

The Isle of Patmos is a rugged chunk of volcanic rock, ten miles long and five miles wide, 35 miles off the coast of Turkey in the Mediterranean sea. It's full of caves and it has a kind of desolate beauty. Tradition has it that the Apostle John was on Patmos around the year of 95AD, when he received a vision which was a revelation from God. Then he sent the message out in a letter to seven churches in Asia Minor, now known as Turkey.

This was the same John who wrote John's gospel and he was a political prisoner on Patmos, exiled to this remote island because of his outspoken witness for Christ. Like Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison, or Martin Luther King's Letter's from Birmingham Jail; John's revelation is born out of suffering and his letter was designed to bring hope and encouragement to a persecuted church. From this we learn that first century Christians were very much like us. They had never seen Jesus face to face, and they learned of Jesus through people preaching the gospel and responded by receiving Him as Saviour and Lord. Like us, they learned that faith in Christ was no immunity from the storms of life and for John, this was very true for his stand for Jesus caused him to be imprisoned on Patmos.

At the time that John received his revelation, Christians were being tortured and murdered for their faith, and John wrote against a background of persecution as the Romans tried to crush the Christian faith. The church met in secret in the darkness of night and John's heart went out to these fearful Christians who were holding out in faith. John received his revelation and then sent the church a message of hope, faith and victory. The Book of Revelation spells out the ultimate victory of the Kingdom of God, and in chapter one John tells the people that the Jesus Christ whom we trust is the living Lord of Heaven. John was only reminding them of what they already knew to give them a firmer hold on their faith. The Jesus of history is the Lord of Heaven.

Isaiah had said this hundreds of years before for chapters 40 to 66 were written during the Israelites exile in Babylon, when the Israelites waited for the deliverance of God. Isaiah said *God is sending someone. He will be a Lamb led to the slaughter. He will die for the sins of His people. By His stripes we shall be healed.* Isaiah introduced this suffering figure with the words *Behold your God!* (Is 40:10). There is the truth: Jesus is God come down to man. Jesus is the Lord of Glory.

This was the message that John wanted to deliver to his people. But he faced a difficult problem. If he wrote about Jesus, and like Isaiah simply said *Behold your God!* he would bring more persecution upon himself and his readers, because to affirm that *Jesus is Lord* was illegal in the Roman Empire. So, John presented this truth in words that used symbols and visions, and although his message would be clear to his readers, the Roman authorities would not understand it. John says in verse 13 that ***I saw one like a Son of Man***, which was a term Jesus used for Himself, and in verse 18 John describes Him as ***one who was dead and is alive forevermore***. Once this was done, John then drives home the central message of hope and comfort. This same Jesus is the resurrected living Lord of heaven. It's Jesus on the throne and not Caesar! John proclaims Jesus Christ by describing Him in OT terms, which to the Roman authorities these were just mysterious phrases, but to Christians who knew the OT, this was an affirmation of Jesus' lordship.

John describes Jesus: *His head and hair were white, as white wool like snow. He had seven stars in His hand. I am the first and the last;* said Jesus Christ in John's picture. Now listen to Isaiah 44:6 *Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and His Redeemer the Lord of hosts, I am the first and the last and besides me there is no god.* For these persecuted faithful but frightened Christians, these were words of hope for God's people. The Jesus Christ in whom you have trusted is the king of heaven; the God of Glory. John's vision was a message of hope that Christians could take with them, to help them through persecution and the suffering from those who opposed them because of their faith in Christ. ***They didn't suffer alone for Jesus suffered. He is our fellow sufferer.***

Jesus wept! Jesus suffered! Jesus was hurt! Jesus knew what these suffering Christians were going through because He has been there! He has been abandoned by friends and he's looked to God and asked *why?* Jesus knew mental, physical and spiritual pain! Christian doctrine believes in a God who suffers with us. The Bible says, *in all their affliction HE was afflicted.* (Is 63:9).

Dr Paul Brand was a medical missionary who preached a sermon to a small crowd of leprosy patients in India. As he looked at those people suffering his tears came where his words couldn't. Dr Brand' eyes looked down at their hands which were deformed with fingers missing, in what is called the *leper's claw*. He began to talk about hands and how he could guess people's vocation by their hands. Then he began talking about the hands of Jesus. There were the chubby little fists of Jesus the baby, there were the slender hands of Jesus the young boy and the rough, scarred hands of Jesus the carpenter, bearing the marks of splinters and hammer blows. Then, there were the tender yet powerful hands of Jesus the teacher and healer that never refused to reach out to anyone however sick or sinful.

Then with deep emotions, Dr Brand looking straight at all those *leper claws*; said Jesus' hands reached the height of their beauty when they were nailed to the cross. Dr Brand said *I'm a hand surgeon and I know what happens when you drive a spike through a human palm. You cripple the whole hand.* He said that Jesus identified with suffering humanity. He endured poverty with the poor, weariness with the tired, and clawed hands with the leper. At this the lepers stood up and raised those hands they always tried to hide. Brand had not given them a cure, he'd given them someone who knew their suffering and would one day welcome them to His heavenly home and cure them of every hurt.

Jesus is with us not just as a fellow sufferer, but as a faithful saviour. Jesus doesn't just reach out, He reached down. Jesus has pity but He also has power.

Remember the disciples in the aftermath of the crucifixion, they were scared timid men hiding from the authorities. And then Jesus appeared to them and they became strong in faith and action, even to suffer martyrdom for the name of Christ.

Where do God's people get such bravery and faith? From Christ's victory. We know we do not go to our death, but through our death! Jesus said, *don't be afraid, I am the living one. I was dead but now I am alive forever more.* (v17-18). What can we endure that He has not already endured before us? We can share in Jesus' agony, but we can also share His victory and there's no doubt about that. But our courage and faith also comes from Jesus' authority. Jesus said *I have the keys of death and the land of the dead.* (v18). What does this mean?

There is a reward waiting for those who faithfully answer God's calling. The first disciples went wherever God called them. Remember Paul was stopped from travelling to Asia Minor by the Holy Spirit, and was told to cross over into Macedonia which was dangerous unknown territory. Consider the many Christian missionaries who have risked and sometimes lost their lives taking the gospel to others. *Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. Tis grace hath kept me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.* We go when God calls and not until. ***We go where God is and trust that grace will lead us home.*** The key Jesus holds is the front door key to the Father's house.

An old missionary was returning home after 40 years of service. He came alone because both his wife and son had died. Sailing into London he wondered if anyone from the Mission Board or any of his old friends would be there to greet him. Drawing closer he saw a crowd and banners and his old heart was filled with joy. *They didn't forget me* he said. When he got into port, he saw the banners and crowd were for some famous person on board and there was no one to meet him. Sitting in a hotel room with two raggedy suitcases he was sad and all he thought of was that no one came to welcome him home.

Then God's Spirit spoke to him: *Don't you know why no one was there? It is because you are not home yet. When you get home, there will be a choir to meet you and loved ones to greet you, and most of all the One you've served all these years will be there to take your hand and say well done. Thank you.*

John's vision of Home as found in the Book of Revelation speaks to us of a suffering servant who was also a mighty God who knows what persecution is, because He was persecuted. John's vision speaks to us of a heaven that He has prepared for those who place their faith in Him. As we go through the Book of Revelation, we will also discover the fate that awaits those who reject the Son of Man. Living our faith for Christ is not easy but many have gone before us and have received their reward. Will Jesus meet us and say *well done; thank you?* That's up to us and what is revealed in John's Revelation will hopefully give us the motivation to live for Christ, and may He be with you as you live your lives for Him. ***Amen.***

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