

“The Seven Martyrs of the Apocalypse:
The Faithful Witness”
Revelation 1:1-8

1. We are Witnesses

Our world is really weird.

If you want your product to sell like crazy on Amazon, here’s what you do. You can hire people to buy your product, and write 5-star reviews. Then it will show up at the top of the list in Amazon searches. Then actual customers will buy it. It might be garbage, but it’ll sell!

Churches have Facebook pages. Visitors and members---and complete strangers---can leave reviews and ratings. Our page has a one-star review by Marie Antoinette declaring that we are going to be kicked out of heaven by St Peter because of our Protestant lies.

The idea is *supposed* to be: someone buys and tests a product, or visits and experiences a church, and then they can give *personal testimony* about it.

From now till Easter, we are studying seven reviews of seven churches. We won’t be going through and giving Laodicea 2 stars, Ephesus 4 stars, etc. But we’ll be paying close attention to the Reviewer’s evaluations of the life and witness of these congregations.

These are honest, fair, thorough, and comprehensive reviews. The Reviewer has not trolled the churches’ FB pages, or shown up at one service and passed judgment. The Reviewer has been constantly present in these congregations. He has seen and heard everything. The Reviewer has tested the product. Tasted the fruit. Sensed the atmosphere.

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What’s the product, the atmosphere, the fruit supposed to be? The answer in Revelation is: witness.

Testimony. Guess what the Greek word is. *Marturos*. That’s right, *martyr*.

Our series is ‘the seven martyrs of the apocalypse.’ That’s just a scary way of saying “the seven witnesses of Revelation.”

As John relays these letters to these 7 martyrs, he says (verse 9): I’m your partner in all this. I am in the family business with you. I share with you all the difficulty, the patient endurance that is required.

What’s the difficulty? Why is such patience needed? What’s the meaning of this partnership?

The trouble is, John says, (verse 9) is that they are speaking forth *God’s word*. John says “you all are martyrs. So am I. My martyrdom is what got me sent off to this island prison. I know it’s tough. But we’ve got to keep bearing witness to Jesus.”

These churches, John sees in his vision, are lampstands (verse 18), and Jesus walks among them, reviewing their martyrdom. They must bring light to their dark cities.

Another weird thing about our Internet culture is how easy it is to be anonymous. If no one knows your true identity, you can say and do stupid things.

Sometimes these churches thought their Christian life, individually and as congregations, could be anonymous. That they could be Christians in a non-Christian world, and blend in. Attend church on Sunday, believe in Jesus, and then be just like their city.

But they’re not anonymous. There’s one person that knows who they are, and what they’re up to. Jesus knows. And he’s going to review them.

You might expect him to keep this review private, so no one gets embarrassed. But that’s not how it works! For one thing, John knows. And John is a senior pastor to

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these churches. I remember when I was about 12 years old I got into trouble on a youth group retreat. And my mom made me go to McDonald’s and have a lunch meeting with our pastor, to review what I had done and what I needed to do to make things right. I *hated* that my pastor had to know! Now John knows what’s really going on in these churches!

But it doesn’t stop there. Jesus tells John to publish *each church’s* review. The churches must read each other’s reviews! And then these reviews ended up in Holy Scripture. And 2000 years later, we’re *still* reading these reviews!

I love our church. There’s so much here to celebrate. But I’m kind of glad that Jesus isn’t reviewing us thoroughly, and putting those reviews in a holy book for every Christian in the world for all time to read!

But guess what: these 7 ancient churches in modern day Turkey are not the only ones being reviewed. In almost every review, Jesus says: all the churches must hear what the Spirit is saying to these churches, because, actually, through each of these reviews, every church now, and until I return, is *also* under review.

These are letters from Jesus Christ to the International Protestant Church of Zurich. As we read, Jesus, by God’s Spirit, is walking among us, examining our martyrdom, confronting our unfaithfulness, encouraging us in our faithfulness, and holding out promises for us if we persevere.

There will be something in each of these letters that hurts. Something that thrills. Something that challenges. Something that encourages. If we actually want the real Jesus Christ to be among us, we’ve got to open ourselves to his searching and reviewing Spirit.

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Will we?

2. We are not the First Witnesses

Does all of this sound intimidating? What’s coming in these martyrdom reviews is so challenging, so bracing, that we might want to give up. The teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness that we’re about to get is going to be so thorough, that we could get discouraged.

But here’s the good news:

We are not the first witnesses.

We are the latest witness in a long chain of martyrs. In verse 1 John says that *God the Father* revealed this stuff to his son Jesus. And then Jesus, another witness, revealed it to an angel. That angel appeared to John while he was stuck on the island of Patmos and revealed this to him.

Before we get to the 7 churches and before we get to IPC, there’s already four witnesses: Father, Son, angel, John. And each of them is a faithful martyr, to get this message to us.

But Father, Son, and John have not just passed this book along. Let’s take a closer look.

John, the author, was bearing such strong and steady witness (verse 9) that he was eventually arrested and sent to an island by the government authorities. Like Chinese presbyterian pastors who are being arrested and detained today, John found the love of Jesus so sweet that he couldn’t *not* talk about it, even though it cost him.

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The Heavenly Father is actually the first witness. He’s been saying good things about his Son Jesus for all eternity. And again at Jesus’ baptism, he said: “this is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And the Father’s witness-bearing to and through his Son *cost him!* Cost him what? Cost him his Son!

Does bearing witness sound tough? Your God and Father knows what it’s like to bear witness, and to have it cost him dearly. You and I will never know the full depths of the sorrow of the Father’s heart when he lost his Son under the crushing weight of our sin on the cross. There is nothing that we could suffer for speaking and living the love of Jesus, that costs us more than it cost God the Father to speak his love to us in his precious Son. But he bore that sorrow, because he was determined to speak his love, through Jesus, to you and me!

And here, John tells us that Jesus (verse 5) is himself “the faithful witness,” the real and best martyr. Over and over Jesus tells us in John’s gospel that he has said everything the Father gave him to say. No part of the Father’s heart of love and grace and justice was left out: Jesus said and lived it all. And he said it best on the cross in his death, a great martyrdom of love to you and me. As the living testimony of the Father’s heart of love, the Son Jesus lost his own life. For us.

Friends, church. Jesus Christ is here in our midst. We are a lampstand, set here in this city, to bear witness faithfully to God’s heart in Christ. And Jesus is walking among us. He will review us.

But, our passage tells us:

To be Jesus’ faithful martyr, we must experience and receive the faithful martyrdom of Jesus. For every review of our our own hearts, our sin, our unfaithfulness; for every review even of our faithfulness and courage and boldness, we need to review the

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faithfulness and courage and full-hearted, bold love of Jesus himself ten times. We need to hear that (verse 5) he loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood, over and over again!

Only if Jesus, the faithful witness, is our focus, can we bear more faithful witness to him. And only Jesus’ own testimony of the Father’s love, in words and especially in the cross, can give us joy, peace, and hope, even as he reviews us. If we are gripped by his love, then instead of saying “no, please don’t come!,” we can say, even as he reviews us, “Amen, come Lord Jesus.”

So, will you say it with me? This Lent? Can we say, together, “Jesus, because you love us, and because we love you, you can say absolutely anything about us. Even so, come, Lord Jesus”?