

The Lord's Work in His Church

We're going to begin tonight to take a look at the opening three chapters of the book of Revelation. I think it's obvious to us that these are distressing times in which we live. They are frightening times to some people. They are different than maybe what past generations have known in our country. It's an important time for us to take a hard look at the church: "What is the church going to be?"

Really, for the first time in the history of our country, we are an alien assembly in a hostile land. That's new for us. But that's the world the church was originally born into. As John begins this wonderful book of Revelation, he does so with a recognition of that. In verse 9, he introduces himself not as the apostle John, not as a disciple of Christ, but he introduces himself as your brother and fellow partaker in the trouble, in the trouble.

The church existed from its very outset in a highly pagan world. The church in Jerusalem, of course, was surrounded by apostate Judaism; but the church in the Gentile world was in the midst of paganism. They were the enemies of the world, as the world would identify them. Persecution broke out. The apostles were virtually all rejected, most of them martyred. Early church believers were martyred, and that went on for a couple of centuries.

From the earliest days of the church's life, it has been in the midst of tribulation. That has ebbed and flowed admittedly through Western society. But it seems to me that the church is re-entering a time not unlike the time of the New Testament. And this is a very important place for us to go, the opening three chapters of Revelation.

Starting in chapter 4, you have visions of the future. But in chapters 1, 2, and 3, you have instruction for the present tense. Chapter 1, the opening vision in the book of Revelation, is a vision of Christ in His church. It is a vision that applies in the present time. Chapters 2 and 3 then contain letters that our Lord wrote to His church – letters to churches in the midst of paganism. This is for our instruction, it is for our encouragement, and it is for our motivation in a time when we desperately need it.

It's easy to become discouraged about the state of the world, the state of our country – the animosity and hostility toward Christianity, toward the Bible, toward the gospel. It's easy to become even depressed about these kinds of things. And then you add on top of that the rather depressing state of the so called church. Chaos and confusion abounds in the church.

True godliness, clear gospel, sound doctrine are rare and scarce. Sober worship, hard to find. Selfishness, rampant, even in the church. Worldliness dominates not only many people in the church, but many leaders in the church. Faithful pastors and faithful believers look at all of this in wonder. What is the church to expect in the future as the hostility increases, as the animosity escalates, as more and more people see Christianity as an alien enemy, as they begin to make laws against what we believe? What is the church to do? How are we to respond?

We go all the way back to the book of Revelation to learn what our Lord is doing in His church in chapter 1, and what our Lord has to say to His church, chapters 2 and 3.

Churches in Times of Trouble: When we look at the church, we would desire all the noble things. We would desire that the church be genuinely in Christ – true, fruit-bearing branches in the language of John 15. We desire that the believers in the church walk in the Spirit, that they would experience the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome temptation, trials, sin. We would desire the church to be strong and pure in holiness.

We would like to see the church clearly understanding that it sits beneath the authority, the reigning authority of Christ as disseminated through the Scripture. We would love to see the church submissive to Scripture, and therefore, sanctified by Scripture – sound in doctrine, sound in behaviour. We would like to see the church led by godly men, godly men and women who set the example of Christ-likeness. We would desire that the church be able to counter the deception and the subtleties of Satan by being protected by a clear understanding of the truth and discernment.

We are concerned that the church manifestly reveal the radiating glory of God, that a holy glory would show forth in the church. This is a desire not only of every faithful pastor, but of every faithful Christian.

We look at the church and we wonder whether there could ever be a time when such would be the testimony of the church. These are very foundational desires for me, for every faithful pastor, and I know for all of you. We need to take another look then at those things that we must be, those things that we must hold to in the church, in the midst of paganism. And for that, we're going to look at chapter 2 and 3.

But before we get there, I want you to look at chapter 1 tonight to see what the Lord is doing in His church. Chapter 1 is the Lord's work in His church. Chapters 2 and 3, the Lord's word to His church – the Lord's work in His church, the Lord's word to His church.

So for tonight, it's chapter 1: "What is the Lord doing in His church?" This for our encouragement to know that the Lord has not abandoned us, that He has not lost control of His church, or of the world for that matter. This is highly comforting to believers who were in times of trouble – and that defines the early church. This book of Revelation basically was inspired by the Holy Spirit through the apostle John in the last decade of the first century, and escalating persecution had become the experience of everybody.

By now, all the apostles are dead – with the exception of John – believers are being killed. And there's even more than that: churches are defecting – they're defecting, they're abandoning their faithfulness. It's a very difficult time.

John himself, the last living apostle, an old man by this time, has been exiled as if he were a criminal to an island designed as a prison. This, you might say, is a bleak time in the life of the church, bleak time. John is sent, verse 9 says, to the island called Patmos. And why? What crime did he commit? Because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. It was a crime to proclaim the Word of God and to give testimony to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That was a crime, a crime. For that crime, he was exiled to a criminal island. That's where we find him when he receives the book of Revelation.

Starting in verse 9, John has his first vision. He is on that island as a prisoner. Verse 10 says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet saying, 'Write in a book what you see 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 with me. And having turned, I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

"When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Therefore, write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.'" This is the astounding, opening vision in the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation is introduced in verse 1 of chapter 1 as the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The whole book is a Revelation of Jesus Christ, one revelation after another of the glorious Christ. This is the first vision, the first supernatural glimpse into the invisible realm of spiritual divine reality. And this, that I've just read to you, pictures Christ moving in His church.

There are identified seven golden lampstands which are stated to be, in verse 20, the seven churches. This is Christ moving in the church, moving in His church. And it is instructive to such a degree that there is no other text in Scripture that gives us a more complete glimpse of what Christ is doing in His church – not only the seven churches of Asia Minor, to whom the book of Revelation and the letters in specific were directly given, but to the whole of His church. This is to tell us that now, even in the midst of tribulation, even in the midst of persecution, in the midst of trouble, even when the apostles and preachers themselves are being put into confinement or prison or executed, the Lord is at work in His church. He is at work in His church.

Now John, in verse 9 – backing up for just a moment to the beginning – introduces himself by saying, “I, John.” That’s three times what he says. He says, “I, John,” three times in nine verses. He is so shocked at the amazing revelatory experience that is given to him, amazed at his privilege rather again. And then refer to himself as an apostle, he refers to himself as a brother and a fellow partaker. Why? Because he doesn’t write as one who has authority, he writes as one who is a witness. He writes as one who witnesses these incredible revelations of the Lord Jesus that run through the whole book of Revelation. He is a redeemed man; he’s in the kingdom. He has an enduring faith; he is marked by perseverance. But he’s in the midst of persecution.

This beloved apostle had every reason to really be depressed. He had lived to see Jerusalem destroyed. It had been destroyed at least 20 years, maybe 25 years before this. It was in ruins. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered. This was a far cry from the hope among the disciples that the Lord would bring the kingdom. Instead of establishing the kingdom which they all hoped for in Jerusalem, Jerusalem was completely destroyed.

The temple was brought to rubble – not a stone left upon another. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish people slaughtered. And then the Romans marched through the land of Israel and they literally obliterate the populations of 985 towns and villages. The massacre is a kind of satanically driven genocide, while at the same time, being a judgment from God. Hope for the establishment of Israel as the reigning nation, hope for the establishment of the kingdom, hope for the establishment of the Messiah’s glory long gone, long gone.

John has outlived his fellow apostles. They were systematically terminated in the most fierce manner. And now he sits on a rock in the Aegean Sea about five miles wide and ten miles long. He had been a pastor and a leader of the churches of Asia Minor – which would be similar to modern Turkey for location. Seven churches had been established there. First Ephesus; and out of Ephesus, the other six churches had been established.

But in the years since they were established, tragedy had taken over five of those churches. Ephesus had left its first love, and the Lord Himself will threaten to shut it down. Pergamos had become idolatrous and immoral, and the Lord was about to come and fight against that church. Thyatira had compromised with paganism, with sin, with worldliness, and was on the brink of judgment from the Head of the church. The church at Sardis: dead. The church at Laodicea: nauseating, nauseating. It made the Lord sick so as to vomit it out. Five out of the seven churches in dire condition.

I’ve been to Patmos, one of the most interesting places that I’ve ever gone - this rock 10-by-5 miles, crescent-shaped with a kind of natural harbour facing east, about 40 miles west of Miletus in the Aegean Sea on the coast of Asia Minor south-west of Ephesus. On a more personal side, looking at it from John’s perspective, banishment to remote islands was a common Roman punishment. And this little island was among, historians say, 50 such islands, 50 islands, chosen for penal colonies.

Early tradition says that John was banished there, which would always include the loss of all property, all possessions, and all civil rights. He was banished there, tradition says, under the persecutions of Domitian. He would have been about 90 years old. And he was banished there not just to sit, but he was banished there to work in the quarries, to work in the mines – to dig out, cut out rock. Since John was the most hated Christian because he was the leader of the Christians, the last remaining apostle, and since his crime was therefore the most severe, banishment for John meant hard labour, notwithstanding that he was 90 years old.

Historian Sir William Ramsay says John’s banishment would be preceded by scourging, marked by perpetual chains, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on bare ground, a dark prison cave, and work under the lash of a whip. To this day, if you go to Patmos, they will take you to a traditional place where it is believed that John received the visions of the Revelation. Those traditions we can’t always know about; but if they’re old enough, they tend to probably be fairly accurate. There is such an old tradition of the cave that Paul was in on the island of Malta. This too is an old tradition. It was an island for criminals.

John’s crime was unshakable loyalty to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus – could happen again. The wrath of the wicked put John in that place. The Patmos of persecuting Rome, however, was suddenly the door to the most sublime and glorious communion ever had by any man with God. Doomed to a rock of exile, the apostle soared on the wings of prophetic revelation to the very throne and glory of God and Christ. Shut out from the world, he traversed the heaven-lies.

From a human standpoint, it was a bleak perspective. Everything has ended for him differently than he expected. Was there a future? Was there a future for the church? Was there a future for the gospel?

The book of Revelation is given to John to tell him there is a future, there is a future. The culmination of the future, verse 7 of chapter 1, is that, "Jesus Christ is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced Him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen." The story isn't over. Jesus has not been defeated; He will come again. John, in writing this down, understands the comfort that's coming.

Look at verse 4: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, grace to you and peace, from Him who is, who was, who is to come. And from the seven-fold Holy Spirit before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the *protokos*, the premier one from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth. To the One who loves us, released us from our sins by His blood, and made us to be a kingdom priest who is God and Father. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Then he launches into, "Behold, He's coming with the clouds." What has elicited all of this praise at the beginning is that when he sits down to write, he's going to be writing down these amazing revelations. So as we come to this opening chapter, the first vision is indeed an encouraging one.

Look at verse 10: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." Well, what does He mean "in the Spirit"? Well, it's a simple way to say this is not a normal human experience. This is no mere mental event. This is not imagination. John was brought by and empowered through the Holy Spirit to an experience beyond the normal senses, beyond sight, beyond smell, beyond touch, beyond taste, beyond hearing. He was literally taken into another dimension like Ezekiel, like Isaiah, like Peter in Acts 10, like Paul.

A vision is not explained by any human phenomena. It is the Lord opening one's awareness to the realm of the divine. He is supernaturally transported to the divine world. He is not asleep; this is not a dream; he is awake. But none of this is perceived by any of his human senses.

There is a clarity of vision because he sees actual images. There is a clarity of interpretation and an understanding that comes to him in another dimension; just happens to be on the Lord's Day, on the Lord's Day – first day of the week, the Lord's Day. That – by the time you get to John writing this – had become the customary way to describe the first day of the week; and it still is. It was a Sunday, a Sunday. The church had been worshipping on the first day of the week since the risen Lord had come out of the grave. It was Sunday on Patmos.

I thought about that when I went into the cave where they say John was supposedly – or a cave like that – when the Lord gave him these visions. On that Sunday, he says, "I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet – piercing, brilliant trumpet." He said, "I heard it."

In the account of the giving of the law, the Bible says there were thunders and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud. When the service of the temple began in the morning and the great door was opened every day, there was a sound of a trumpet. When the year of Jubilee came it was signalled by a silver trumpet. When in the future, the silence of the tombs are broken and the scattered children of God all over the globe will be gathered for glory, it will be the voice of the archangel and the trump of God that will call them out of their graves. The trumpets shall sound and the dead shall be raised.

The voice of God commanding like a trumpet – piercing, penetrating, loud sound. Throughout the book of Revelation you have these loud sounds, these trumpet-type sounds – chapter 5, chapters 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19, and of course, here in chapter 1. Loud announcements are being made, loud announcements. This is not just a trumpet, this is a sound like a trumpet. This is a sound that comes not from an instrument, but a sound that comes from the Lord Himself, the Lord Himself. The risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ is the one speaking.

John is told to write. The voice says to him, the voice of the Lord, "Write in a book what you see. Send it to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea." A scroll – papyrus, *biblion*. "Write it down."

After every vision – there are 12 visions in Revelation. After every vision, there is a command: "Write it down," with the exception of chapter 10, verse 4: "Don't write." The rest of the visions: "Write them down. Write them down seven times." No copy machine on Patmos: "Write it out seven times." John wrote the book of Revelation down seven times.

The churches had already been mentioned. The seven churches generally in chapter 1, verse 4; and now they're specifically identified in chapter 11, and they literally follow the postal route in Asia Minor. The ancient postal route starts in Ephesus and sweeps across the cities, ending up in Laodicea. Each had its own postal district and was the center of that district. The order of the cities indicates the route the messengers would follow.

There were seven messengers there; they're identified in verse 20. They would be pastors from those seven churches. They would each be given their copy of the book of Revelation, and they would start off, and one of them would drop off at Ephesus, the next one at Smyrna, the next at Pergamum, next at Thyatira, next at Sardis, next at Philadelphia, and the last one all the way to Laodicea. And although each of the seven churches received a complete book, they also found in the book a specific letter to that individual church – and we'll look at those in chapter 2 and 3.

So the first thing that comes to John is a voice – a piercing, penetrating voice. The voice of the Lord Himself telling him to write the book of Revelation down seven times and distribute to these seven churches. The message starts for them. That brings us to chapter 1, verse 12 – look at it: "Then I turned to see the voice, the voice like a trumpet, that was speaking with me." Not just a blast, but a trumpet-like sound, but words.

The words are given in verse 11: "I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned, I saw seven golden lampstands." John apparently had his back to the voice and he turned. And what did he see? He sees the vision of the glorified Son of God, the glorified Son of God, the voice of the risen, glorious Christ. And he doesn't see only Christ, He sees him in the middle of the lampstands, the seven golden lampstands.

Verse 20 says the seven golden lampstands represent the seven churches. What is a lampstand? Lamps in the ancient world were made out of clay or metal. You poured oil into them. Had a floating wick; lit the wick. And if you wanted to elevate the light in the house, you put the lamp on a stand. Just like you have lamps: you don't put light on the ground, you need to elevate light. And they had lampstands for their flickering light.

He sees portable lampstands holding oil lamps so commonly used. And these seven golden lampstands are the seven churches. This is to remind us that the church is the light in the world. "You are the light of the world," our Lord said. The church carries that light. God's people are assembled in local churches as lights in the world, lights in the world.

Each church is a light in its own place, in its own location, in its own city. They're golden. What does that mean? Costly, precious, lovely, magnificent, beautiful, valuable. They are, in fact, the most valuable reality in any place, any city, any town, any district, any neighbourhood.

Why are there seven? Well, there were seven churches that had been planted in Asia Minor. But seven is a number often used to refer to completeness, completeness.

Zachariah and the book of Exodus, both Moses and Zachariah had seven lamps on their lampstands depicting completeness based on the creation in seven days, symbolic then of the whole people of God, the complete people of God, the whole church. So John turns and sees what represents the church, and he sees in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, one like a son of man, one like a human – like a human, but not like a human – like a human. He doesn't say he saw a son of man, he saw one like a son of man.

This is the Son of Man, but He's not like the Christ that John saw before the ascension. He's not like that. He is now in full glory. I don't know what the difference was between a post-resurrection Christ and the Christ in full glory in John's vision, but it was striking. Son of Man is a messianic title given to the Lord Jesus Christ because He is the fulfilment of that prophecy in Daniel 7. Daniel 7 calls Messiah "Son of Man".

Just to make as much time up as we can, let's just say for the sake of simplicity: he sees the glorified Christ, the Lord of the church moving in His church. That's what he sees. In itself, this is tremendously encouraging. This is very comforting. Now the Lord had said at that very, very powerful, final moment before He ascended, He said, "Lo, I am with you always." Maybe John wondered about that.

Jesus had said to them on that Thursday night in the upper room, "I will not leave you as orphans." He will not forsake His people, He will not forsake His church, and John looks and sees that He has not. It looks so bad, so bleak.

Here is this last apostle exiled in his 90s to do hard labour. Not exactly what they thought when they started following Jesus, and hoped to sit on His right and left hand in the kingdom. And the churches seemed to be crumbling under the weight of the wretched culture that surrounds them, and he needs to know that Christ is moving in His church – and that's the comforting vision.

What is the Lord doing in His church? The imagery here is unmistakable. He describes Him, first of all: "I saw one like a son of man – " and he starts with His clothing " – clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash."

Such robes could be emblems of dignity, could be emblems of rank. Certainly, Christ is the pre-eminent one in the church. It says that back in verse 5: "He is the *protokos*. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth. He deserves to wear the most royal robe available. Kings wore those kinds of robes. The word is *podrs* in the Greek. So it can easily be linked to the Old Testament, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Most of the occurrences of this Greek word in the Septuagint – which is the Greek Old Testament – use it in reference, not to a king, but to the high priest, the high priest.

It was true, kings wore robes, princes wore robes. Jonathan and Saul – for illustration – had robes. Prophets wore robes. In Daniel's vision, the divine figure who came to tell Daniel the Word of God was clothed in a linen *poderase*, a linen robe. That was the dress of the angelic messenger as well – the king, the prophet, those of dignity and nobility, messengers of God – but most uniquely, this word is used to speak of the robe the high priest wore.

Jesus is king, He is priest, He is prophet, He is all of that. But one thing nails down the idea that this is a priestly robe, and that is that a cross – the front of His chest, over the robe, is a golden belt, a golden sash. This, the high priest wore. Priests wore a belt or a sash. We learn that in Exodus, Leviticus. Most particularly, the high priest was identified by a belt or a sash. So what do we see Christ doing? He's the royal High Priest interceding on behalf of His church. He's in His priestly work.

Hebrews unfolds this, doesn't it. We don't have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. We have a high priest to whom we can go boldly to the throne of grace for help in time of need because we know He's been there. We have a faithful High Priest. We have one who ever lives to intercede for us. This is His priestly work. Unequalled capacity for sympathising with our distress, with our struggle, with the danger in which we live, the sorrow that encompasses us, the trials of life, the temptations He was exposed to – all of that, to all of that. He understands us. He knows the path of victory over sin. He walked that path; and in so doing out of love, verse 5 says, "Released us from our sins by His blood." So he knows suffering far beyond what we would even know.

He endured temptation triumphantly. He endured the cross victoriously. He is the sympathiser. There is no one with a capacity such as His to feel our sorrow, pain, and struggle. He's present in His church, interceding for His church before God – pleading, praying on our behalf, interceding that we might not ever be tempted above that we are able; but that with every temptation, there will be a way of escape; that there would never be a time when there would be too much for us to bear; that He would be to us what He was to Peter when He steps into Peter's life and says, "I have prayed for you – " Luke 22 " – that your faith fail not." He ever lives to make intercession for us. That is why no trial crushes our faith, but trials are cause for triumph, and strength, and growth, and joy.

Secondly, John moves from the clothing to the person, and he looks to His head and His hair, verse 14: "And they're white like white wool, and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His hair is like wool and snow; His eyes like a flame of fire."

And then he goes on to not only describe His head, His hair, His eyes; but His feet, His voice, His right hand, His mouth, His face. The picture continues to be more clear. And the picture then is a picture of His purifying work. He not only interceded for His church – listen: He purifies His church, He purifies His church. This is so encouraging to me, comforting to me.

Sometimes I'd like to get people in the church by the neck and shake them. I don't understand how churches, and church leaders, and pastors can live the kind of lives they live. It can be so discouraging,

so disappointing. John must have felt that with regard to the very churches that he was shepherding in Asia Minor. But here we see that no matter what is going on in the church, the Lord Himself is fully aware of that.

The apostle Paul said that he wanted the church to be presented to Christ as a chaste virgin. Second Corinthians 11, Paul said that, "Christ gave Himself for the church to sanctify and cleans her that she might be glorious and without spot or any blemish, but that she should be holy and blameless," Ephesians 5. Paul said Jesus reconciled the church in Colossians 1 – it was read this morning – "To present her before Him, holy and blameless, and above reproach." Peter says that He wants the church holy, for He is holy. As much as I want the church holy, He wants it far more, infinitely more, infinitely more.

There are patterns in Scripture for dealing with sin, Matthew 18, the disciplining of sinning people. But the Lord Himself is working in His church. All of us He prunes all the time, but sometimes that pruning is severe. He might even take lives – such as Acts 5.

First Corinthians 11: Some people who were desecrating the Lord's Table died. Or, as John writes about it in 1 John: "A sin unto death." Peter said, "Judgment begins at the house of God." But short of that, as we read this morning in [John 15:2](#), "The Father is pruning His church." It is the work then of the Father the Son is doing as He purifies His church, penetrating to see the church.

Go back to verse 14: "His head and hair white like white wool, like snow – " speaks of absolute, unblemished, pure holiness. He is perfectly holy " – and His eyes are like a flame of fire." Like lasers, they see everything. They miss nothing. This is holy, wise omniscience; holy, wise omniscience.

Does that encourage you to know that or does that frighten you to know that? Nothing is going on in your life, or my life, or this church that is unknown to the Lord. His holy, wise omniscience, penetrates to everything and that in light of judgment, because the next thing that John sees are His feet, in verse 15, and they're like burnished bronze when it has been made to glow in a furnace – white, hot metal; red hot glowing brass.

The emphasis is on judgment. This pruning working, this purging work is a work of judgment on sin; not a damning final judgment, but a disciplining judgment. When men came before the throne of a king, the king was always elevated, they were always underneath. The king's feet came to symbolise judgment because the subject was under his feet. Our Lord has feet of burnished bronze and He will stamp out sin in His church – blazing, molten, pure, refined, gleaming feet of judgment.

He exercises judgment in His church. When you see a person whose life is crushed because of certain sin, a person who's a believer, this is that in action. When you see a leader who is literally removed in judgment, this is that. Our Lord is at work in His church. Don't think for a minute that we have to do the work, He's doing it. He intercedes for His church to protect His own. But He also purifies His church by disciplining His own.

Then John moves from His clothes, to His features, to His voice. The end of verse 15: "His voice was like the sound of many waters." What is that? Well, it's very much like [Ezekiel 43:2](#) which describes the voice of God as the sound of many waters.

If you were in the Isle of Patmos, you would know that waves surround that little island and smash against it with crashing loud noise. The thundering voice of the surf pounds the rocks of Patmos' shore. It's the crash of Niagara. This is the voice of the Lord of the church. What are we seeing here? He speaks to His church with authority. He interceded for His church, He purifies His church, He speaks to His church with authority through His Word.

I believe in every time, in every period, the Lord has those who are faithful to be His spokesmen, faithful to be His spokesmen. When He speaks, the church must listen. He has not abandoned His church. He is still speaking to His true church through His Word, which is His authoritative voice.

I hear preachers all the time saying, "You need to learn to listen for the voice of God. You need to learn to hear God speak. And sometimes He comes in such a still, small, gentle voice; and you need to be tuned in so you can hear Him speak." I have no idea what that means. But I know that when He speaks to the church, He thunders to the church. He thunders to the church with the divine authority of Holy Scripture.

This isn't psychological games He's playing. This isn't little niceties that are attempting to tweak your life to make it more the way you'd like it. This is the thundering of divine truth – crashing truth brought against the years of His church.

Verse 16, he sees that he's holding something. He's holding seven stars, He's holding seven stars. What are seven stars? Down in verse 20, "The seven stars are the *aggelos*. The word can mean "messenger," and here most likely refers to pastors of the seven churches.

It's a very real consideration that they had actually been able to come and visit John – pastors from these seven churches. They were giving John the reports that are reflected in the letters. They're in his right hand. Each of the letters – notice the seven letters.

Look at chapter 2, verse 1: "To the messenger of the church at Ephesus," verse 8: "To the messenger of Smyrna – " verse 12 " – and the messenger of Pergamos. Verse 18: "The messenger of Thyatira." Chapter 3: "The messenger of Sardis, the messenger of Philadelphia, the messenger – " these are best understood as messengers. Now what does this tell us? That the Lord provides leaders for His church, the Lord provides leaders for His church. I love the fact that He holds them in His hand.

We can be disappointed by a lot of people. There are a lot of defaulted leaders. The Lord will always have in every generation for His true church, true leaders in His hand. You can count on it. The future may be bleak. There may be a lot of defection. When persecution comes, people may flee, people may want to leave the church, leaders may try to compromise with the world. There may be many who defect – there already have been through the ages. But there will always be, in the hand of the Lord, true messengers, true messengers. The Lord will always raise up true messengers, true leaders.

This is so critical to the life of the church, that's why we train men, that's why we have a seminary. The Lord will always have His faithful leaders through whom He controls His church, through whom He controls His church. So the Lord of the church is present to intercede for his church, purify His church, speak authoritatively to His church, and sovereignly control His church through the men that He gifts and calls and sets apart to lead.

Just two more thoughts. In verse 16: "Out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. Out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword." What is that? That is the Lord protecting His church, that is the Lord protecting His church.

Chapter 2, verse 12, says it again: "To the messenger of Pergamos from the one who has the sharp two-edged sword." Verse 16: "Repent or I'm coming to you quickly, and I'll make war against them with the sword of My mouth – " against who " – against those who are deniers of the faith, those who hold the teaching of Balaam, those who walk in the way of the Nicolaitans," false teachers. The Lord protects His church.

This is a judgment sword, a judgment sword. This is a *rhomphaia*, a big, double-handed, double-sided, broad, devastating sword. He will destroy the enemies of His church. He will build His church.

Is that encouraging? The Lord of the church is seen defeating His enemies. Those who attack His people will pay the price. He will destroy His enemies: "I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth."

And, finally, verse 16: "His face was like the sun shining in its strength." Looking at His face was like looking into the sun at noonday. What is this? This is the Lord reflecting His glory through the church, the Lord reflecting His glory through the church.

John looked at His face and it was like the blazing fullness of the sun on a clear day. John might have borrowed that expression from [Judges 5:31](#), "The sun shining brightly in its strength," that text says, and it refers to those who love the Lord.

The faces of the righteous are said to shine like the sun: [Matthew 13:43](#). Daniel 12 says, "Those who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars." This is the climactic reality in the church. The glory of the Lord shines through the church. The glorious, exalted Lord of the church, present in the church – empowering the church; interceding for the church; purifying the church; speaking with authority to the church through His Word; controlling the church through His chosen, gifted, and prepared leaders; protecting the church; and being glorified in the church – that is what our Lord is doing in our church even now, even now. We have nothing to fear, do we; nothing to fear.

And John, of course, is overwhelmed. He falls over like a dead man – which is what people did when they had visions. It's what happened to Isaiah and Ezekiel. Overwhelmed of the majestic glory of the vision. He is motionless; he is shocked into lifelessness. This is an experience that almost kills him. But he really has nothing to fear because the Lord placed His right hand on him.

Verse 17 said, "Stop being afraid." Why was he afraid? Because he'd just seen the Holy Lord in His church. He had seen divine omniscience depicted, judgement depicted. And John, even as a 90-year-old apostle, knew his own sinful heart. There's always fear in a true vision of Christ because we see His glory and we're aware that He sees our sin. But He places His right hand on John and says, "Don't be afraid; I'm the first and the last, I'm the living One. I was dead; and behold, I am alive forever-more, and I have the keys of death and Hades."

Why is that important to say? What He's saying to John is simply this: "Don't worry about dying. Don't worry that I might kill you. I've already died and risen again for you. Don't be afraid; don't be afraid." The same one who struck fear in his heart touched him. And I want this passage to touch you with that tender encouragement.

Even you as a sinner, you, like John, have nothing to fear. The glorious Lord will not be to you an executioner. He will not bring you to death; He has already died and risen again for you. In fact, back in verse 5: "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth – to Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood, by His death, He rose then to give us eternal life."

"So, John, just write, just write – " verse 19 " – write the message – visions of the past, the present, and the future." In other words, "Go to work. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off. You have nothing to fear. Do what I've asked you to do: fulfil your commission."

So here we are seeing this vision of Christ. We don't have anything to fear because He has died and risen again for us. But we're part of the plan. We're not going to write a new book of the Bible. But we have been called, have we not, to proclaim His glory to the ends of the earth. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and do what He called you to do.

Father, we thank You for this great text and incredible picture of our risen, exalted, glorified Lord in His church. This is Christ in our midst, even now, in all this majesty and glory. How grateful we are; how hopeful it is – how encouraging, how motivating, how exciting, how thrilling. How blessed we are to have this confidence that no matter what's going on in the world, should we all be exiled to some island for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, You are still at work, still at work, triumphantly in Your church.

You will build Your church. You will bring Your children to glory. That is the plan. You purposed it; You bring it to pass. So even as the world encroaches more on us and persecution has escalated, we rejoice with the same kind of joy that John must have come to, to know that in spite of how dark it looks, Your glory is shining in Your true church. We rest in that; we rejoice in that; we praise You for it. In the name of Christ. Amen.