

"A Vision of Reality"

Revelation 1:9-20 ♦ (read text at start)

Introduction.

It had been a long hard day, and the old Apostle finally had the chance to rest his weary body. He felt the ache in his muscles, and soreness burn throughout his body as he stretched out in an almost dreamlike state. His mind quickly turned to the past. The last few decades had been filled with more wonder, and turmoil, than he had ever expected for his generation. He had actually witnessed the presence of God's Messiah finally come to Israel. He had been a part of the close circle of followers who had lived with Jesus, the Christ, for the three years of his ministry on earth.

He had been confused, bewildered, and shocked, along with the others, when their Lord was crucified. He was a witness to the indescribable awe of the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. He was a part of the birth and the growth of the Church which carried on Jesus' mission. The miracles, the conversions, the expansion of God's Kingdom all took place before his very own eyes. He and the rest of the new Christian movement were anxiously awaiting Christ's return to call believers home to glory in heaven!

Suddenly, a sharp pain in his leg brought his thoughts back to **reality**. His glorious memories were all being threatened by the events of the present day. It seems that everything had turned wrong. Persecution and oppression in various forms appeared to be destroying the church. Christians were losing faith and giving up the way of the gospel. The work of Christ appeared to be falling apart. Fear of the present reality struck the Apostle John full in the face. The vision of God's Kingdom was fading from the eyes of believers everywhere.

This imaginative description of a moment late in the life of the Apostle John reflects a genuine concern for the Church. Loss of the vision of God's Kingdom is a dangerous threat to the work of the Lord. The Church was faced with this threat late in the 1st century, and in many ways, the contemporary Church is faced with a similar threat now in the 21st century. In order to overcome this threat, it is helpful to recognize some of the reasons for this "loss of vision."

I. Reasons for Loss of Vision.

The crises for the Church at the end of the 1st century came in the form of persecution and oppression. By late in the 1st century, many of the Apostles of Jesus had been killed as martyrs. John may have been the only one left, of the original twelve, when he was exiled on Patmos; a small island in the Mediterranean where criminals were forced to do hard labor in a rock quarry.

At the same time, Christians in Asia Minor were suffering oppression from a variety of sources. Some were being persecuted by those who were stirring up riots and leveling charges against Christians, which led to their arrest, imprisonment, and sometimes death. In addition, the Roman state viewed Christians with suspicion because of the violent disruptions of which they seemed to be in the center.

Furthermore, the Roman Emperor himself was known for instigating persecution against Christians, and in fact anyone who did not honor him. **Domitian** enforced emperor worship, demanding to be considered as a god. Refusal to comply was considered treason. Christians, who refused to worship the emperor, were subject to economic restrictions, loss of property, banishment, imprisonment, and even death. Domitian did not simply single out Christians, but was known for a general reign of terror stemming from a warped personality and excessive arrogance. Imagine such a fearsome ruler with a great sword at his side as a constant threat to your well-being.

For the Church, the result of this persecution was loss of the Christian vision. Pain, anxiety, and fear tended to occupy the minds of believers, and exclude all other perceptions. The Christians of the late 1st century were losing hope and faith in God's glorious realm, which was supposed to be characterized by justice and righteousness.

It is not hard to see a similar loss of vision within the Church today. The circumstances are different than those of the 1st century, but the Church is faced with a similar crisis. There are a number of reasons for loss of vision in the contemporary Church.

Events in our modern society can be said to reflect a general reign of terror of their own. Modern times have witnessed two world wars, and numerous regional atrocities related to warfare. Terrorism, has replaced Communism, as this generation's looming threat, still overcast by the shadow of nuclear holocaust. Olivehurst, Thurston, and Columbine High Schools; Youth with a Mission, and New Life Church still echo in our hearts the unimaginable pain of the death of our young people and neighbors. We could rehearse numerous examples of violence and occasions of dread, related to weapons, drugs, gangs, kidnappings, murders, rapes, and more; but I am confident that we are all too familiar with such daily reports in the media, concerning which we have become numb.

Our vision is also limited by the stresses which we so commonly experience. There is never enough money. There are too many demands from work. There is too much strife and tension in our relationships. As a result, we are in debt, we experience heart attacks, and far too many of our marriages are falling apart.

Our vision is also clouded by disillusion. Our "modern" society appeared to hold such great promise in the beginning. Remember thinking that when we reached the 21st century, life would be like "The Jetsons!" You know; robots serving in every home, and cars zipping through the air. Technology appeared to solve all of our problems and hold such promise. Nuclear power could ward off our enemies and supply our energy demands, rockets could take us to Mars, and computers could produce and process vast amounts of information.

To our dismay however: nuclear power threatens us with dangerous radiation, and in the hands of terrorists is a horrifying threat; a rocket ship sent to Mars not too many years ago was actually lost in space; and tell me honestly, how many times have you pulled your hair out by the roots because of computer malfunctions! Yes, just consider the great advantages of our modern technology: you can have breakfast in London, lunch in Paris, and luggage in Denver!

As a result of the disillusionment of our "modern" world, we are said to now be experiencing "postmodern" society. This has only increased our need to regain vision in the Church. Postmodernism is described as pluralistic and broadly inclusive. In relation to religion, postmodernism embraces every view imaginable. As a result, our country has experienced a resurgence of a variety of beliefs and practices. For example, a trend which has been labeled a type of "neo-paganism" has become popular. Not long ago, a News report in San Francisco told of a parent who was protesting to the school board because his elementary school child had been taught basic rituals of witchcraft in the public classroom.

People are searching for truths, and they are open to everything including paganism, Eastern mysticism, neo-nazi practices, and much more. What could be seen as a great opportunity for the evangelistic mission of the Church, has become a source of confusion and frustration for the faithful.

Violence, stress, disillusion, and confusion are only a few examples of the many difficulties which obstruct the vision of the Church and its members in the 21st century. When overwhelmed with stress or pain, it is a human tendency to develop "tunnel vision" . We tend to see the world in light of our problems. It is as if our turmoil defines the only reality which exists. We become paralyzed and withdraw into the private worlds which we have created for our comfort, in order to escape the frightening reality which surrounds us.

The reality of life which the 1st century Christians experienced was the strife coming from their community and the deadly threat of a powerful Emperor with a threatening sword by his side. Likewise, reality **today** is defined by our afflictions and stresses and fears. Like the recipients of the revelation to John, we need to hear a word from God which would expand our vision. The Church needs to expand its **vision of reality**.

II. Expanding our Vision of Reality.

One of the ways in which God addresses this need is through the inspiration of a new vision, communicated in the book of Revelation! I want to emphasize that the visions in the book of Revelation are not just intended for those at the end of the world. It is an image directed at every generation which needs to be reminded of the **present** reality of God's Kingdom! Thus, the book of Revelation was just as significant, and perhaps moreso, for the Christians of the 1st century, as it is for the Church today! Notice how the book is introduced:

{Read Rev. 1:4}

This is addressed as a communication to seven churches in Asia Minor, not, initially, to churches in the 21st century. Thus, like the letters of the Apostle Paul, we are privileged to be reading someone else's inspired mail. Also, note the words of verse 9, in chapter one of Revelation:

{Read Rev. 1:9}

John identifies himself as a "fellow partaker" in the tribulation. He was not referring here to some future end-time tribulation, about which we debate whether the Rapture will take place before, during, or after. Rather, he was referring to persecution in the 1st century which he was experiencing first hand on the island of Patmos.

Thus, God's response presented to the early church, from which we too may benefit, through the gracious application of the Spirit, is a new vision. As I read the introduction of this vision once again, keep in mind the character of a "vision." Visions constitute communications which are intended to be "seen." That is why the Greek term, ἰδοῦ, appears throughout the book of Revelation. This Greek particle is actually taken from an imperative form of the verb which means "to see." Thus, 26 times throughout the 21 chapters of Revelation, John writes this command "**See**," "**Look**." It is often translated in our English Bibles with the word, "behold." It is intended to cause the reader, or listener, to "look" at what is being "said."

Consequently, as we often say of children, Revelation is primarily intended to be "seen," not heard. An illustration of this irony occurs in verse 12 of the first chapter.

{Read Rev. 1:12}

John states that he "turned to **see** the voice." Normally, we "hear" voices. But this is part of a vision which must be "seen."

So, as I read a portion of our text again, this time try to "see" it!

{Read Rev. 1:12-18}

Allow the vision to have its impact on your mind and heart. Imagine a being dressed in a full robe with a golden sash, with eyes flaming with fire, with feet glowing as from a furnace, with a voice like the mighty ocean, and a large sword between his teeth. This being is so large, that he holds seven stars from the galaxies in his right hand; and his face shines like the sun, blinding your eyes! It is no wonder that John passed out as if a dead man!

Through the communication of this image, John was to expand the vision of reality for the 1st century church. The people of the early church were surrounded by fear and oppression. The reality which they saw was an emperor who threatened their lives, and neighbors who persecuted them. The vision which John received from the Lord, however, testified to a greater reality that existed in that very day.

John's inspired words infused the church with a picture of a greater truth than the pain which surrounded them. As the vision sunk deep into the lives of the early believers, they were to gain new strength and inspiration. Why should they fear a tiny human emperor with a sword by his side, when they served an omnipresent God who holds a two-edged sword in his mouth, with stars in his hand, and flames of fire in his eyes. The human emperor may be able to kill them, but they serve a God who was dead, and is alive forevermore; and holds the power of Resurrection!

Strengthened by the vision of the greater reality of God's Kingdom and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the early Church did not die. Rather, many of its members were so bold as to proclaim the glory of God's Kingdom, even when killed as martyrs for the faith. The Church did not fail, but has survived and proclaimed the Gospel for over two thousand years, by the grace of God!

The reality of God's Kingdom is still evident today. I often want to see evidence of God through grand miracles which display His power, like those described in the Old Testament; the creation, the flood, crossing of the Red Sea, fire on Mt. Carmel, and others. However, one of the first testimonies which really expanded my vision of the reality of God's Kingdom came from a rather ordinary man who had a loving wife and four daughters.

This man was part of a family scene that was all too common a few years ago in America. The man did not go to church and was not involved in religious concerns. His wife, however, was a committed believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Every week she gathered up their four children and took them to church, leaving the man behind. Each week she prayed that her husband would come to know Jesus and join her at church. She never nagged and she never pushed. In fact, she served her husband graciously in every way. Meanwhile she prayed and longed for his change of heart. He was not necessarily a cruel man, yet he appeared gruff and distant. He seemed to care mostly for his own, and his sense of reserve almost frightened others away.

One day a preacher came to the man's home, and introduced the man to Jesus Christ, and told him about God's Kingdom. Miraculously, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the wife's prayers were answered. The man not only attended church with his family, but became a leader in the congregation. He served as a greeter, an usher, and chairman of the Church Board. When the church went through hard times, he maintained a stable ministry of lay leadership, when so many others abandoned the congregation. That church is now thriving with growth, in the context of serving of the Lord.

It may have been enough for me to simply hear that testimony and believe in the reality of God's Kingdom and its power to change lives. However, the real impact of the story came to me as it touched my own life. The preacher in the story was my father. When I was 14 years old, that preacher died. At that time, the man in this story, who had come to know Christ, stepped in, and in many significant ways, he took on the role of my father. He taught me to drive a car, he took me to visit his work-place, he played with my friends and me, he fed me at his table, and always welcomed me into his home.

At a time of crisis, when my reality was diminished by the pain of loss and death; when I cried out, "is this all there is to life?", the greater reality of God's Kingdom came in the form of caring Christian man transformed by grace.

As the Church faces this 21st century, we must realize there is more to reality than the problems which oppress us, the stresses which restrict us, or the violence which frightens us. We live as citizens of God's Kingdom! We pray, meditate on God's word, worship the Lord, practice daily devotions with our family, help our neighbor in need; and even wake up singing in the morning. A pastor friend of mine encourages his congregation to set the tone for each day by starting every morning with song. These are only a few small illustrations of how we practice the greater reality of God's Kingdom, knowing that ultimately God's Realm has already secured eternal victory over sin and death! Thus, nothing can prevent us from living in the present reality of the Kingdom of God, and fulfilling the call which God has placed on our lives.

Conclusion:

The traumas around us are not all that exists. God's Kingdom is real in our world, right now, in the present day. We must expand our vision and see the greater reality and truth of God. That is the exhortation which comes from the book of Revelation. Let us grasp it, let it sink into our minds and hearts. Most of all, let us practice its existence. Be inspired, be encouraged, and serve the Lord without fear or despair, for God's Kingdom is real, and it is greater than any concern in the universe!

Perhaps you need to regain your view of the reality of God's Kingdom and your place in it, as God's servant. Look and See the truth of God's rule in the world, and commit fully to Christ and living in God's Kingdom.