

Patmos and the Seven Churches of Asia

By Doug Hamilton

The Book of Revelation is one of the texts of the Bible which has intrigued the religious world more than any other. Countless sermons have been preached and hundreds of commentary books have been written concerning this writing. Cults have used it to inaccurately “predict” the end of the world and events of the age.

Theories have been advanced about the 144,000, the mark of the beast, the seven-headed ten-horned dragon and the thousand-year reign. For those who would like this series of sermons to wade into those topics, you will be disappointed. I would be more than happy to cover those more complicated issues in a small-group study if desired. The purpose of this series is to learn eight applicable lessons from the locations described in Revelation 1:9-11.

Revelation 1:9-11 “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance *which are* in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like *the sound* of a trumpet, ¹¹ saying, “Write in a book what you see, and send *it* to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

There are eight locations mentioned in this passage. They are Patmos, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These are real places with real history. We will cover eight practical lessons for the Christian today.

A) The Island of Patmos

It was early in the year of A.D. 95 when the Apostle John was banished to Patmos. Domitian was Emperor of Rome and believed the kingdom should be run as a divine monarch. He wanted to return the Empire to a standard of patriotic morality like the days of Augustus a century prior. As a result, he instituted edicts against other faiths, including non-Romans pagans, Jews and Christians. He banned witchcraft and fortune-telling. Prophecy of the early Christian church was also viewed as a threat to Roman political power (Pliny *Natural History* 4.69–70; Tacitus *Annals* 4.30).

This placed the elderly Apostle John in the crosshairs of Domitian’s wrath. The Roman historian Tacitus makes reference to the Emperor using some of the Aegean islands as places of exile during the first century (*Annals*, 3:68; 4:30; 15:71). Patmos was one of these islands. John was sent imprisoned there “*because of the word of God*”. For 18 months he would be banished to this location until Nerva replaced Domitian in September of A.D. 96.

Patmos is a barren, thirty-five square mile landmass in a group of larger islands called the Dodecanese. The name of the island means “sterile” because not much would grow there. It rises out of the Aegean nearly 900 feet above the surface of the



A view from atop the Island of Patmos

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water. It did not offer much retreat for those who were banished there, for life there in the first-century would have been miserable. To the east it was 40 miles to Miletus and 60 miles to Ephesus. It was guarded by Roman soldiers and impossible to escape without a ship, for the sea was turbulent, chilly and of great distance to the mainland.

There is a cave about halfway up the central mountain. It is commonly accepted this was the dwelling which the Apostle John received the revelation from God. Today it is called “*The Cave of the Apocalypse*”.

Greek tradition says that Prochorus, one of the original deacons from Acts 6:5, was also exiled there. Apparently Prochorus was the one who penned the actual letter. In many locations, including at the entrance of the cave, there are artist renderings depicting John standing at the entrance of the cave and Prochorus writing it down. I personally believe this to be nothing but legend, because it was John who had the vision and he was the one commanded to write it down (1:11), not Prochorus or another. The Apostle John was the one who was to “write down the things which you have seen...” (1:19).

If the date of imprisonment was accurate, John would have been in his eighties. He was the last of the living Apostles of Jesus. Peter was crucified, Thomas killed, Paul beheaded, Matthew run through with a sword. They were mostly wiped out during the persecutions of Nero. It was a horrible period for Christians, but it waned under the next few Emperors.



Artwork above the entry to John's cave.

The Domitian Power Grab

When Domitian decided to make his power grab and become the moral authority for the Empire, the Christians world was one again turned upside down. Domitian demanded to be worshipped as lord with incense and oaths. He had temples built to force the populace to swear allegiance. They could not call Caesar “lord”, for to them there was only one Lord, the Savior Christ Jesus.

Will Durant addresses this in his publication *Caesar and Christ*. “Vanity, which flourishes even in the humble, had no check in Domitian's status: he filled the Capitol with statues of himself, announced the divinity of his father, brother, wife, and sisters as well as his own, organized a new order of priests, the *Flaviales*, to tend the worship of these new deities and required officials to speak of him, in their documents, as *Dominus et Deus Noster* – ‘Our Lord and God.’ He sat on a throne, encouraged visitors to embrace his knees, and established in his ornate place the etiquette of an Oriental court. [p. 292].

Operating with the knowledge that Christians refused adhering to the Imperial Cult of Caesar worship, Domitian may have launched an investigation, sending a team to Galilee to discover the roots of Jesus. [UNRV History, “Christian Persecution”]



A bust of Emperor Domitian

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- They were being dipped in oil and burned alive at the stake.
- He would have the Christians cooked alive.
- Tens of thousands were being beheaded, hung on crosses, run through with the sword.
- The Christians would have hot fire placed on their private parts.

With Jerusalem long since destroyed, John fled Asia Minor to further the gospel. It was during that time of his life that he was captured and sent to be a prisoner. If the dates are accurate, then John was in his eighties.

The Vision



The view from the original cave entrance overlooks the Aegean Sea. It was on the “Lord’s day”, the first day of the week, Sunday, while John was in the cave. He was not permitted by men to attend worship with the saints of Asia, therefore God would bring the worship to him. Christ comes to John in a vision to be a guide to the Seven Churches of Asia during the time of ramped up persecution.

In the ceiling of the cave there are two strange cracks, forming three sections. Tradition says that the revelation of Jesus was so powerful that it cracked the roof of the cave. The three sections were symbolic of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The opening vision of Jesus begins with a seven canded lamp stand, seven angels and a Priestly Warrior Jesus Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. It was a powerful beginning to a powerful letter, meant to be distributed to the Seven Churches of Asia. From that location, John would pen the letter and send it out to all seven locations throughout western Turkey.

No Imprisoning of God’s Word

This leads us to the primary thrust of the lesson this morning. John was imprisoned on Patmos, but the word of God would not be locked up!

- 2 Timothy 2:8-9, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, ⁹ for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned.”

You can lock the saint in a cave, in a prison cell and even with the threat of death, but the word of God is not imprisoned!

- When Peter was locked up by Herod in Acts 12, the word of God could not be imprisoned. Acts 12:7, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands.”

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- When Paul faced beheading on one of the hills of Rome, he was not going to allow the word of God to be imprisoned. *2 Timothy 1:8*, “*Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God...*”
- There was no obstacle of man which could stop Paul from preaching to word! *2 Thessalonians 1:8*, “*For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.*”
- When Paul was under house arrest for two years, *Acts 28:31*, “*...preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.*”
- He wrote to the Philippians in *1:12-13*, “*Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,¹³ so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else...*”
- He was able to close the letter with *Philippians 4:22*, “*All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household.*”
- Paul knew the word of God could not be imprisoned. *2 Timothy 4:17-18*, “*But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion’s mouth.¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*”
- Peter knew the same. John knows this as well. Dirty Domitian made his attempt to silence and old man with a vision from God. We must never forget the lesson of Patmos, that the Word of God shall not be imprisoned.

Conclusion:

If the Christians of the first-century still spread the word when the times were tough, then how can we not do the same in our gentler environment?