

Sermon to the Saints which are at Topeka, Kansas -- Sunday, June 2, 2024

***“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, **Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.**” (Revelation 1:10-20)***

What a delight we have here. For a few sermons, we will examine the remainder of this oracle that I began with the opening verse, when last I spoke. The thoughts and expressions here are so intertwined, it cannot be parsed verse-by-verse ... but it must rather be consumed in subject matter chunks. It is a most delightful transition to the substance of the seven writings that were recorded and sent to the elders of the seven churches of Asia Minor ... to be consumed and used by the Church of Revelation.

The weight and substance of this opening scene is quite beyond the capabilities of humankind. It’s one of the most terrifying, intimate and beautiful scenes for the soul that faces privations in the wilderness of this world. Being given sight of such things, I submit, could only happen in the spirit because this dry flesh of ours has insufficient capacitors to manage the load. Like when Paul described what he was given witness to, he used language showing the restrictive capacities of human flesh when the true glories of God and Christ are come upon it:

***“It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”*** (2 Corinthians 12:1-4)

When holy men are brought into the extraordinary condition that they see the things of God in a manner not appointed to but few, it is a glory put upon them that so far exceeds what even elect

souls are normally given that it will – near immediately – puff up their human pride. To experience such explosive indicators of God’s eternal affection and the potency of the gifts to be poured out in abundance in that grand heaven of His occupation, would put a man quite out of himself. It is the wrong reaction, because it is for the purpose of sharing visions and revelations of Himself that the glorious experiences are given ... not so we can go where all flesh wants to go. This is why Paul follows up with this strong language regarding the need to be humbled and humble:

***“Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me. And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.” (2 Corinthians 12:5-7)***

I think it proper for us to lens our consideration of John’s opening words in a similar vein. In previous discourse about John’s words ***“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day”***, I have shared that Seiss makes what I find to be a compelling case that John’s words here are telling the reader that God took him to the Day of the Lord ... by the Spirit. So that it was as though he was made personally present at the fulfillment of that solemn promise made to our Savior in the Covenant of Grace – that Revelation ***“which God gave unto him”*** as we are told in the opening verse of the book. It is a grave thing happening here, just as it was a grave thing that happened with Paul that prepared him to do the labor appointed for him as an apostle to the Gentiles. There are multiple indicators that this experience of John was physically and spiritually devastating. And for us to move to a better sense of the whole oracle, we should begin with that baseline.

First, we have the words that he ***“heard behind [him] a great voice, as of a trumpet”***. What he heard was *not* a trumpet, but a voice that had the effect upon his very essence that a trumpet has on the ears and hearts of men. The word that the Holy Ghost chose here – translated by English-speaking expositors – is the Greek *“salpigx”* (*“sal’-pinx”*). If you chase the origin of the word, you will find that it seeks to capture the notion of a sound that makes you tremble and quake for fear. An agitation of the mind that disturbs and troubles you. Like the deafening sound, in the tossing of a great wave within the swelling seas, will bring the human mind to the clearest sense that you are mere moments away from the most awful end.

Second, when John turns to see He who is speaking, part of the description is His ***“voice [was] as the sound of many waters.”*** This expression is one of terrifying majesty. The exposition of the notion by Seiss is helpful to flesh it out from some scriptural references, so I will share: *“how could it be otherwise, considering that the day is approaching when ‘all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man, and they that hear shall live?’ But this majesty and power of voice is elsewhere more especially referred to the dreadfulness of Christ toward his faithless servants and enemies. It is particularly characteristic of his rebukes. His word came to Jeremiah, saying, ‘Say unto them, The Lord shall roar from on high, and utter his voice from his holy habitation; he shall mightily roar upon his habitation; he shall give a shout, as they that tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. A noise shall come even to the ends of the*

***earth, for the Lord hath a controversy with the nations; he will plead with all flesh; he will give them that are wicked to the sword, saith the Lord.’ But whether for the overthrow of his enemies or the salvation of his people, ‘The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.’”***

Third, we understand the impact of this introduction on the Apostle, by the description he gives of his own reaction: ***“And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.”*** There is here no room for interpretation. The word John used here is *“nekros”* (“*nek-ros*”) ... dead tissue. And this is not hyperbole. When Daniel was introduced to things in the realm of eschatology – particularly as it will exhibit itself toward the people of the Jews – what did it do to that tender soul?

***“Therefore I was left alone, and saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength. Yet heard I the voice of his words: and when I heard the voice of his words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face (i.e., stupefied in fear), and my face toward the ground.”*** (Daniel 10:8-9)

These two partakers with us in this wondrous truth of God are not to be understood as weak and timid. Consider what we know of them and the grand things they were given to see and do – to suffer for their Christ – in their flesh. What we see here are the effects of the gravity and solemnity of this subject matter, that Christ would open Himself and His intentions with regard to His return. With such weight upon the very opening of the dialog, what should we learn and apply to our lives? ***“What manner of persons ought [we] to be ...”*** in light of the knowledge that something so world-altering is shortly to come to pass (**2 Peter 3:11**)? That is a discussion I believe is necessary to gain a relevant grasp of this oracle opening the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Peter passage I quoted finishes with two key components to the answer – ***“holy conversation and godliness”***. But there is a difficulty in laying those two elements down in front of you and walking away. First, the terms are just spiritual-sounding enough ... and yet profoundly cryptic enough ... to be ineffectual if left off without a deeper dive. If I tell you that you need to have a *“holy manner of life”*, I’ve not helped you at all if you don’t understand what I’m telling you to do – or *not do* – that will line up with the standard of behavior I expect. More importantly, to understand the message of the Apostle – from his words and his reaction – we need to soak ourselves in a discussion of our duty. We are plainly warned against doing what ***“seemeth right”*** to us, because that human-focused behavior ends in death (Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25). So this cannot be a discussion about which one of us looks at things the right way. Rather, it has to be according to the light of scripture (Isaiah 8:20). So I offer a few thoughts in this regard.

***“And the angel of the LORD appeared unto [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover***

***he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.” (Exodus 3:2-6)***

Is that not a fascinating revelation about what happened here with Moses? When he approached the presence of the Almighty, it triggered a vehement reaction. This was not like some human saying “when you come into my house, please remove your shoes”, and if you see it from that lens, your lens is severely out of focus. This energy was utterly terrifying to Moses ... such that he ***“hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God”!*** This is the energy of: *“You’re not seeing a magic trick, Moses. You’re in the presence of glory and power beyond your comprehension, so discipline your thoughts and conduct like someone who recognizes that!”* Friends, we are standing on holy ground!

***“But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16).***

I’m asking you to see that same energy in John’s opening up of this first oracle in the Revelation. The very first thing he learned was that he was in the presence of the King ... and he had the bone-shattering realization that all of his human-focused life realities dissipated in an instant of time. How much of our days are spent thinking ... and rationalizing ... and pontificating ... and angling ... and stressing over what it is to spend our eternity-focused human lives in this wilderness of darkness, confusion, sin, and death? It is a waste, under the very best and most “necessary” of circumstances, it is a waste of our time and our strength. When we bring those same energies into our work for the King, then we are crossing a line. Like Moses, seeing something that was quite a remarkable thing from the weak human perspective – a bush that burned but was not consumed. But when he approached, with his human-lensed perspective, he was immediately drawn up short. *“Don’t walk up on this holy ground with those nasty dirty shoes on!”* Don’t approach the things of God with the filth of sinful humanity in every step!

Likewise, when John the Apostle transferred in the Spirit to the Day of the Lord, the first thing he had to learn was how utterly unequipped the flesh is to even take a glimpse of that glory! This is the perspective we should have. We are going to take hold of these matters that are prepared for the final Church of Jesus Christ ... and we think we will be able to rationalize it? Perhaps we can just muse ourselves into that amazing, appointed work? That we will take a look across the human landscape and figure out from whence the Antichrist will come ... or which of the Jews will be called out ... or how the white, red, black, and pale horses will ride? Let me suggest that the first order of business is to get our perspective and our spirit correct – that these transitional things will require the preparation of the spirit in a way that few things in human history has ever required. A holiness in the conversation of the ecclesia that no previous iteration of the Church has faced. This is holy ground!

Now, if you think I’m chastising anyone ... please stop thinking that. This is scriptural analysis of a reality. We are given accounts of human events – and we are given life experiences – to teach us about what a holy, godly walk means. We need to use those instructions to inform how we act ... change how we act when changes are necessary ... force an alteration of our lens when we

see the plain instruction of scripture that shows our lens is wrong. That is joyful labor. That's not an automatic and robotic outcome. The greatest danger we face is our flesh. The warfare that Paul emphasizes is between the flesh and spirit (Romans 7:14-25). James warns us that this is the source of all the fighting we have within this body (James 4:1-5). The vanity and misery of that perpetual conflict is decried by Solomon as the war from which there is no discharge (Ecclesiastes 8:6-8). This is the battle we must wage, just to do little more than move through our daily lives.

When we come to do the Lord's work, we have an amplification of that danger that has been recorded in the pages of Scripture as giving vexation and faltering to our most substantive prophets and fellow laborers.

***“¶ Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet every one of them doth curse me. The LORD said, Verily it shall be well with thy remnant; verily I will cause the enemy to entreat thee well in the time of evil and in the time of affliction. Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel? Thy substance and thy treasures will I give to the spoil without price, and that for all thy sins, even in all thy borders. And I will make thee to pass with thine enemies into a land which thou knowest not: for a fire is kindled in mine anger, which shall burn upon you. ¶ O LORD, thou knowest: remember me, and visit me, and revenge me of my persecutors; take me not away in thy longsuffering: know that for thy sake I have suffered rebuke. Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts. I sat not in the assembly of the mockers, nor rejoiced; I sat alone because of thy hand: for thou hast filled me with indignation. Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail? Therefore thus saith the LORD, If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me: and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them. And I will make thee unto this people a fenced brasen wall: and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the LORD. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible.” (Jeremiah 15:10-21)***

This engagement between the prophet Jeremiah and Almighty – one of a good number of such instances within the Bible – is both terrifying and comforting to a laboring saint. Indeed, a sincere reading of the entire book of Job will see an extended version of the same conversation ... and with the same outcome. Because these instances are all at the point within the human's life where they are in the very crucible – the time of extreme trial and vexation – it is a good place to see the work of the Spirit and apply that wisdom to the present passage involving John, who was also in great straits.

Here, Jeremiah has had it. He has been exposed to the most vehement of Satan's hatred, because he was numbered among the ***“few [who] are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)*** Certainly we can be edified in looking at such instances, since we are seeking to understand the context of the

Revelation and all the cataclysmic events this time of transition will bring to the saints. Being pressed beyond the end of his patience – ***“wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?”*** – he presumes to call God Almighty to task. You know this record reveals how our spiritual forefathers did that. You know that we also do that. In a thousand ways, we find fault with how God has prepared our pathways. We do so, even though we have suffered so little for Christ ... particularly in light of how much He suffered for us. And, unlike us, He suffered when He was neither conceived with Adamic sin, nor committed any sin of His own. It is a cause for great shame, that we so easily lose control of our spirits under our load – and presume to call God into the court of our judgment to give an answer. How proper it is for us to say ... as Job said, when the Lord showed him this error:

***“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:5-6)***

In the instance of Jeremiah, the response from the Lord gives us two things: A clear glimpse of the proper standard of godliness and holy conversation ... and ***“that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.” (James 5:11)*** He tells Jeremiah, and by extension each of us who get testy with our King because of our petty discomforts: ***“If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me: and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth.”*** He then tells Jeremiah what wonderful things he will do to deliver him from his enemies. What I want to focus on is this warning to take the precious from the vile. This, I believe, is at the essence of our duty of holy conversation and godliness – those descriptors of how we should walk in presentation of Christ’s return.

What is ***“precious”*** ... what is ***“vile”*** ... in this passage? In the simplest terms, ***“precious”*** – as in “rare ... of great value ... pure ... undefiled ... glimmering” – refers to God’s revealed Word, judgments, standards. ***“Vile”*** – as in “common ... routine ... cheap ... corrupt ... cankered” – is everything else. Like the distinction between the grace of God and the works of man: ***“if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.” (Romans 11:6)*** There is no context where the two can compatibly coexist.

Yet, if we inspect our own fruit, how quickly do we bring the flesh forward to address matters of the King? How quickly do we become short-tempered with each other? How quickly do we adopt a thought or express a word that is prematurely – or altogether unduly – critical or harsh when we come to discuss matters related to how we serve our King? With what fervor will we defend our flesh – with all the traditions and justifications that attend our very best works – rather than turning our eyes upon the Word and letting Him be our first and chief Guide? And it is not because we are faithless, but because we are walking in the corruption and darkness of our flesh – that is at perpetual war with the Spirit.

A few weeks ago, I was travelling with some of my friends here and one asked me about this passage:

***“¶ And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying, Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water. And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him. Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me. And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour. Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.” (Matthew 17:19-21)***

How weak is our faith? How severely lacking are we, in this life, in our capacity to walk in genuine faith – taking forth the precious from the vile in the simplest and purest form? We cannot display faith in the amount of ***“a grain of mustard seed”***, so filled we are with the traditions and ordinances of our flesh. When John the Beloved turned and looked upon the face of our Christ – beholding His glories up against that of his own flesh – he was filled with the dread of how weak we are where it counts. How weak we are in matters of absorbing that glory and seeing just a little bit of where our faith will exhaust itself in sight. Is there any wonder why he fell at the feet of that Christ as a dead man?

But while we are here – while we walk in that light that we have and those helps that are ever-present – should we not be humble about this solemn truth? If we have been given a greater understanding of doctrine, should we not want to pour that out upon our fellow saints – with patience and kindness? If we have been given a lesser understanding, should we not want to grow and learn and talk and attain, so we might see the face of our Christ the better? If we find our friend overtaken in a fault, should we not simply, humbly, and obediently restore him – rather than look down our noses with even a hint of pomposity? If our very greatest faith, in this life, cannot even equal ***“a grain of mustard seed”***, why would we say or do anything in the name of Christ that does not originate from the Word? And when we return to God ... when we strive in faith to follow after Christ and His Word – He keeps our ways and we are able to go out and speak as His ambassadors.

There is one last nuance with which I want to conclude my examination of this first subject matter within this opening oracle from John’s book. It is a final sharpening of the proverbial blade with regard to how we should receive and consume the letters given to John for the edification of the Church of Revelation. I think it is good to frame the issue with this Messianic prophecy from Isaiah:

***“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish***

***it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*** (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Let us begin by making our hearts and minds clear on this profound truth. From the beginning of all things – and through all of the providential weavings of time and events across the last six millennia – there has been a power in motion. As John Gill says: “[God’s] fervent love for his own glory, which is his ultimate end in all his works of nature, providence, and grace, will engage him to fulfil whatever is foretold concerning the birth of Christ, and redemption by him, and his offices and kingdom”. It is a burning, fiery energy that is wrapped up in the beautiful description of what John sees when he turns at the sound of the voice – which thing we will examine in great detail as we continue unwrapping this glorious oracle.

The next step in the analysis is to understand how the zeal of God has – through the active faith He has put into the hearts and minds of His people – infused into those chosen ones to be ***“zealous of spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:12)*** and ***“zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14)***. The Greek word expresses how we receive through Christ’s sacrifice an eagerness to vindicate our God and our Christ against all false doctrine and practice in His proper worship. Zeal alone can be righteous ... or it can be sinful because it is ***“not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2)***. It is specifically a characteristic that is demanded of the ***“church of the Laodiceans” (Revelation 3:14)*** that they ***“be zealous therefore, and repent” (Revelation 3:19)***.

So, it is not simply a gift of grace that we are highly energized for the defense of the gospel of our Lord ... but it is required to be evident in our holy conversation and godliness. We must be filled with zeal. Filled with it! We get our blood up when we see an encroachment into the prerogative of God to dispose of His creation as He sees fit. We get energized when we see the audacity of humans who seek to question God or unseat Him from the throne of glory and make Him subservient to the lusts of the human. We get worked up when the glory of our King is stolen and given to the works of men’s hands. And we should!

But we are also required to be clothed with humility, and put ourselves ***“under the mighty hand of God”*** if we would have a hope to be ***“exalt[ed] in due time [i.e., at His Revelation]”*** (1 Peter 5:5-6). As we continue our work on the examination of this prophecy, we will time and again see what highs and lows that our dear friend John the Revelator records for the saints and the reprobate through the Day of the Lord. Matters we examine will dust up our zeal and will humble our hearts and spirits. Through it all, we must continue to occupy. That means that we must exercise our knowledge of doctrine and practice – so that we will be known by this dying world to be the servants of God – zealous and humble. They will witness our holy conversation. They will witness our godliness. They will see servants and ambassadors – and hate us for that service and for the King’s messages. It will be for that last Church a time of great distress and joy ... patience and faith. Our duty in the meantime is to pray for grace to take a sincere look upon our Christ, that ***“we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear”***. (Hebrews 12:28)

I love you all. Amen.