



*Bruce Butler*

This photo of my daughter, Katelyn, and me was taken at Barclay College in Haviland, Kansas, where she is a student.

I live in the Los Angeles area, Glendora to be exact, where I pastor and serve as a hospice chaplain and ride my bike.

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 1:1-8*

It can be helpful for us to think of John's *Revelation* as an epistle-plus. It's an epistle, like much of Paul's writings, because it addresses the needs of local churches, in this case the seven listed in Revelation 2-3. The plus part, though, is the added end-times encouragement found in much smaller doses in just a couple of Paul's epistles.

What John most wanted his churches to know, as he wrote them from the prison island of Patmos, was that The Revelation was nothing less than the revealing of Jesus Christ to meet all of their awful conditions.

The Christians of Ephesus, Smyrna, Laodicea, and the other cities were in a tight spot. Rome was cracking down on this new seditious religion called Christianity, sometimes claiming it was no religion at all, atheistic even, because its God, the slain Jesus Christ, was invisible and not representable through wood or stone or precious metal. Its leaders, like John, were scattered. Its adherents were marginalized economically and socially, definitely not part of the Roman hipster crowd. They had no standing before the government, and no one to represent their interests. John's churches were full of weak, persecuted, powerless, silenced people.

Into these catastrophes, John speaks this word: "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him..." (1:7) John's encouragement to the put upon Christians of Thyatira, Pergamum, Sardis, and Philadelphia is the same encouragement we receive from The Revelation today from Jesus: "Yes, I am coming soon" (22:20).

*SONG: All Who Are Thirsty*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 1:9-20*

Like many of us today, John the Apostle was no stranger to hard times. In his old age he was exiled to the island prison called Patmos, a full day's sailing from mainland Asia. His crime? Testifying about Jesus Christ. Rome was growing impatient with this new misunderstood movement, viewing it as a growing threat to the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome.

John wasn't the only suffering Christian. He wrote words of truth and encouragement to groups of Christians who also suffered for the name of Christ. They lived in the large region of modern Turkey then known as Asia. Asian Romans were particularly prone to currying the favor of their Roman overlords. They did this by erecting large public and private monuments and edifices to *Roma aeterna*, eternal Rome. The cities mentioned in Revelation 2-3 rushed headlong into Emperor worship, racing one another for the privilege of catching Caesar's eye with the devotion and opulence of their particular city's emperor cult. Christians were conspicuously absent from performing these rituals, which sometimes led to accusations of sedition and treason against the state.

John's message to them was simple: Jesus, our True King, walks among the churches as among golden lamp stands, giving the encouragement to "not be afraid" for he is the Ever Living One who holds the keys to life, to death, and Hades. No Caesar, past or present, can ever match that claim over us Christians. John's message was this: we share together in our sufferings and catastrophes for Christ, but we also share kingdom and patient endurance in Jesus (1:9).

*SONG: He Giveth More Grace*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Sustain us, Lord, in our hour of trial because of our testimony about Jesus Christ, and all Christians worldwide who suffer for his name.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 2—3*

The church is a community. We are a community of believers in Christ Jesus. We share in his life, his death, his resurrection, his work, his word. Together we worship him and we nurture one another in our faith. We reach out to our world, locally and globally, to share the good news about him.

The church also exists *in* a community. We are in communities, towns, villages, and cities of people who desperately need Jesus. We as the church have place, geographic location, like Pergamum and Philadelphia of old or Miami or Mumbai today. We are in neighborhoods, on main streets, in homes, and places of business. We see the faces of teachers and retirees, bankers, and burglars. We interact with king and pauper alike.

Our communities have concerns. Churches deal with conflict, moral failures, apathy, and self-righteousness. Churches also help poor folks in our communities, raise money, offer counsel, network for jobs and housing, educate kids, help free folks from addictions, and help folks live lives of shalom.

The seven churches of Revelation 2-3 must be seen in the same light as our local churches today. They were communities of faith existing in local communities in need, and full of needy people who were suspicious of churches, communities populated by broken vessels in need of repair. Churches are not perfect; Christians are not perfect; communities are not perfect. But what the church community offers to the communities of our world is the One who repairs and overcomes our catastrophes: Jesus Christ.

*SONG: Light the Fire Again*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, reignite in us the fires of our first love, and help us love on our communities just as you would.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 5*

The Laodicean church (3:14-22) thought of themselves as good folks, not given to foolish extremes on one side or the other. They were comfy and cozy in their reality, which was based apparently on their wealth, comfort, and self-sufficiency. They had compromised so much with the values of their world that they had traded a limited reality-laden bowl of chili for their real birthright as children of God in Christ.

Jesus pleads with them to reclaim their birthright reality! “So be earnest, and repent.” And Jesus invites them, “Here I am! I stand at the *door* and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” (3:20, emphasis mine).

The Spirit then shows John an open *door* into heaven, and a mighty angel cries out, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” (5:2). John weeps and weeps because no obvious champion appears to open the scroll. But then, unimaginably, a slain Lamb appears in the middle of the throne and is encircled by the 24 elders and four living creatures. This improbable “poor slain little Lamb” projects immeasurable power and knowledge. Confidently, the slain but worthy Lamb takes the scroll and all creation breaks forth in song, expressing the Lamb’s praises in worship.

This picture of the activity of heaven is the really real reality that Jesus was pleading with the Laodicean church to participate in, instead of the sideshow of temporal wealth, comfort, and self-sufficiency. By the wounds of the slain Lamb are our catastrophes healed.

*SONG: Take My Life and Let It Be*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Deliver us, Jesus, from the great temptation of our time to exist in our own carefully constructed reality of wealth, comfort and self-sufficiency.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 6:15—7:12*

Jesus unseals the scroll, and the Judge comes forth, on a white horse, bringing judgment with him, including social strife and war, famine and inequity, disease and death, persecution of Christians, and natural disasters and cosmic discord. It's a catastrophe of epic proportions. Eventually even kings, princes, generals, the rich and mighty as well as slaves and free men look for cover and scream in dismay, "Who can stand in the face of the wrath of the Lamb?" (6:15-17). It's the right question to ask when the end of the world has come.

When catastrophe strikes our world, who can stand? Who has standing, if kings and princes and caesars don't? The Revelation of Jesus tells us that the angels are still standing. They are Christ's agents, putting his will into practice, proclaiming the great deeds of the Warrior Lamb.

Who else is standing? The unsealed scroll reveals that the sealed people of God are still standing in the midst of catastrophe. Who else can stand? An uncountable multitude stands before God's throne, people from every nation, tribe, people and language. They are wearing white robes and waving palm branches and praising and worshiping.

Crucially, it is explained, the white robe-wearing people of God are able to stand because they have endured their own tribulation. God's people are not immune from catastrophe. Trust me. In fact, it's our tribulations that mark us as his people. We share in Christ's sufferings; it's his blood that whitens our robes. Then we are able to stand before the Lamb, serving and worshiping him as he wipes away our tears (7:13-17).

*SONG: Am I a Soldier of the Cross?*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Tame my heart, O Lord, to not despise my catastrophes, but to patiently endure and trust in you as I await your rescue.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 8:1-5*

I had lots of fears as a kid: the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dracula walking down my hallway at night, and Big Foot lurking in my dark closet. What am I afraid of today? I'm afraid *for* my family, afraid of national policy trends, meaninglessness, inadequate material needs, personal and professional conflict, failure and The Catastrophe.

Whether irrational childhood fears or adult fears, the effects of fear are the same: worry, distrust, and paralysis. John's Revelation addressed fears, real and perceived, that worried and paralyzed the first century church.

Does prayer matter? Does it work? I ask this because when I'm feeling fear, and then remember that my life is hidden in Christ, I turn to him in prayer and find real relief. "Don't worry [be fearful, anxious] about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs and don't forget to thank him for his answers. If you do this you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7 LB). Does prayer work? It does for me, when I remember to engage my fears with trust in God.

What the seventh seal unleashes is actually a bit unclear, but what happens when it is opened is this: silence. For 30 minutes, heaven stood silent as the prayers of God's people wafted up to God like smoke from a censer. And God listens! Does prayer matter? Does it work? Does it have meaning? Think about the answer in this way: what other spiritual activity makes heaven go silent in consideration?

*SONG: Sweet Hour of Prayer*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Heavenly Father, please teach me to pray.*

—Bruce Butler

*BIBLE READING: Revelation 9:13-21*

Judgment is no fun. It's not pleasant to contemplate. It's not fun to endure. We don't wish it upon anyone. We avoid it like the plague. We don't like to talk about it, preach about it, or worry others about it. In fact, in today's world we flat out deny God's judgment.

As I write this, May 21, 2011, the end of the world is supposed to be at hand. If we can believe the news stories and billboards and t-shirts, this day heralds judgment day. Most Christians get embarrassed by such antics, and rightly so. Our response should be to offer correction and truth-telling to wayward parties. Too often, though, we start to label judgment as fairy tales, or myth, or put implausible "that's not what is meant" conditions on Scripture. But judgment is what the open seals, the blowing trumpets and the poured out bowls of Revelation are all about.

What does judgment do? What is its purpose? I believe God first uses kindness and mercy to bring us to repentance. But if that doesn't work, he uses judgment—to bring us, to bring the world's people, to repentance. He wants us to go his way, and if he has to, he will bring judgment to bear to get his way—if we allow it. "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the works of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts." (9:20-21).

*SONG: Day of Judgment! Day of Wonders!*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Deliver us, Lord, from our self-imposed catastrophes. Amen.*

—Bruce Butler