

CHAPTER 3

Jesus and John

The Book of Revelation helps us understand how God fulfills His purpose. We begin with Jesus encountering John. He meets an individual. He meets His servant. From there He goes on to address the churches in chapters 2 and 3, the seven churches of Asia. From there He goes on to impact the world. In a sense, that is how God has always furthered His purpose. He begins with the individual. From the individual He affects the Church, and the Church then goes on to affect the world. What God shows us in this plan of the book is how He still operates in our own generation. God wants to meet with you, and God wants to meet with me, individually. We have a very intimate and personal relationship with God, and God will not violate that. God wants to maintain and enlarge that relationship we have with Him and cause it to grow. When you and I are right with God, and each individual in

the Church is right with God, then the Church itself as an entity is right with God. When the Church is right with God, the world will be changed by the influence of the Church.

There is a very powerful historical parable of this principle in the Scriptures, and it happened on the day of Pentecost. You will remember that it tells us that “they were all together in one place” and then “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven” and every one of them, each individual, was filled with the Spirit, and they all began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Acts 2:1-4). There was an encounter—a personal and intimate encounter with the Holy Spirit—for each individual who was there in that upper room. Not only did the Holy Spirit impact each individual, but also the whole Church was filled with the Spirit. The violent rushing wind that came from Heaven filled the whole *house*. God’s purpose for us as individuals is that we be filled with the Holy Spirit. But more than that, His purpose is to fill the whole house.

As you look down through history at God’s dealings with His people, for example, when He first had them erect a tabernacle and then later a temple, His approval was always demonstrated by a manifestation of His presence. A cloud filled the house, and God’s presence was so dynamic that even their prearranged programs had to be abandoned. They were overwhelmed by the sense of the presence of God. The priests could not minister. Nothing could happen because God had demonstrated His presence in the midst of his people. I long for days like that. I long for days when we abandon our program, when the preacher does not preach his sermon, when the musician does not pick up his instrument, not because I despise or reject those things, but because more important than any of those things is the presence

of God—the presence of God that overawes us, that silences us, that causes us to fall down and worship Him. That is what I long for. That is what I desire. Some of you reading this have had fleeting moments of that. Some of you have had past encounters that are both awesome and memorable—and having been there, you know that nothing else will ever satisfy you.

However, when God fills the Church, he does it so that he might impact the world. Luke carefully records for us in Acts that, at that time, there were devout men dwelling in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). So the enacted parable is this: every person filled, the whole house filled, the whole world impacted. And it is this same pattern that we see in the Book of Revelation. Jesus meets with John, he comes to the Church, and, from the Church, he moves out to touch the world.

John, the Trouble-Maker

It is my conviction that this book was written before A.D. 70, and by the apostle John. The writer is John the disciple, the apostle, and he is probably, by this time, the last surviving apostle of the Lamb. It is most likely that every other one of the twelve has laid down his life in martyrdom for Jesus. Even Paul has probably gone home to his reward, and by this time only John is left, an old man, well into his mature years. But what I like about him is that he is still giving the world a lot of trouble! He is on Patmos because of the Word of God. These islands strung out in the Aegean Sea, of which Patmos was one, were used as penal colonies for those who had offended the policies of the Roman Empire. Those who had dared to stand against the will of Rome often found themselves exiled to these rocky islands. That is probably why John is there. John the old man has been upsetting the status quo, causing problems for the powers that be, having so much impact on the power

of the Roman Empire that he has been put out of the way and removed from his sphere of influence.

From this there are two very important things to take on board. Firstly, you are never disqualified from the service of Christ through age. There is no retirement program in Heaven. John has not thought for a moment that the time has come to hang up his Bible. He is there because of the Word of God. He is a man consumed by the Word, obsessed by the Word, zealous for the Word; he is determined to preach Christ, and the preaching of Christ has got him into trouble—and the true preaching of Christ will always get you into trouble. Secondly, he has offended society, offended those who do not want things changed, challenged, or affected. But we are a people who are called by God to challenge the status quo, to challenge society. We are called to challenge the moral state of the nation in which we live. We are not just to challenge it in a negative sense, but to offer a viable alternative that says that there is a Kingdom in which you can live in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit and know the righteousness of God that brings the happiness of Heaven into our world. John is doing that, and because of that he has been exiled.

John, Brother and Fellow-servant

I like the way John introduces himself. I guess he is writing it after he has seen all his visions, and, although he is John the apostle, the man of great influence and respect in the churches, he introduces himself as John, “your brother” (Rev. 1:9). I believe in the recognition of ministry, in apostles and prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. I believe in receiving a prophet in the name of a prophet because that is how we get the prophet’s reward. I believe in receiving men with honor, but I do not believe in putting men on a pedestal. I don’t believe in men who are out of reach, who live

on some other planet and in some other atmosphere. I believe in men and women who are first and foremost brothers and sisters in the things of God. John is just a brother. Sometimes out of great respect and genuine love we get introduced in extravagant ways. I do it myself sometimes. I remember introducing a visiting preacher at our congregation in rather glowing terms. He got up and said there were two people in the meeting who immediately needed to repent: "Tony, for introducing me like he did, and me, for enjoying it." The bottom line is that we are just brothers—brothers and companions. That is, we are not just those who are related, but those who share in a common task, those who are yoked together for a common purpose. John sees every saint, every servant of Christ, whether he has a title or no title, whether he has a recognized ministry or not, as those who are companions in the work of God. Paul would call them yokefellows.

We are all necessary. We are all vital. It is not just about the apostles and the prophets; it is about the servants of Christ, and that is one area in which we all qualify. When I read my Bible, I do not find anywhere that when I stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive commendation, I will hear, "Well done, good and faithful apostle." I do not find a verse anywhere that says, "Well done, good and faithful prophet." I do not find any chapter that contains the words, "Well done, good and faithful evangelist," "Well done, good and faithful pastor," "Well done, good and faithful teacher," "Well done, good and faithful elder." I cannot find such phrases anywhere; but I can find this: "Well done good and faithful *servant*." We are on a level playing field when we stand before Christ. We will not be judged on how far we traveled in ministry, nor on how many sermons we preached, how many invitations we responded to, how many conferences we notched up on our Bible. We will be judged on how we served the Lord.

We are companions in the things of God. There is no one person more important than any other, and even as servants, when we have done all that we can do, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:10). When you compare what we are and what we can do with the price He paid for us, no one will ever be profitable, and yet we are here by the grace of God.

Companion in Suffering

"I [am] your brother and companion in the suffering" (Rev. 1:9). John introduces suffering right at the beginning of the book. He wants us to know that suffering is not an odd thing that happens. He wants us to know that suffering is not what comes to those who are outside the will of God. You can hear preachers preach like that: "If you are under pressure, if you are in problems, if you are suffering, you are outside the will of God." My Bible nowhere has that kind of teaching. My Bible tells me, and it is the underlying theme of Revelation, "There is trouble out there!" There is suffering to go through. There are sufferings that "are ours in Jesus." This is how John puts it: Suffering is yours. It does not belong to somebody else and is put on you. It is yours. It is yours for this reason. It will do you good. It will cause you to be strong. It is part of the process of God whereby we become more like Jesus. We live in an age where the Church needs to get back to that Scripture where we are told, "You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons." We live in a church that has forgotten the exhortation that speaks to us: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you." Why? The response comes, "because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:5-6). If you don't have that discipline, then you are bastards and not sons.

We live in a church that despises discipline, that rejects hardship, that will have nothing to do with suffering, because we believe that the blessing of God is upon us. We believe that the prosperity of God will overwhelm us. We believe that the joy of the Lord will be our strength. Now, all those things are true, but it is not either/or with God. Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost, "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:19). In the last days there is going to be an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But Paul writes to Timothy and says, "There will be terrible times in the last days" (2 Tim. 3:1). Now we might think, "Make up your mind; is it Holy Spirit or terrible times?" The answer is both! It is knowing both how to be in need and how to have plenty (Phil. 4:12) that brings us to the fullness of the blessings of God. Paul wrote this to the Philippians, "For it has been granted to you [as if it were a gift or a prize!] on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29). To the Thessalonians he writes, "You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews" (1 Thess. 2:14). Or to the Corinthians, "If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort" (2 Cor. 1:6). God is the God who comforts us in all our troubles, but if you do not have troubles, how will you know his comfort? How will you know the patient endurance that is ours in Christ? We need a reality check, a wake-up call, to signal that it is not a sign of being unspiritual to suffer hardship. It is not a sign that you are backsliding because you are going through difficulty. It is a sign that God is disciplining you. It is a sign that you

have been accepted as a son and are being shaped into His likeness.

We need to recapture these ancient truths that the Church has jettisoned in its desire for instant everything. We are on a pilgrimage, and sometimes it is through the wilderness, sometimes it is through the valley of the shadow of death, and sometimes it is through the dark and hard place, but always it is *through*. Never is it to dwell there forever. There are some things in our lives that we are not supposed to enjoy. There are some things we just endure; but, like Jesus, we endure for the joy that is set before us. Sorrow lasts for the night, but joy comes in the morning (Ps. 30:5). Do not despise the disciplines of God. Do not be surprised when pain comes. It is from a faithful hand. The apostle Peter also speaks of suffering. He says that we should not suffer as evildoers, and we all acknowledge that. But he goes on to say that if someone suffers in the will of God, they should commit their soul to Him as to a faithful creator (1 Pet. 5:19). Do you know why? It is because, in the suffering, the Creator does His creative work.

I remember when I was at Bible School, in 1965. I was in school when Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was released from a Communist prison in Romania, and he came to visit our college. It was one of the first places he visited after his release. He spoke to us about his suffering, of his solitary confinement, of the revelations he had of God in a lonely, dark, and dank prison cell. As he spoke, he said these words that have lived with me ever since: "A diamond is just a piece of coal that has been under intense pressure and a pearl is only the tear of an oyster." Here was a man who had been through suffering, who had experienced pain, but who had come out refined like gold from the crucible.

We embrace suffering. We do not develop a martyr complex, but we do not run from it. We do not bury our head in the sand; we do not try to carry this unreal “positive confession” in the midst of heartbreaking tragedy. We confess the goodness of God, but we do not try to make our suffering some kind of happy moment. Tears are legitimate, groans are real, and sighs communicate with God.

“Your companion in suffering in patient endurance that are ours in Christ Jesus.” (See Rev. 1:9.) So everything that happens to you is yours. It is not somebody else’s that fell on you. It is not satan that hurt you. It is not a demon that afflicted you. Everything that happens to you is yours; you possess it because, in your possessing and owning it, it does what God wants it to do. Here is how Paul described it to the Corinthians. He is speaking about receiving different ministries, but in his revelation he moves off into whole new areas that are sometimes difficult for us to understand. He says, “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (1 Cor. 3:21). All things are yours, life with its pressures as well as its blessings; it is all yours. It is all given to you for a purpose, and therefore we embrace it with faith. All things are yours.

In the Spirit

John knows who he is and he knows why he is on Patmos, and here is the great thing: He may be exiled. He may be separated from his family, his fellowship, and his friends. He may be in solitary confinement, or a chain gang. I don’t know exactly what is happening to him, but I know he is restricted in some way. Every door seems to be closed, and every window seems to be

barred. There seems to be no way out and no way forward. He is suffering, and he is in discomfort. He is an old man in a penal colony. This is not a good place to be, not a thing to enjoy. He is incarcerated, enclosed, imprisoned. But no matter how they imprison him in the natural, Heaven is open to him. He says that he was on Patmos, but he was "in the Spirit" (Rev. 1:10)! Your circumstance, your situation, or your condition is no obstacle to you being in the Spirit. Your circumstance is no disqualification to God opening the Heavens to you. You can be shut in, but as far as God is concerned, you are wide open. There is no restriction, no prison door that will hold Him. It seems to me that the only problem He has is with us.

I love the story of Peter when he is in prison. The church prays for him, but the church praying for him does not seem to be filled with faith. He is at the door and they are still praying and the little girl comes to tell them that he is at the door and they tell her she is crazy; he must be in prison because they are praying for him (Acts 12:12-17). I am sure they are praying extravagant prayers about walls falling down, iron bars yielding, and gates flying open, and yet they still don't believe it. But God answered their prayers anyway! It tells us this: the angel turned up in prison, the chains fell off, the angel led him out, and the gate opened all by itself. It always amazes me that he could get out of the prison but couldn't get into the prayer meeting! Sometimes the biggest problem that God has is not with the world, but with the Church. The world has no option. God says open, and open it goes. God asks us to open—and we reply, "We'll think about it." But whatever restriction you are in, it is no restriction to God.

"I was in the Spirit," says John. Being in the Spirit is a kind of technical term in the Scriptures that means moving into a

new dimension, seeing things that are invisible when in the natural. However, the New Testament also makes it very clear that being in the Spirit should be our natural environment. When Jesus speaks to the woman at the well, He says that those who worship God should worship in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:23). In the Spirit is where we belong. When you worship God, I trust that you don't just sing songs; we are meant to move into a new dimension. Pray, says Jude, pray in the Spirit (Jude 20). I trust that you do not say prayers, but that you pray in the Spirit, because in the Spirit is where we are meant to be. And being in the Spirit when we come together would transform what happens in our gatherings. It means, of course, preparing yourself. You cannot be in the Spirit if you come in a hurry. You cannot be in the Spirit if you come in the midst of an argument. You cannot be in the Spirit if you are full of bad temper when you arrive at the meeting. You cannot be in the Spirit if you have just beaten the kids up in the parking lot. It is difficult at times to be in the Spirit, but when we come together as the people of God, we need to be prepared.

I will tell you what transformed it for me: It was when I understood that the meeting is not the place in which *I* invite Jesus to come, or *I* invite the Holy Spirit to come. The meeting is where *God* invites the Church into *His* presence. John said that he heard the voice that said, "Come up here." Do you know that every time we join together as God's people, we hear a voice that says "Come up here"? We ascend the hill of the Lord. They used to do it literally in the Old Testament. They would actually go up the hill of the Lord; they ascended into His presence, and they climbed a mountain. They knew what they were doing. It was a physical reality for them. They were so fit, too, that they sang on the way up! They had songs for climbing a mountain to. They were called, in

the Scriptures, the "Songs of Ascent." They went into the presence of God, and they knew what they were doing. They asked, "Who is going to go up?" "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Ps. 122:1). And they also asked, "Who can go up?" And they answered, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4). They had to get ready. They did not just amble into the presence of God. They came with a sense of awe and expectation. They did not gather around the foot of the mountain for a coffee and then think, "We are ten minutes late; perhaps we'd better get up there now." No. They came to meet with God. And that is what happens to us. Hebrews tells us we have come to Mount Zion (Heb. 12:22). Every time we meet together we go up a hill. Even if you meet in a cellar, you go up a hill. You are ascending the hill of the Lord and coming into the presence of God. And you come in the Spirit. John is in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.

Certain things happen when you are in the Spirit. In fact, we will find three other times in this Book of Revelation when John is in the Spirit. He is in the Spirit when he goes up into the Heavens. He says immediately that he was in the Spirit and he saw the throne (Rev. 4:2). Later on, one of the angels says to him, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute," and he says, "Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit" (Rev. 17:1-3). Toward the end of the book, another angel says, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb," and again he says, "He carried me away in the Spirit" (Rev. 21:9-10). In the Spirit, he sees Jesus down here on Earth in the midst of His Church. In the Spirit, he sees the Lamb upon the throne surrounded by all the hosts of Heaven and the universe. In the Spirit, he sees the deceptive, seductive prostitute unmasked for what she really is. And in the Spirit, he sees the bride in all her

purity and in all her glory. We have to be in the Spirit to see those things, to understand what is right and what is wrong, to see what is real and what is counterfeit, to know what is glorious and what is just glittering. We need to be in the Spirit to realize those things. They are discerned in the Spirit.

But other things happen. John says, "I was in the Spirit, and I heard..." (Rev. 1:10). It is when you are in the Spirit that you hear, because it is the Spirit who is speaking. Notice again and again in the letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3, it ends with, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The Spirit is speaking, and the best way to hear the Spirit is to be in the Spirit.

There is a great story in the Old Testament that I love very much; it is in the Book of Judges and is about a man called Gideon. Gideon is a great hero. God calls him to ministry, but his ministry is not on some far and distant isle. It is not to remote and unknown continents or foreign and fearful empires that God calls him. The first thing God has him do is pull down the altar in his own backyard. That's a challenge. It is always easier to be a hero away from home. Every preacher is a great preacher when they are in another country. It is tough on your own turf. Jesus said, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor" (Matt. 13:57). It is hard to be real and spiritual where you live, where everyone knows you—especially when they have known you since you were a kid! That is a terrible burden to live with. But that is where we have to prove ourselves, where people know us, not where we can go and put on a face, act, or mask. Gideon has to face the issue in his own backyard. He does it at night because he is scared, but he does it anyway.

He pulled down the altar of baal and cut down the Asherah Pole, and then the story continues—the very next thing to happen, a knee-jerk reaction from satan, is that the enemy invades the land. The Edomites, the Amalakites, and all the children of the East in this great confederation of evil invade the land of Canaan, which is the gift of God to His people. The enemy has come into the land. It seems like an overreaction. It seems like overkill. All he did was pull down the altar, and it brings an invasion. Satan will always overreact to whatever we do. He does it not to show his strength but to display his fear. Do you know satan is scared of Jesus? And because satan is scared of Jesus, satan is scared of a church that will take its stand on the Word of God. So we have this overreaction.

And then the story continues. What is God's answer? What is God's strategy? What plan will God hatch now to counteract the invading army? It says that God's Spirit came on Gideon. God's strategy is always an anointing. We will look at that in more depth. We will have a whole chapter about the Church and the Holy Spirit in the Book of Revelation because, although He does not get a huge amount of mention, you will find Him active everywhere throughout the book. He is God's agent on the earth. He is executing the purposes of God in every nation under Heaven.

So the Spirit of the Lord comes on Gideon. This is a strange episode, a kind of a comical verse. It says, "Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet" (Judg. 6:34). You would think that you would want to do a bit more than that, but he blew a trumpet. Remember, the trumpet is God's word to His people, and He is sending out a call for the army of God. Notice what happens. The Spirit of the Lord

comes upon him and he blows a trumpet. There is no better time to speak the Word of God than when the Spirit of God is upon you. I guess you are like me; I go to conferences and to meetings, and I have a little prayer in my heart and my prayer is this: "O God please let the preacher be under the anointing." I have been in too many meetings when he is not. Or perhaps I will add a little rider: "Let him be under the anointing, but, if he isn't, then at least let him be funny." If you have any sense, then you will pray this prayer, too. Why? Because when the preacher is under the anointing, the Word comes in a different dimension. It doesn't just inform your head, it inspires your heart. It doesn't just give you knowledge, it stirs your spirit. Something is going on inside, and sometimes you cannot even explain what it is, but the Word is coming like flaming arrows into your soul. It may not be eloquent, it may not be well put together, it may not come with the right vocabulary, but it is working in the Holy Ghost. It is nothing other than deep calling to deep. That is what happens when the preacher is under the anointing.

But the preacher, if he is any kind of preacher, also has a prayer that he prays when he comes to speak to the people. And it is this: "O God, let these people be in the Spirit." Why? Because that is when you hear. There are different kinds of hearing. There is a hearing with our physical ears, but there is a hearing that goes on deep down in your spirit. There is a seeing with physical eyes, but there is a seeing with the eyes of the heart. It is what revelation is made of. It is hearing things that do not just go in your ears, but that settle in your heart. It is seeing things that do not just fill your eyes, but inspire you on the inside. It is seeing and hearing in the Spirit.

Still Being Changed

So the Spirit comes on Gideon and he blows the trumpet, and John is in the Spirit and he hears the trumpet. The best place to hear is in the Spirit. That is where you will not only hear but you will understand. I was in the Spirit and I heard. The strange thing is, if I am right about the authorship of this book, if it is John the apostle, the disciple who was part of that intimate trio that went with Jesus into situations from which others were excluded; if it is John who described himself, in his Gospel, as the disciple whom Jesus loved, who leaned on the breast of Jesus at the last Supper; if it is this same John who wrote such a profound and insightful Gospel, who wrote inspiring and encouraging epistles; if it is this same John now exiled on the isle of Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, you would think at least that when the Lord turned up he would be looking the right way! But he says, "I heard behind me" (Rev. 1:10).

It is almost the stuff of pantomime—"He's behind you!"—but it tells me this: every time we encounter Christ, we must be turned, to be changed. It tells me this: just because you have been around for a long time, just because you have been faithful in ministry, just because you have been successful in what God has called you to do, it is no guarantee that you are still looking in the right direction. Jesus comes to adjust us all the time, to adjust us to His Word. I hope that as you read this book and feel God speaking to you, you are adjusted, you are turned around, because unless we are looking the right way, we will not go in the right direction. John himself hears a voice behind him, and he turns himself and lines himself up with the word he has heard. You may read things in this book that are controversial, that are diametrically opposed to things that you have always believed, and that will challenge you. I

am not saying that you must receive every word that comes. You search the Scriptures like the Bereans and check that these things are true (Acts 17:11). But you will hear things from the Spirit because He wants you to turn around. He wants you to change and look in another direction because He has new things yet to lead you into.

In the last chapter, we left John in mid-thought. John had turned around to see the voice that had spoken to him. Every time we gather together, God wants to turn us to be in line with His Word so that our lives are reflecting what He is saying. John says he wanted to see the voice and, having turned, he saw Jesus golden hair and robes. He wanted to see Jesus, but he saw the Church because one of the things that this book will show us is that, although Jesus is still speaking, His communication now comes through the Church. Like us we are going to see John turn to see a Lion, but he sees a Lamb, and just as the Lamb is the Lion, so Christ is the Church. We see the Church as God in the world (and it is through us that God now speaks). John was in the middle of the Church, the awesome revelation of the very dear Son of God.