suffering people. John himself was suffering, due to being exiled on the island of **“Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”** (v. 9). Patmos was a small island off the coast of what is now Turkey, and it was

used in this day as a Roman penal colony. Though there weren't prisons such as we have today, it was not unlike Alcatraz. John was put here as a result of persecution from the Roman Emperor Domitian. According to church historian Philip Schaff,

He was the second Roman emperor who persecuted Christianity, and banishment was one of his favorite modes of punishment. . . . After a promising beginning he became as cruel and bloodthirsty as Nero, and surpassed him in hypocrisy and blasphemous self-deification. He began his letters: 'Our Lord and God commands,' and required his subjects to address him so. He ordered gold and silver statues of himself to be placed in the holiest place of the temples. When he seemed most friendly, he was most dangerous. . . . Many Christians suffered martyrdom under his reign, on the charge of atheism—among them his own cousin, Flavius Clemens. (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. I, pp. 427-28)

We know that John's first readers were experiencing the same kinds of trials as John, because in verse 9 he calls them "**partners in the tribulation.**" This brings us to the real, practical purpose of this book and a message we need to hear if our Christmas celebration is to transcend our circumstances. How can we be blessed and happy while in the midst of suffering? The answer is that we can be happy by reading, hearing and keeping these words. A man by the name of Tim Hansel once observed, "If you have to move even ten inches from where you are now in order to be happy, you never will be." If we would be happy right where we are, we need both to see Jesus and to hear Jesus. Let's look at those two points here in this passage.

## **I. We Need to See Jesus – v. 12-16**

As we approach this first of many visions in this book, we need to understand something about how to interpret visionary language. It's meant to be interpreted figuratively and not literally. I mention this because many interpreters have gone astray with this book by trying to visualize what John saw. You won't understand this book if you attempt to draw a picture of Jesus as he is portrayed in these verses, with a sword coming out of his mouth, white hair and flaming eyes. A literal interpretation would lead to contradictory statements. For example, right after saying that Jesus holds the seven stars in his right hand (v. 16), we read in the very next verse that he laid his right hand on John.

So if we interpret this vision figuratively, as we are intended, what do we learn about Jesus here? Note first that Jesus is standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, which are identified in verse 20 as the seven churches of Asia. So the first and very important thing we learn about Jesus from this vision is where to go if you want to find him. He has chosen to locate himself in the midst of his church. Many critics have raised their voices to point out what is wrong with the church, and many of them are correct. But here we have the significant truth that Jesus has chosen to locate himself there. Just as he

appeared in a plain stable at his birth, in his glory he stands among the plain and often troubled church he has come to redeem.

**Application:** This leads to a very important application. Have you ever heard anyone say that they feel closer to God in the world he has created rather than in church? So they choose to go camping or golfing or hiking instead of coming to church. Someone has said that such an approach is like trying to have a relationship with Henry Ford by opening the hood of the Model T he built and saying, "Henry, are you there? I want to get to know you through what you've made." A closer contact is needed, and we come to have that closer contact through the church of Jesus.

Notice next that Jesus is wearing a long robe, which is the clothing worn by the high priest. Jesus is the one who alone can take care of sin. What does a priest do? He stands before God on behalf of sinners and makes sacrifices for their sin. Jesus is both the priest and the sacrifice, and his efforts on our behalf really do take care of sin. That is especially good news in light of what is next revealed about Jesus.

There is a great deal of imagery here to describe Jesus as the King. Notice several things about his royalty. He is the wise king, with hair that is white like wool and like snow. This image of white hair is easy to grasp. It indicates advanced age, and the wisdom that comes with it. Jesus is older than the hills, the eternal one who is, who was, and who is to come. Think how much wiser you are now than just twenty years ago. If you could live the last twenty years over again, would you do anything differently? Probably all of us would, because we have learned some things over the years. If instead of twenty years of experience you had 20 billion, your wisdom would be immense. Such is the wisdom of Jesus. We live in a day when age is not respected, because we see it as bringing physical weakness. But in the case of Jesus, none of his power is diminished. He has power to judge. Notice the repeated images describing Jesus as judge. He has these eyes that are like fire, which suggests his anger and his penetrating sight. He has a type of x-ray vision that is able to penetrate into the heart of every man and woman. All is exposed to him. And he is able to judge those who are revealed to be his enemies. That's what is meant by these feet of bronze, with which he can trample his enemies. It is also said of him that a sharp sword proceeds from his mouth. The sword is used to subdue and judge one's enemies. Jesus can do so merely by the word of his mouth.

No wonder John was filled with fear when he saw Jesus. Note that his response wasn't to go and hug Jesus, whom he hadn't seen in sixty years. Rather, he **"fell at his feet as though dead."** This image of Jesus must be put alongside of the one we commonly have at this time of year, baby Jesus lying in a manger. Both are true, and when put together they increase the sweetness of Christmas by unveiling the beauty of Jesus. The wonder of the incarnation is that it is this glorious God who humbled himself to become the weakness of a baby. And when baby Jesus was in that manger, he was still this glorious God.

## II. We Need to Hear Jesus – v. 17-20

I notice that for John it was the word of Jesus that brought comfort to his soul. Before Jesus spoke to him, he fell at his feet as though dead. But Jesus spoke to him words that brought comfort and encouragement. It is the same for us: it is the word of Jesus that brings comfort to our hearts. So let's look at what he tells John, and what he is telling us as well.

The main thing he tells him is not to fear. Have you ever considered what a difference it makes to have the right person tell you not to be afraid? You develop a pain in your arm that you fear might be a symptom of a heart attack. Your friend, who has had no training in medicine at all, tells you, "Oh, I'm sure it's nothing. Don't be afraid." But then you schedule an appointment with the best cardiac specialist in your city, who then runs a battery of tests and examines you thoroughly. He then meets with you to share the results and says, "You have nothing to fear; your heart is fine and the pain you felt was nothing to worry about." Which "Don't be afraid" will mean the most to you, your friend's or your doctor's? Not all "Fear not's" are created equal. The difference lies in who's telling you not to be afraid. Notice who is saying it here.

It is Jesus who says "Fear not," and he identifies himself as "the first and the last." This phrase is a literary device called a merism, which is another way of indicating something that is comprehensive by identifying opposite ends of something. For example, if we really look hard for something we lost, we say that we searched "high and low." So when Jesus says of himself that he is the first and the last, and when he identifies himself back in verse 8 as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet, he is saying that he is sovereign and in control of all things.

The sovereign God who knows everything tells you not to fear. Did you notice the wording of verse 1, where we read of Jesus' intention **"to show to his servants the things that must soon take place?"** The word "must" indicates the certainty of these things to a sovereign God. He knows the future because he is sovereign over it. He is more than simply a good predictor of the future. Have you ever considered how hard it is to predict the future? On November 30, 2001, Arthur C. Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, offered his vision of the future. He said that 2002 would see the arrival of clean low-power fuel involving a new energy source, possibly based on cold fusion. Well, he missed that one. In 2003, he predicted the automobile industry would be given five years to replace fossil fuels. He's 0 for 2 just two years out, the easiest predictions to make. In 2004, he said that we will read of the first human clone, and in 2006 the last coal mine will be closed. Jesus has no such difficulty when it comes to knowing the future, because he is in complete control of the future. It is this all-knowing and all-controlling God who tells you not to fear.

Part of God's sovereignty is his ability to transform our suffering and use the work of his enemies to further his own purposes. John's exile might seem at first to be proof that Caesar was really in charge, and not Jesus. But Jesus had his purpose with the banishment of John, in ways that John undoubtedly did not see at the time. As a result of this exile, we have the book of Revelation. I don't think John was saying to himself, "The life of the exile on Patmos is not very good, but at least the final book of the New Testament will result from this." He, of course, did not know that. But Jesus did, and he is able to use even his enemies for his good purposes. It is this God who can transform our suffering, which is a bad thing in itself, into something that accomplishes his good purposes. This is the God who tells us not to fear.

This is also the God who sees all things. Remember his eyes that were like a flame of fire, able to penetrate like x-ray vision. Did you know he is able to penetrate into your heart, and see things about you that even you don't see about yourself? It is this God who sees everything about you who loves you and tells you not to fear. He will never find out something about you that will cause him to say, "Well, if I had known that, I would never have given myself for you. I regret now that I did so." He knows it all right now, and he loves you still and lays his hand on you saying, "**Fear not.**"

## **CONCLUSION:**

In a hostile world like that of these early Christians and our own as well, there is only one thing that can deliver us from our fears. We must see Jesus as the mighty High Priest, the Judge and the King. Hudson Taylor saw Jesus like that. He was the founder of the China Inland Mission. When he arrived in China, he discovered that all the missionaries were staying in the bigger coastal cities, and none were venturing into the vast interior of China with its millions of people. So Taylor adopted the dress and lifestyle of the Chinese and went throughout the interior preaching the gospel. When Hudson Taylor became an old man, the Boxer Rebellion erupted in China, resulting in terrible persecution against Christians. The local warlords tried to stamp out everything that was foreign, and they saw Christianity as a foreign religion. Many Christians became martyrs. After Taylor was informed of this rebellion and the resulting persecution, his friends were concerned about his response. One of his fellow workers went to check on him, and as he came up the walk to his house, he heard the old man singing to himself that well-known hymn. "Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art; I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart. Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee, and Thy beauty fills my soul, For by Thy transforming power, Thou hast made me whole." It is as we gaze on him in his glory that we are transformed and delivered from our fears. I invite you to take your fears to him right now.