

A TRACT OF TRIUMPH FOR TROUBLED TIMES

I. TROUBLED TIMES. It was the Coliseum in Rome. The lions were unleashed. Instantly, the Christians scattered. One particularly viscous lion was chasing a Christian. The man could feel the lion almost breathing down his neck. In desperation the Christian cried out, "Lord, do something. Turn that lion into a Christian!" Suddenly, the lion wasn't chasing him any more. He turned around and there the lion had dropped to his knees and was praying. He couldn't believe his eyes. So he came up closer to over hear what the lion was praying, "Lord bless this food which we are about to partake."

Truth is stranger than fiction. And more bitter. The date was A.D. 95. The mad Caesar, Domitian, a megalomaniac was on a rampage. He wanted to be known throughout the Empire as very Lord and God [Dominus et Deus noster]. Christians were coerced to bow before the image of the Caesar, while pinching some incense, renouncing Christ and confessing, "Caesar is Lord!" Under Nero's reign, thirty years earlier, many Christian had been thrown to the lions, some were decapitated by gladiators. Others were crucified like their Lord. Their women were ravished in open raw rape. The men were covered with combustible pitch and ignited like torches to light up the night sky. Others were sewn up in animal skins and chewed up by salivating wild dogs [F.F. Bruce, NT History, pp. 401-402, pp. 411-413]. Tradition tells us that beyond his exile on the island of Patmos that the Apostle John in Rome was plunged into a huge pot of boiling oil. Miraculously he lived to tell the story. John lived during troubled times.

And so do we. Peter writes in I Peter 5:8 writes: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Maybe you feel the demonic lion breathing down your neck. Most every day you check your E-Mail and on the screen pops up a sensual siren is calling on you to compromise your integrity. And you are a split second away from clicking on the cookie. Most every week some of your colleagues at work, your friends at school broadcast their sexual conquests or boast about the orgies they partied at over the weekend. And sometimes you honestly feel gypped, by your lily-white piety and purity. Assignments are given at school. Papers to write. Tests to study for. And you choose to slough your way through school. TV is your drug of choice. And that boob tube sucks your brains right out of their casings. Disembowels your brain. When you kiss your brain goodbye, sounds to me like there's been a decapitation. Your heart is enlarged. A cancerous lump disfigured you for life. Infertility has sucked your marriage bone-dry. You can't find work anywhere. All these disappointments like a demonic lion are breathing down your neck. And sometimes it feels as if living for Christ is infinitely harder than dying for Christ.

Ben Patterson until this past year was chaplain at Westmont College and earlier at Hope College in Holland, MI. He also is quite a fine writer. In his book, *Waiting*, he speaks of his wife Lauretta. She once remarked to him, "I know I'd die for Christ. If I were put in front of a firing squad and commanded to renounce Christ or die, I know I'd say "Shoot me!" That would be easy. The hard part is living for Christ, not dying for him." One, huge, heroic act would be easier than a lifetime of little daily decisions" [p. 102]. Just like John and the churches he wrote to, we too live in troubled times.

I. FOUR APPROACHES TO REVELATION

1. Preterist: Contemporary-Historical: From the Fall of Jerusalem to the Fall of Rome [A.D. 70 to 476]. Much truth here, yet Revelation contains prophecies yet to be fulfilled such as the final conquest of Satan, the Great White Throne Judgment, and the Cosmic Renewal of All Things [chapters 20-22].

2. Historicist: Chain of Events: From Patmos to the End of History. Newspaper exegesis. The antichrist is the Pope, Hitler, or Mussolini. The Protestant Reformation, French revolution etc. are direct fulfillments of specific prophecies. It's subjective. Advocates of this system radically disagree about specific fulfillments. It leads to far-fetched interpretation e.g. that laser readers at grocery check-out stands and the lines on grocery items are the Mark of the Beast!

3. Futurist View: End of History Exclusively (except for the first three chapters). Abraham Kuyper and Dispensationalists buy into this approach [The Revelation of St. John, pp. 22 & 49]. Revelation would thereby be mostly irrelevant to the first hearers.

4. Idealist: Revelation is a timeless theological poem. It talks about symbolic principles that apply to all times. Contemporary persons and events are irrelevant. This method follows the medieval allegorical system of interpretation. History becomes bunk.

5. Past/Present/Future/Figurative. Truth is, this document exhibits all four of these perspectives to some degree. The final breakthrough in the future awaits Christ's return. In the present there are major historical crises that foreshadow final judgment especially the immediate crises experienced by the first century church. What is more there are figurative features that surface throughout. Babylon the Great certainly refers to Rome as the center for opposition to God and His people. But it also represents every religious and political power that challenges the city of God.

Some consider 1:19 as the interpretive key to the entire document. Christ tells John: "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." A threefold organizational structure is the result.

Chapter One="What you have seen..."

Chapters 2-3= [the letters to the 7 churches] "What is now."

Chapters Four On="what will take place later."

This seems somewhat contrived, for the unfolding drama on the pages of Revelation utilizes a lot of flashbacks and stream of consciousness sections. It's a mixed bag of now and later. A twofold reading of 1:19 seems more appropriate [now and later]. The main clause ["what you have seen"] introduces the twofold division [cmp. 1:11]: "what is now and what will take place later."

II. TITLE & LITERARY STYLE. The Greek title is apocalypsis from which we get apocalypse or revelation. It is the "revelation of Jesus Christ." Christ is both the revealer and the revelation. In this powerful piece of mail, the curtains are pulled back on the star actor in the drama of history, Jesus Christ.

LITERARY STYLE: Some find this document very confusing and not very relevant, like something out of the Twilight Zone, some macabre horror flick written by Stephen King. The book of Revelation is called apocalyptic literature like the book of Daniel or Ezekiel. Don't let the weird names and the unearthly creatures put you off. This is exciting stuff. It's a multi-media presentation, like a Stephen Spielberg biblical epic with loads of special effects to grab your attention. The ideas dance off the

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page. They trumpet the collapse of the dragon's empire and the breakthrough of God's final civilization, the New Jerusalem on the New Earth. Don't cheat yourself out of studying this fantastic book. You'll not want to miss a single episode. Vs. 3 utters the first of 7 blessings: *"Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near."*

III. AUTHOR, ORIGIN & DESTINATION Identified 4 times in Revelation as John [1:1, 4, 9; 22:8]. From as early as Justin Martyr in the 2nd century A.D. it has been held that this John was the apostle whom Jesus loved, the son of Zebedee. Often called, St. John the Divine Theologian. He is a God-intoxicated, God-possessed, God articulate man.

GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN & DESTINATION: John wrote to the 7 churches of Asia Minor: [vv. 4 & 10]. The mail to those churches originated from the island of Patmos. Look at vs. 9. *"I John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos [perhaps not on the island at the moment] because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."* Patmos is a small [10 miles long & 6 miles wide at the North End] rocky Greek island 50 miles SW of the large ancient city of Ephesus. According to early church tradition [Writings of Eusebius] Roman authorities had banished the Apostle John to this ancient Alcatraz in AD 95 under Emperor Domitian and 18 months later released under Domitian's successor Nerva and returned to Ephesus--mission headquarters for Asia Minor. Other scholars for very good reasons place the Apostle John's sojourn in Patmos 30 years earlier under the reign of Nero. In any event, Patmos was not a place to write home about. It was a penal colony. A dump in the Aegean Sea [See Swindoll, Letters to Churches Then and Now, p. 3]. John's accommodations were not all that hot. Tradition has it that he spent most of his time in this cave. John therefore was no stranger to the outbreak of suffering that was threatening the Church. It was perhaps here in this hostile environment that John was blown away by a staggering vision of Jesus Christ. The Christians in Asia Minor and throughout the Roman Empire were troubled. But to those troubled saints, John penned this living breathing document of hope. It was a tract of triumph for troubled times.

IV. A TRACT OF TRIUMPH FOR TROUBLED TIMES. The main thing is to always keep the main thing the main thing. If you remember nothing else from this series of messages remember this: the central thrust of Revelation is this: Jesus is Victor. And because Jesus is victor we too can overwhelmingly conquer.

The future sometimes feels frightening. We open the newspaper and are assaulted by the news of... The economic explosion in India and China. The rising lethal threat of chemically armed and militarily dangerous terrorist organizations. We're vandalizing the environment: earth, air, sky, and sea, pushing ourselves to the edge of ecological disaster. The unraveling of our nation's moral fabric. Assaulted by such shocking news we end up shaken. Is it any wonder that Francis Fukuyama wrote the essay, "The End of History." Fukuyama argues that the American experiment is the final society. Fascism of the thirties and Marxist communism have been blown out of the water. The rest of the world seems to have bought into the American Dream as the ideal society. And we ask, is history headed for catastrophe? Is Armageddon waiting in the wings?

I don't always have a lot of answers. But I'm connected to the Answer. We don't know what the future holds. But we know who holds the future and we know who holds our hand. We don't have to be afraid. King Jesus is in control. We need not tremble before the blood stained 7-headed Serpent the Devil. Here is a tract of triumph for troubled times. We may have to go through dark times, the great tribulation, Satan's little season, the appearance of the anti-Christ. But we have champion inside us. We don't have to be afraid. "Greater is He who is in us, than he who is in the world" [1 John 4:4].

This is the message of Revelation. Jesus is on the throne. Christ has triumphed. History is in His almighty hands. No one could ever snatch you out of His hands. "In this world you will face tribulation. But be of good courage," Jesus says, "I have overcome the world."



