

The View from Heaven

1, 2, and 3 John; Revelation

John

The other apostles were all dead by AD 90, but the Apostle John remained – the last living man who had been intimate friends with Jesus during His life on earth. The Romans had leveled Jerusalem and burned its temple to the ground back in AD 70 to stamp out a Jewish revolt. That was the end of the Jerusalem community. Its members were now scattered. John ended up in Ephesus, where the believers received him with honor bordering on awe.

After all, John had been Jesus' closest friend. Furthermore, in his late sixties John had become something of a visionary prophet, somewhat like Daniel. In his youth Jesus had dubbed him a "son of thunder" because of his temper. Now that intensity was channeled into a passion for his Lord and a talent for piercing to the core of an issue. His demeanor would have been alarming had he not placed such a high value on gentleness and love.

Ephesus and environs had been Paul's assignment during his lifetime, but now John took responsibility for believers in every town for a hundred miles around. It was probably for them that he wrote his gospel during the years around AD 85. And when a clique of pseudo-Christians began to wreak confusion in the

area, John's response was a letter that circulated among the communities under his care.

Ultrapluralism

Asia was a cultural melting pot. Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, and Persians had immigrated over the generations and mixed their customs with whatever ancient ways still lingered. Few people thought it necessary to hold one school of thought rigorously. They thought there were many roads to truth, and a person took what he liked from each—a pinch of Plato, a dash of Persian dualism, and one's ancestral cult for tradition's sake.

In this environment, Jews and Christians were considered narrow-minded and even atheistic for paying homage to just one God. Most people acknowledged hundreds and favored several. Some hedged their bets by joining one or more "mystery" cults—groups with secret rites of initiation that promised encounters with the divine and bliss in the afterlife. There were sects that mixed Judaism with Plato or astrology or secret revelation. Thus, it was inevitable that someone would try to add the teachings of Jesus to a Greek-Persian-occult casserole and challenge the apostles' gospel.

Fifty years after John's death these semi-Christian hybrids were as common, various, and thorny as roses. The seeds were planted in John's lifetime. The full-blown systems are labeled Gnostic (from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge") because they all offered some secret knowledge by which a person could be saved. This knowledge was not available through study, but only through revelation from some higher spiritual plane. It was basically self-knowledge; one recognized the divine spark that was the true self.

Most Gnostics believed in a divine redeemer who would bring the knowledge of the true self. Some identified that redeemer with Jesus; others did not. Those who did talk of "Christ" were not thinking of the Jewish King, but of a sort of spirit who had "emanated" from "the divine Absolute." Some believed Jesus was the Christ but only appeared to have a flesh-and-blood body during His time on earth. (They thought matter was too corrupt for a pure spirit being to take on.) Others said the Christ-spirit

descended upon Jesus at His baptism and departed just before His death.

Evidently, some men with views like these joined the communities of Asia for a time and provoked strife. They eventually withdrew in anger when they failed to persuade the majority, but the believers were upset. They were asking questions like, "What's the truth about Jesus and 'the Christ'?" "How can you tell a real child of God from a fake one?" "How can I tell if I'm really a child of God?" John's first letter answers those questions.

First John

John's style seems repetitive to readers accustomed to step-by-step logic. He writes in a spiral, cycling through the same basic ideas deeper and deeper, from every angle. The ideas of *knowledge* and *confidence* recur over and over, as John emphasizes what believers know and how they can be confident that they know it. John himself was confident that his readers really did have a relationship with God, and he didn't want them to worry about it. But he also didn't want them to be led astray by people who claimed they needed something different.

There are three basic tests, John told his readers, to know if they are really children of God. First, genuine children of God walk in the light of moral truth. They're not sinless—maybe they lapse into selfish behavior regularly—but they're at war with the self-centered side of their nature. They're seeking every possible strengthening of the Holy Spirit and making every choice they can for purity rather than corruption. They don't tell themselves their behavior doesn't matter just because they've been "saved." And when they catch themselves doing wrong, they're quick to admit it to God and fervent in asking God to change them. They want to be like God, who is the perfection of moral purity. Obeying God is a joy to them, not a teeth-gritting duty. They're glad when God shines a spotlight on the areas where they tend to lie to themselves. And they don't gloss over their actions with excuses. They regularly take a hard look at their lives and call the slime what it is.

Second, real children of God love the rest of the family.

“Love each other” was Jesus’ paramount command, so people who want to obey God will make this instruction a priority. Jealousy, hatred, and indifference will be fading traits in people who have God active in their lives. And John’s notion of love was not mere sentiment. He had in mind deeds like taking care of brothers and sisters with material needs, and laying down one’s very life for them. “Dear children,” he said, “let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

Third, people who truly know God hang on to the certainty that Jesus was the Christ who was born, lived, and died in a human body. John stresses that he himself had actually heard, seen, and touched the eternal One who came from God. Anyone who bent the truth about Jesus to make Him less than fully God and fully human didn’t really know God at all, for one could not know the Father without knowing the Son.

Believing the truth about Jesus, obeying His commands, and loving other believers were for John the three interwoven strands of belonging to God. One could not obey without believing, and to obey and to love were aspects of each other.

John had just one final request: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). Or, as he put it earlier, “Do not love the world” (2:15). John was not telling the Asians to hold their pagan neighbors in contempt. He was warning against the great temptation that plagues the most seasoned believer: desiring some thing in the world system more than God. It might be a man’s longing to feel really important through the work he does, or a woman’s yearning for a man who will truly cherish her. It might be the lust for possessions, power, comfort, security, or praise. Whatever it is, it becomes an idol and an addiction when a person pursues it as though it will give life. John’s solution: Stop believing that those things give real life. Love the Father. Pursue *Him* with that unquenchable longing.

Hospitality

Love and truth figure prominently in John’s first letter as key features of life with God. In his next two letters, he shows how to apply them in a balanced way to two practical situations.

The Romans knew that a prosperous, united empire needed

a way for people to travel safely. So they invested a lot of money and effort in building roads and guarding them from bandits. The stone highways were smooth and wide enough for soldiers to get to trouble spots quickly. And while robbers and wild animals were not eliminated in lonely areas, they were curbed enough to let civilians travel with some security.

And civilians did travel. Not only merchants and government officials, but tourists, pilgrims, magicians, priests of every cult, and teachers of every imaginable doctrine walked or rode from Syria to Spain and back again. A teacher of grammar or philosophy would arrive in a town and try to attract paying students among the sons of local men. Religious missionaries sought adoration (and money) for their deities and doctrines. Among all these the ambassadors of Jesus Christ traveled, doing their best to stand out from the competition as messengers of truth.

There were inns every twenty-two miles or so along the Roman roads, but we’ve already seen that they were no place for respectable folk. Most people tried to stay with friends of friends when they traveled. And because the spread of the gospel depended on apostolic teams, hospitality was considered a key expression of Christlike love. Paul often stayed with converts when he visited a town. Likewise, he asked believers to house messengers and teachers, and to help them with provisions for the next leg of their journeys (Romans 15:23-24, 16:1-2; Titus 3:12-13).

But when it became known that believers would feed and house anyone who claimed to be a teacher of the gospel, unscrupulous people began to take advantage. *The Didache*, a manual for Syrian communities, gave guidelines for hospitality: an apostle may stay up to two days and may receive only provisions, not money, when he leaves; a person who wants to stay longer must work; and so on. John’s communities in Asia were having similar problems, and he wrote 2 and 3 John to address them.

Love and Truth

Second John was sent to “the chosen lady and her children” (2 John 1). In the name of love, this lady was welcoming into her home some of the false teachers John combatted in his first letter. John reaffirmed to her the importance of loving other believers.

But, he said, love ceases to be love when it loses sight of truth. To give aid and a forum to teachers who distort the gospel is to do harm to real believers. If you really want to show love for the people of God, wrote John, reject visitors who teach falsehood about Jesus.

John's third letter is addressed to a friend of John's named Gaius. Some of John's envoys had visited Gaius's community and had brought back glowing reports of Gaius's hospitality. This, wrote John, is living by love and truth. Now John was sending to Gaius's community an emissary named Demetrius. He respectfully asked Gaius to offer Demetrius the same kindness. (Third John is basically a letter of introduction letting Gaius know that Demetrius really did represent John. With so many impostors around, it was a good idea to send genuine emissaries with letters.)

John was especially concerned because someone prominent in Gaius's community — one "Diotrephes, who loves to be first" — had told the rest of the community to have nothing to do with John and his messengers. Diotrephes's doctrine may have been pure, but his arrogant, controlling attitude was far from the love and truth John expected. John warned Gaius that Diotrephes might try to have Gaius expelled from the community for housing a friend of John's, but Gaius was not to worry. John hoped to arrive in person soon to face Diotrephes.

Both of these little letters are snapshots of the kinds of hassles that sprout like weeds as soon as the people of God try to gather in community. It's easy to become frustrated when pettiness poisons the community. It would be nice to think that becoming God's children would immediately make men and women the loving people they should be. But it doesn't. John's response was not to throw up his hands in disgust, but to hang in with the Father's stubborn family and try to urge them on to maturity. His approach required strong doses of both love and truth.

Revelation

John wrote these three letters in the early AD 90s. For a while after Nero's death in AD 68, persecution of believers was a small-scale affair—a brawl here, a little job discrimination there, and

malicious gossip nearly everywhere. The main thorns in the community's side were self-proclaimed teachers of divine truth.

But toward the end of his reign, Emperor Domitian began to lose his mind. Roman poets had always sung extravagant praises of their emperors, calling them gods incarnate in all sorts of flowery ways, but Domitian was the first to believe them. He liked to be addressed as "Our Lord and God." He decreed that anyone holding public office or testifying in court—effectively almost everyone—must offer a pinch of incense to the emperor's guardian spirit and declare "Caesar is Lord." People who refused to worship the emperor in this way might lose their jobs, their homes, even their lives.

For decades the slogan of God's people had been "Jesus is Lord." The gospel asserted that Jesus was King of the world and would come back soon to claim His domain. But the years had passed, and there was no sign of Him. Arrogant teachers were a cancer within the communities, and by this time claiming allegiance to Christ was growing more and more dangerous. Was it worth it? Was God really in control of events on earth?

Around AD 95, John went to the Roman penal colony on the island of Patmos, off the coast of Asia. He went either as a prisoner or as chaplain to the increasing scores of believers exiled there. One Sunday while praying, he received a spectacular series of visions with a single message: *Yes, I am still in control.* Under the inspiration of God, John wrote a letter to seven Asian communities urging them to stand firm in the face of the attacks assailing them. That letter, the book of Revelation, recounts John's glimpse into the spiritual realm. Like no other biblical book, it unveils the war between the Snake and the Lamb of God.

Seven Communities

John had been Jesus' dearest friend. But when the resurrected Lord appeared to him glowing with divine fire, John fainted, just as more than one prophet had done before him. Jesus picked him up and identified Himself in terms calculated to shake John's wavering comrades to attention: "Do not be afraid. [John was no doubt trembling with terror.] I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever

and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

Jesus dictated brief notes to each of the seven communities to whom He wanted John to send this revelation. Each memo offered praise, criticism, or both; counsel; and a promise "to him who overcomes." The messages were blunt.

For instance, the Ephesian community was doing great at rejecting falsehood, but in the process had hardened into a tight, loveless orthodoxy. Jesus warned them that if they didn't regain their youthful passion for God, their group would soon shrivel and fade out of existence.

Believers in Smyrna were being denounced to the authorities by Jews who considered their beliefs blasphemy. Jesus reminded them of His own death and resurrection, and urged them to face martyrdom with confidence.

The imperial governor resided in Pergamum, Asia's political capital. He held the "right of the sword" to execute whomever he willed. But Jesus told the community in Pergamum that *He* held the sword that mattered. He commended them for not flinching under persecution, but rebuked them for tolerating certain members who still dabbled in paganism.

Some Thyatirans wanted to believe it was okay to share in the pagan practices that were so much a part of trade guilds in their town. It was tough to do business and avoid idolatry, and a so-called prophetess was winning fans by offering an easier way. Jesus praised the Thyatirans' love, faith, service, and perseverance, but warned them not to tolerate compromise with debauchery and idolatry.

Jesus had harsh words for the community in Sardis: "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (3:1). A glitzy public image meant nothing without the dynamic group life that came from active love.

Jesus had nothing but tender encouragement for the little embattled group in Philadelphia. But His final message to wealthy Laodicea pulled no punches. The community there deemed itself rich, but Jesus called it "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." The city took pride in its banks, its industry in black textiles, and its famous eye ointment. Jesus counseled the Laodiceans to get

gold, white robes, and eye salve from Him. Material comfort had made the Laodiceans lazy and self-satisfied. They had no passion for Jesus because they didn't feel any great need for Him. Jesus loved them too much to leave them in their complacency. He bared His heart to them, urging them to open their hearts to Him before it was too late.

Visions

After recording these jarring memos, John was treated to a tour of Heaven. He saw the Father enthroned, blazing like the fire of a thousand gems. Four bizarre angelic beings sang ceaseless praise, and twenty-four "elders" added their song to the Creator. A slain but living Lamb appeared and received a scroll. The worshipers sang a new song to the Lamb because He was acclaimed worthy to open the scroll and disclose its contents.

What did it all mean? John's readers would have had much less trouble than we at deciphering it, since apocalyptic (books of symbolic visions) was a familiar type of literature at that time. The symbolism of numbers and certain objects was fairly standard, somewhat like the symbolism of political cartoons today.

We are often forced to guess at the meaning of specific bits of John's visions. The gist of this one seems to be that by His death as a sacrifice for sin Jesus won the right to bring the contents of the scroll—perhaps a contract declaring God's plan for the fulfillment of history—into effect.

John watched as the myriad inhabitants of Heaven exulted that Jesus was bringing about the climax of history. But as Jesus broke each of the scroll's seven seals, John saw that the inhabitants of earth were not so ecstatic. Conquest, bloodshed, war, famine, and death accompanied the breaking of the first four seals. With the fifth, the souls of martyrs cried to be avenged. When the sixth broke, cataclysm swept the earth and sky, and all humankind cringed in terror of the Lamb. Angels appeared to mark the people of God who remained on earth—to protect them from the rending of land and sea—and a multitude sang praises to God from Heaven. Jesus broke the seventh seal, and Heaven hushed.

Then followed a cycle in which seven angels blew seven

trumpets. A third of the land was burned, a third of the sea turned bloody, a third of the fresh water became poisonous, a third of the sky's light was darkened, a plague of demonic locusts rose from the abyss to plague men, and a third of earth's population died. One might have thought that such calamity would humble the surviving humans, but it did not. They clung stubbornly to their worship of the Snake and his deeds: murder, theft, witchcraft, debauchery. Partial destruction achieved nothing. One trumpet remained.

An angel appeared and swore that the martyrs would wait no longer for justice. Then John saw Jerusalem with its temple rebuilt but harassed by pagans for three and a half years, while two witnesses stood against the persecution. The witnesses were martyred but raised from death, and an earthquake ravaged Jerusalem, bringing survivors to their knees before God. The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and a song burst forth in Heaven proclaiming the coming of God's Kingdom.

Then John saw war on earth between a woman and a Dragon—the children of Eve and the children of the Snake—and war in Heaven between God's angels and the Dragon's. He saw a beast with the Dragon's power to attack God's people, and another with snakish power to delude unbelievers with false religion. The persecution was terrible, but more terrible still was the bloodshed of those who fell before God's angels.

Seven angels struck the earth with seven horrific plagues. Babylon, symbolizing the great whore city of the earth, fell amid mourning and mocking. But the chorus of Heaven raised another song: the Whore is dead, long live the Bride of the Lamb, the people of God. The wedding feast of the Kingdom was at hand.

Jesus appeared as a white horseman leading the armies of Heaven against His foes. The Dragon and his human servants were crushed, and the martyrs came to life to reign with Christ for a thousand years. Then came a final battle and the Dragon's final defeat, and then all humanity faced judgment before the throne of their rightful King. Those who were found guilty of treason were destroyed; those found to be loyal subjects were welcomed to the Kingdom.

Finally John saw the Kingdom itself in symbols woven from throughout the Old Testament. A voice proclaimed,

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:3-4)

To read John's visions is to be overwhelmed by color, sound, weird creatures, and strange events. One can study the specifics for clues to the future, or one can stand back to behold the tapestry. Whatever the details, the essence is clear: God's people can expect terrible suffering as the Dragon escalates the war in the final days of his fury. But they must cling to hope, confident despite everything that God will triumph in the end. Beyond martyrdom lies a Kingdom that fulfills every longing of the prophets. In Eden God visited His children, but that intimacy was brief. In the wilderness, He dwelt with His people in a tent that could be approached only with blood sacrifice. For thirty years He lived among His people in a human body that became the ultimate sacrifice. But one day He will dwell with them as never before.

In his letter, John identified himself as "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (1:9). Those words summarized for John the believer's life. Suffering now. The glorious Kingdom just on the horizon. And therefore, patient endurance.

"I am coming soon!" Jesus promises three times in the last chapter of Revelation. Two thousand years later, His people still wait. Yet, John wrote, to be envied are those who can look past the anguish of today and trust their God for the joy of tomorrow: "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (22:17).

And we say, along with John, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus."