

Speak, O Lord, As We Listen
Revelation 1:1-18

Introductions to ancient speeches and formal letters served primarily to increase the reader's receptivity to the content that followed. John faces a particular challenge in this regard, and for two reasons: (1) the Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) are facing severe persecution, and some will have to die for their faith (or else renounce it); and, (2) God's message to them in their suffering is to suck it up and wait it out because life will get worse before it gets better. How can John set the stage so that his readers and hearers will be amenable to such a tough message?

In 1:1-18, he employs the typical components of an introduction (title, greeting, blessing, addressee, grace, doxology, narrative introduction). Through all these standard formal elements, his implicit point is the same: they should embrace the content of this letter. By my count, he offers at least ten reasons why they should embrace this missive. (To cover all ten in six days, I double up some.)

How does any of this apply to us? Notably, while our disincentive differs, we may still need the ten reminders why it is essential to pay attention to Revelation. The original readers would have been disinclined to listen because the message is hard to accept: it tells those suffering from their faith that they must persevere, no matter how difficult their situation becomes. Our lives are relatively easy, so that disincentive no longer applies. Instead, our disinclination is more likely because the book is hard to understand. (Honestly, 'hard' is an overstatement; it is just a little troublesome because we are unfamiliar with the genre). And because the message is repetitive (all 22 chapters make essentially the same point). Given that our disincentive is so much less substantial, any disinclination on our part is much more serious.

Day 1: Revelation 1:1-3 Reasons #1 and #2 why the readers should take this book to heart. First, both the source and the 'chain of custody' are unimpeachable. The letter originates from the highest authority: the omnipotent God himself. Moreover, while the message necessarily passes through a series of intermediaries (God -> Jesus -> angel -> apostle John), the point is not the indirectness of the revelatory process, but its reliability. Like a well-conducted police investigation, the chain of custody is ironclad. The message delivered to the original readers is exactly the same message that God originally revealed to Jesus himself: John 'testifies' (note the legal term), and his witness consists of 'the word of God which Jesus himself

'testified' (the same legal term). What John tells his readers is identical to what God told Jesus. Nothing could be more authoritative. We read that very same message today. Revelation is the direct word of God. We do well to study it closely, and to live it faithfully.

Secondly, the content of the letter is urgent, describing "what must soon take place" (1:1,2). Of course, John's point originally was that these events would occur soon, so they should keep themselves ready. That timetable is crucial to the interpretation of Revelation. Often these books are interpreted as speaking directly to our time, describing nuclear bombs and the like. In fact, the author was writing to his own generation, and expected them to understand his references. So likely the book does not speak directly of modern crises, though it certainly has implications for the crises we face.

So of these two reasons, the former is more directly relevant to us. Two millennia after the fact, (many of) the events described have long since occurred. Still, as we read it and extrapolate its lessons for us, the former point remains a key reason why we should heed this letter: coming from God and reliably transmitted, we do well to pay close attention to the teaching of Revelation.

Day 2: Revelation 1:3 Reason #3 why the readers should take this book to heart. Because to do so brings divine blessing. Two observations elaborate the point. For one, what brings blessing is specifically three responses: read, hear, take to heart. This brings to mind the incident during Jesus' earthly ministry when a woman called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." Jesus replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:27-28). Reading and understanding Scripture are only the beginning; embracing and obeying it is critical. For the other, obedience is the only avenue to divine blessing. The words of the hymn have it, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." Of course, John's goal here is not that we be happy in Jesus, but that we be blessed by him. Still, the point remains true: blessed are those who read Revelation, hear it, and take it to heart. Implicitly, John also confirms the inverse: only those who read, hear, and take to heart are blessed.

Do you want God's blessing? Read, hear, obey.

Day 3: Revelation 1:4-5a Reasons #4 and #5 why the readers should take this book to heart. The fourth and fifth motivations for accepting the teaching of Revelation derive from the God who stands behind it. The

fourth reason derives from the status of the Father; the fifth, from the biography of Jesus.

God is the great and eternal one: the one who existed before all things came into being; the one who reigns supreme now; and the one who will always be. He reigns over the entire universe, his throne surrounded by powerful and glorious archangels. He is the true emperor, not some feeble, pretentious fool in Rome, threatening to persecute Christians for refusing to worship him.

Jesus is also great and exalted, ruler over all the kings of the earth (cf. Revelation 5), but much more besides. He is the role model for Christians under persecution, for he remained faithful in his witness through martyrdom. He is also the role model for what to expect after martyrdom, as he rose from the dead and was exalted over all kings.

Whatever such a God and such a Christ command them, they rightly obey, and we also. Whatever such a God and such a Christ ask of them – or of us – we rightly give.

Day 4: Revelation 1:5b-7 Reason #6 and #7 why the readers should take this book to heart. To tell the Christians that they should embrace the tough message of this book because God is great, and because Jesus too suffered, is reasonable enough, but lacks a measure of warmth. John adds that warmth now. Why should they welcome this book despite its tough message, why should they follow Christ no matter what its costs them? The sixth reason is because what they have gained through Christ is greater far than anything they stand to lose to persecution.

Jesus is not just ruler of the universe, he is equally tender provider. He loves us. He intervened to rescue us from the consequences of our sin. He died in our place. And he has ascribed to us the two most elevated statuses in first-century Jewish culture, two statuses typically differentiated but combined for us: we are political royalty and we are temple priesthood. The believers of Asia Minor stood to lose a lot to persecution, but not nearly so much as what they had already gained from Christ.

Conversely, and seventh, if they reject this book, its message, and its God, what they stand lose is unthinkable. Christ is coming, and all those who reject him “will mourn because of him” (1:7). This is a far greater loss than anything that persecution might extract from them.

Day 5: Revelation 1:9-11 Reasons #8 and #9 why the readers should take this book to heart. Most of the reasons so far have derived from God – from the Father and from Jesus – their authority, their eternity, their

character and identity, their kindness, and so forth. Reasons #8 and #9, in contrast, derive from the human parties in this interaction, the apostle John (#8) and the churches (#9).

Just as Jesus' biography – his crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation, and return – credentials him, and should motivate the Christians of Asia Minor to take this book to heart, so does John's biography (#8). Jesus was a role model of faithful witness in the face of persecution, so was John. Just as Jesus was not only high and exalted, but also engaged and caring, so – though obviously to a lesser extent – is John, august leader, recipient of divine revelation yet also their humble brother.

For their part, they should take this book to heart because Jesus commissions it expressly for – and addressing it expressly to – them (#9). He identifies all their churches by name, and speaks variously to each.

The latter of these reasons is obviously less germane to us than the former. It matters that this exhortation to endurance in the face of suffering comes not from a wealthy and safe Christian, speaking from a position of privilege and protection. It matters that it comes not from an armchair theologian or a secure bureaucrat but from the fires of persecution and the privations of imprisonment.

At the same time, though the letter is not written directly to us, God speaks to us through his words to them. This means that we must attend carefully to differences between their circumstance and our own, and how that might impact our reading of his word to them. At the same time, we read with confidence in its relevance, recognizing that all of Scripture is useful to all of God's people.

Day 6: Revelation 1:12-17 Reason #10 why the readers should take this book to heart. Because it pulls back the curtain on cosmic realities and reveals them for the reader to see. Face to face with the glory of the cosmic Christ, looking like the 'ancient of days' of Daniel 7 – no mere mortal emperor this – John prostrates himself in awe and fear. The entire book is full of this sort of thing: opening the curtain to heaven to reveal the cosmic crises and wars going on behind the scenes of this world's events; opening the door to the throne room of the majestic and eternal God. The gospels show us an incarnate Jesus, entering our world, living among us and like us. Revelation takes us into heaven itself, and its inner chambers, where God rules in glory on his throne, and directs the events of life. To the extent that words suffice – and they never suffice – it paints an awe-inspiring picture of reality, not the pedestrian and conflicted realities of everyday life, but the eternal cosmic reality. This is intrinsically captivating.