



Write What You See

Revelation 1:9-20

1. John's Commission to Write (verses 9-11)
2. John's Vision of Jesus (verses 12-16)
3. John's Comfort from Jesus (verses 17-20)

For the past few weeks at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been looking at the book of Revelation. One of the things that I have pointed out is that much of Revelation is written as apocalyptic literature, which is a bit different than we are normally used to reading. As such, it takes a bit of care in understanding it, that we might interpret it correctly. Over the past few weeks, I have tried to illustrate to you how apocalyptic literature works using political cartoons. That is, some strange pictures we observe, with a few labels, we can understand the meaning of the picture. But that's not the only way to describe apocalyptic literature.

This morning, I want to put another category in your heads, that of an impressionistic painting. For instance, consider for example this painting (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impression,_Sunrise). It was painted by Claude Monet. It is entitled, "Impression, Sunrise." It depicts the port of Le Havre in France, where Monet grew up.

When this painting was put on display in 1874, art critic Louis Leroy used the term, "Impressionism" to mock "the loose and relaxed nature of the paintings." He wrote, "A preliminary drawing for a wallpaper pattern is more finished than this seascape."^[1] It is from this critic's response, that the "Impressionists" coined the name of their art. Yet, this is exactly what Monet was aiming for. He was aiming, not to paint a realistic scene, but to create an impression in our minds of a fleeting moment of misty haze of the French harbor.

This is what the Impressionists sought to do. They sought, not to render the scene, but to create a sensation of the scene in our minds and hearts. For "Impression, Sunrise," we see only a few focal points: (1) a few dark boats, (2) the sunrise and (3) its reflection. The rest of the painting sits in the background to create a context for the focal points to pop. And these focal points are the product of some loose brushwork. Look at the boat in the foreground, it's just a few bold strokes with a large brush. Look at the sunrise reflection, with unmixed white and orange tones, it's a series of horizontal brush strokes. That's it. This painting is not a realistic picture. It's a glimpse of a moment in time to capture an impression.

This is often what we see in Revelation. Everything mentioned in the passage isn't of significance. Everything doesn't have its special meaning. But it is all present to make an impression. I mention this because this is what we see in our text this morning. We see an picture of Jesus, that isn't reality, nor is it greatly symbolic. Rather, it is given to us to make an impression of the glorious Christ!

So, I invite you to open in your Bibles to the book of Revelation. We will be looking today at the second half of chapter 1. I want to read it for you now.

Revelation 1:9-20

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. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 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. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 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.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "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. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The title of my message comes from verse 11, in which John is told to "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." The title of my message this morning is, "Write What You See."

This is John's commission that he received from the Lord. This is my first point.

1. John's Commission to Write (verses 9-11)

John's task was to write down in a book, what he saw. Now, technically, this is not a book. It is a scroll. It's what they wrote on in the times of the New Testament. but the sense is the same: John was to be an eye-witness news reporter. God would show him some things, and he was tasked to write them down.

Revelation is filled with statements by John that says, "I saw." Consider the following texts:

Revelation 5:2, "And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?'"

Revelation 7:1-2, "After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea,

Revelation 8:2, "Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them."

Revelation 9:1, "And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit."

John says this more than 30 times in the Revelation he wrote down, as if to remind us what his commission was. It was to see what God showed him and write it down.

Verse 11 tells us what he is to do with the book he writes. He is to ...

Revelation 1:11

... send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

These churches were in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. These churches were real churches with real people, just like us. They were meeting together, for worship and teaching, just like us.

Some of the churches are nearer the coast and some of them are further inland. All in all, they aren't so far from one another. It would only take a few days walk from one to the other. These cities were familiar with each other. I'm sure that they conducted trade and business with each of these cities, as they are only a few days walk between them.

Now, if you notice, the order of the churches in verse 11, you will see that they trace a clockwise path between the churches. Thus, any mail delivery to these churches would have easily gone from one to the next. All of this argues that these were real churches to which Jesus expect them to have this message delivered.

Now, until this point in our exposition, we haven't said much about John, but he introduces himself in verse 9.

Revelation 1:9

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.

This verse tells us a lot about John. First off, he identifies himself as a "brother." That is a fellow believer with those in these churches. Notice here that he didn't pull rank. He didn't identify himself as one of the twelve disciples who walked with Jesus. Nor did he identify himself especially as "the disciple who Jesus loved" as he did six times in the gospel of John. No, he is simply "John," a "brother," one who could identify with those in the churches.

This is what he points out with his second description of himself. He identifies himself as a "partner in the tribulation." And this gives us insight, not only to John, but also to those who were in the seven churches. A "partner in the tribulation" means that John was going through some difficult times. We often hear of the "tribulation" period, this seven year period of time in the future, where there is particular difficulty in this world with wars and famines and persecution of Christians. But the truth is the tribulation is a regular occurrence for followers of Christ as we face opposition from the world. For some, the tribulation is great. For others, it is minimal. Yet, the truth remains, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

John says that he was experiencing tribulation during the days of this writing. John says that those in the churches were also going through this as well. This is a big key to understanding the Revelation. It is written to those who were facing tribulation in their lives. Life wasn't easy for the early Christians. They faced hostilities from the Romans. They faced hostilities from the Jews. They faced hostilities from their families, just as Jesus had foretold. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

This is the purpose of John in writing: to help those facing tribulation to overcome, to give strength to those facing hardship to endure. In fact, this is how John finishes the phrase, "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus." In other words, if you are in Jesus, you will face tribulation. If you are in Jesus, you will be a part of the kingdom. If you are in Jesus, you will be strengthened to patiently endure your sufferings.

Again, this is super-important to understanding Revelation. It was written to suffering Christians, to encourage them and strengthen them, that they might endure in their faith. It wasn't written to 21st century Americans, who are living at ease in this world with time on their hands to try to figure out the end of the world. We ask questions about the identity of the antichrist and the timing of the end with the purpose that we might escape the difficult times. This wasn't the case with the original readers.

Those in the churches were in the midst of suffering! John's message to them was clear: "You serve a sovereign Christ, who will judge the godlessness in the world. And he will conquer! All of your suffering for Jesus is worth it! So press on! Hold fast to your Savior! Endure until the end! Jesus will be victorious!"

Have you ever noticed that when a baseball team or basketball team is successful, the fans turn out to watch. People are willing to go and spend a few hours watching their team, because they know that they will come home with a good feeling of victory. But if a home team isn't doing so well, attendance is way down, because people don't like a losing feeling. The message of Revelation is that Jesus wins! It is worth it to be on his team. You will conquer! You will overcome with him! Jesus will judge the world!

Does a message of judgement give you joy? Consider Psalm 96.

Psalm 96:11-13

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the people in his faithfulness.

There is rejoicing with the people of God when the judgment comes. If such a thought is foreign to you, it's probably because you have not face persecution. The message of judgement is a healing balm to those facing unjust persecution.

Imagine that you grew up in eastern Ukraine. and you had a family there, living in peace. Then, comes the Russian army to your city. They enter your house with guns blazing. They shoot your father dead. They demand you food and supplies. They abuse your sisters. and leave your house in ruins.

What is the sort of message that would help you at that moment? "Jesus is coming. He will deal with those wicked Russian soldiers. Whatever they inflicted upon you, Jesus will punish, and more so. They will spend an eternity in torment." This is the message of Revelation! "Jesus is coming to take his kingdom! He is coming to rule! He will deal with those who have done wrong!"

If you know this, you have no need to be hard toward those abusing you, because you know that God says, "Vengeance is mine! I will repay" (Romans 12:19-20). You overcome evil by being good (Romans 12:21). The only way you can do this is if you know that somebody is coming behind you with a big stick (namely, God), who will conquer his enemies.

My pastor friend, Chris, says, "A soft eschatology leads to a hard people, but a strong eschatology leads to a soft people." "Eschatology" means "the study of the end." So, if you have doubts about the end, whether or not God bringing the ultimate justice upon wrongdoers (a soft eschatology), you will feel the need to avenge yourself with everyone who hurts you. You will be hard towards others. But if you know that the Lord will come with his might and strength to right all wrongs (a strong eschatology), you can be gentle and loving toward others, and able to overcome evil with good.

If you don't understand the joy of the message of judgment upon those who hate Christ, it's because you haven't suffered unjust persecution at the hand of his enemies. Do you remember Paul's attitude toward Alexander? He told Timothy, "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds" (2 Timothy 4:14). Paul didn't feel the need to repay him. He trusted in the Lord to do that. Paul didn't withhold his desire for justice. He simply gave the execution of it to God.

For those who were seeking to be faithful to Jesus in the first century, this book would come with joy. I fear for us in America, that we miss this core message of the book of Revelation, because we are a people at ease. But John wasn't at ease, nor those in the churches. John shared in their "tribulation."

In the last half of verse 9, we see John putting forth where John was in his suffering.

Revelation 1:9

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.

Patmos is island, just off the western coast of Asia minor. Not so far from the mainland. But, actually, quite far. it was across the water. and those on the island had little access to boats. See, Patmos was a penal colony. a barren, volcanic island that was used for political prisoners of Rome.

The best comparison today is this island we call Alcatraz. It was a maximum security federal penitentiary. It housed the worst of criminals in America, beginning in the 1930's. Today, it's a National Park, existing to tell the stories of prison life on the island. What made Alcatraz so bad was that freedom was in sight. Alcatraz is a mere 1.25 miles from San Francisco, yet the cold temperatures of the waters and the swirling currents of the San Francisco Bay made escape difficult, even if you could get out of your cell. The same was true for John's time on Patmos. John was a prisoner upon the island. Any escape attempt would include a long swim.

We see in verse 9 why he was a prisoner.

Revelation 1:9

I, John, ... was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

That is, John was being persecuted for being a witness for Christ. He was preaching the gospel. As a result, he was a political prisoner. He was preaching that Jesus Christ is the Messiah! To the Jews, he declared, "You crucified him!" But he died on the cross for our sins. He was buried and raised from the dead, so that if we believe in him, we will enjoy eternal life!

The Jews hated what John was telling them. So they told the Romans, who imprisoned John on Patmos. He was hated even though he was proclaiming "good news." John was proclaiming how we might escape our sins through faith in Jesus!

And while suffering upon the island as a criminal, John is taken to another place. John writes the following in verse 10:

Revelation 1:10

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

It was the Lord's day. that is, it was Sunday. John says, "I was in the Spirit." In the book of Revelation, John uses this phrase four times: (4:2; 17:3; 21:10). Every other time besides this instance, John mentions how we was "carried away" to some place to see some vision. My guess is that he experienced something likewise here. Physically, he was on the island, but his spirit was someplace else, in God's theatre, where God was to reveal something to him.

In this case, it all began with a sound, a loud sound, coming from behind him. it was a voice that sounded like a trumpet. It was that voice that told him to write to ...

Revelation 1:11

"Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

Beginning in verse 12, John tells us what he saw.

Revelation 1:12-16

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 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. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 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.

This is a majestic vision of Jesus. If you are looking for a point to hand your thoughts on, I'm simply calling this, ...

2. John's Vision of Jesus (verses 12-16)

How do you even begin to expound these words? They are stunning. They are breathtaking. They describe Jesus as being resplendent in majesty.

It is curious, isn't it, that throughout all four gospel accounts, we are given no information about the physical appearance of Jesus. We know nothing about his height or his weight, or his hair color, or his beard, or his nose or his eyes. But here, we are given a physical depiction of Jesus.

You put them all together and can try to draw them and you can catch a bit of what John sees. However, you won't be able to catch his voice, because a picture doesn't convey sound. Also, any picture of what John saw can't capture his face, which John said, "was like the sun shining in full strength." This shows you how untenable any picture of what John saw would be. If indeed, his face was shining in full strength, John would not have the ability to see anything else about the depiction of Jesus. You can't look at the sun. You can't look at anything near the sun! But that's apocalyptic literature.

Now, attempting to draw such a picture could easily lead you into error. It would be wrong for you to think that this is what Jesus looks like.

Any physical representation of the vision of John is like the political cartoons that I have shown you for several weeks. Yes, this is what John saw, but this is no more Jesus, than the two-headed donkey I showed you a few weeks ago is what the democrats, who are taking their party in two different directions, looks like. No. That's not how you handle apocalyptic literature.

John's description of Jesus is a symbolic representation of Jesus, meant to give you an impression. In this way, it is like the impressionistic paintings, like Monet's Sunrise that I showed you at the beginning of my message this morning. Yes, it was a sunrise, but it wasn't an iPhone's picture of a sunrise to show you reality. rather, it was a representation, meant to give you an impression.

Likewise here, this vision that John relates to us is meant to make an impression upon us. It is meant to stun us. It is meant to overwhelm us. It is meant to show us that Jesus is the powerful one, who is fully capable of carrying out everything that he promises to do in this book.

Now, you can go deep into the symbolism of all of these things: Jesus is wearing a priestly robe with a golden sash, just like the priests of the Old Testament (Exodus 28:4). Jesus has white hair, like the respected of society. "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life" (Proverbs 16:31). This is certainly true of Jesus. Further, Jesus has eyes of fire that can penetrate deep into our souls. Jesus holds the stars, like the LORD, who marks off the heavens with the span of his hand (Isaiah 40:12). Jesus has a face like the sun, like the Lord, who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). But in all of this, you might be stretching the symbolism a bit too far. It's a picture designed to make an impression upon us, of the mighty and majestic Jesus.

However, there is something to symbolism here, as portions of this vision will be communicated to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 exactly as they need. To the church in Ephesus, who was cold in their love, Jesus reminds them that he walks among the lampstands, and may

remove the lampstand from Ephesus (Revelation 2:5). To the church in Smyrna, who is facing intense persecution, and may well suffer death, Jesus reminds them that he has conquered death (Revelation 2:8). To the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira, John reminds them of his sharp sword, and his burning eyes, both of which tell us of displeasure (Revelation 2:14, 20).

But in all of this, I think that the key to this picture comes in verse 13.

Revelation 1:13

and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man.

This draws us back to the book of Daniel. Again, if you know your Old Testament, Daniel 7 comes into your mind. When he spoke of one coming “like a son of man” (Daniel 7:13). Consider what Daniel saw.

Daniel 7:9-10

As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; 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. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

The son of man, the ancient of days, is served by a thousand thousands! And ten-thousands of ten-thousands, will stand before him in judgment as the books are opened! The book of Revelation is about the coming judgment of Jesus! Of this “son of man,” Daniel later writes of what he sees.

Daniel 10:5-6

I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.

Though the details aren't quite the same, the impression is. As Greg Beale says that this vision is given to Daniel “to reveal the divine decree that Israel's persecutors would assuredly be judged.”^[2] It all brings us back to the fact that Jesus has the dominion.

Daniel 7:13-14

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

That's the purpose of this vision that John saw! Jesus may have been meek and mild during his days on the earth, but he is coming again to judge the world. he is coming to establish the throne of his kingdom.

We have every reason to take comfort in this, because Jesus is on our side! He is the one who died for our sins. He is the one who loves us and cares for us. This brings us to our final point this morning.

3. John's Comfort from Jesus (verses 17-20)

When John saw this vision, he responded like every other prophet did when encountering the presence of God. He was overwhelmed and on his face, recognizing God as God, and himself as a mere human.

Revelation 1:17-18

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “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.

This is the comfort that Jesus brought to John. John felt like he was a dead man. Jesus shows his care for John, tenderly placing his right hand on John. Comforting him. “Fear not, John.” As Isaiah records, “for I am with you; I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

“I am the first and the last, John.” These words echo back to verse 8 that we looked at last week, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” they echo back to the words that the LORD spoke to Isaiah: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god” (Isaiah 44:6; see also Isaiah 41:4; 48:12). John is not to fear because the LORD is the only true God.

Verse 18, “I am the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” This is the resurrection in all of its comfort. Jesus died, but Jesus conquered death. And he has the keys to slam shut the door of Death and Hades. We need not fear what man can do to us!

Again, this is the message to a man suffering imprisonment on a barren island for preaching the gospel of Christ. Jesus comforts him, telling him not to fear. I am God! I have conquered death. There is no need to fear.

This is the fruit of the book of Revelation, that we will be able to face hardship and persecution in the face without fear. Because our Lord has conquered death, the great enemy of our bodies, we will conquer through faith in him. I mentioned it last week. I will mention it again. If the book of Revelation leads you to fear, then you have missed the main application of the book.

Yes, God is to be feared! Jesus is to be dreaded in all of his majesty. We are to be in awe of him. But Jesus comes in comfort to us, that we

might not fear the hardships that we face in life.

In verse 19, Jesus reaffirms John's commission.

Revelation 1:19

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

John is told to "Write What You See." Many have pointed out that this is the rough outline of the book of Revelation. John is to write of the things that he has seen (chapter 1). John is to write of the things that are (chapters 2 and 3), John writing to the churches in Asia minor. John is to write of the things to come. Revelation is a book about the future, it's a book about how the world will end. It will end with God on the throne with his people in the New Jerusalem. In the process we will see judgments. We will see the seals opened up and the trumpets blown and the bowls poured out, all of which is God's judgments coming upon the world.

This is what John is told to write about: was was and is and is to come. This is how God is represented, "who is and who was and who is to come."

Reading these things should bring great comfort to our souls. Nothing in history will take God by surprise. It's all under his sovereign power and control. Now, finally, we see comfort in verse 20. It is here that we see some labels put on our vision.

Revelation 1:20

As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Here we have the benefit of John explaining the vision for us. In this way, we can put labels on any picture of the vision of Jesus that we sought to draw. Jesus holds stars in his right hand. They aren't literal stars. They represent angels. The lampstands are churches. There are seven lampstands. There are seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In this way, the vision of Jesus feels like a political cartoon.

Here's the comfort for us. Jesus is walking among the churches. He is with us. Jesus said, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus didn't cast the lampstands from him. He doesn't push them away. They aren't distant from him. No. Jesus is walking right in the middle of them.

That's the picture we see here. Even when the end is coming, Even when the Ancient of Days arrives on the scene, Jesus is still walking among his lampstands. He is with us! He has not forsaken us! In this, we can take great comfort.

Come Lord Jesus.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 30, 2023 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] <https://drawpaintacademy.com/impression-sunrise/>

[2] G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 1092.