

Revelation 1:1-11
On Patmos, in the Spirit

Introduction

John introduces himself to his readers and tells them of his circumstances. He has no official title, just **your brother and companion in the suffering** (Revelation 1:9). θλιψις means “great pressure”, e.g. the pressure of a great stone on a man’s body. Persecution had brought great pressure on the early church. John had been through it all himself, he had experienced what they were going through, and therefore was in a position to speak to them with conviction.

He also described himself as their **companion in the ... kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus**. They were all within the Kingdom of God, and it required them to show patient endurance. John did not just sit down with his head bowed in resignation, but showed courage which turned suffering into glory.

Then John tells them he was in two places at one and the same time. **I was on the island of Patmos...I was in the Spirit** (Revelation 1:9,10). This was his outward condition and his inward condition. Every Christian lives in two environments, one that is physical and involves body and material circumstances, and another which is spiritual, our relationship with God. We have to make a choice in which of these two environments we will live chiefly – dominated by physical things and outward circumstances, or living triumphantly regardless of circumstances by the Holy Spirit?

On the island of Patmos

I was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 1:9). Patmos was a barren rocky island, 10 miles long and 5 miles wide, crescent shaped with the horns of the crescent pointing east. It was 40 miles off the coast of Asia Minor, the final haven on a voyage from Rome to Ephesus. Banishment to this remote island was a common Roman punishment. John had been faithful to the Lord and His Word, and had been banished as a criminal. He probably had to do hard labour in the quarries on the island. According to Sir William Ramsay, it would have involved scourging, perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleeping on the bare ground, and whipping by a military overseer.

Life could hardly have been harder. The reason for it was John’s loyalty to the Lord and faithfulness to His Word. There was no quiet eventide of life for this great apostle of the Lord. He must have been desperately lonely – no friendship of Peter and the other apostles, and on the Lord’s Day no communion of saints or breaking of bread. He would have been worked seven days a week, and his only company was criminals. His pain, suffering and need were constant.

A depressing and harsh environment is the lot of many Christians. Few have trouble-free passage through life. For some, life is a perpetual battle. Our external circumstances are not our own choosing, but have been made for us. Where we live, work, company we meet, situations of discouraging difficulty, fierce temptations –

often we have no choice in these. Here we have been set by the consent of God to live out our lives. This is our Patmos, the world where we have to live.

The Lord prayed, **My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one** (John 17:15). We should not pray to be removed from our external circumstances, but that we should be kept from evil within those circumstances. Perhaps our Patmos may be a harsh environment of feeble health or a nervous temperament, rendering us incapable of achieving much. C.f. Paul's thorn in the flesh - Paul prayed three times for it to be removed – and it was not removed.

Here is outward confinement, restrictions and frustrations. There is no way of escape. But the second part of John's statement is a reminder that when there is no outward form of escape, there is inward escape through the Spirit. When there is no way out, there is always a way up. The outward road may be closed, but the upward way to God is always open and no man can bar it. "The Devil may wall you round, but he cannot roof you in." (Hudson Taylor)

In the Spirit

There was a special meaning for John here because he was receiving special inspiration – he was about to receive God's revelation of truth which he goes on to describe in the book. But in another sense, the Christian is in the Spirit. The Christian is born of the Spirit, receives new life in the Spirit, and through Him has a new relationship with God, becoming part of God's family. The Spirit is God's deposit, earnest or guarantee of our glorious inheritance in the future. He seals us as a mark of God's ownership. We have a deep inward relationship with the indwelling Christ which makes all the difference. Our whole situation is transformed.

God's answer to Paul's thorn in the flesh was "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness**" (2 Corinthians 12:9), and Paul's experience was **that Christ's power may rest on me...when I am weak, then I am strong** (2 Corinthians 12:10). Even when he was in prison in Rome, because he was in the Spirit he was able to pen his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and a second letter to Timothy, telling them of great spiritual treasures.

While Martin Luther was imprisoned in Wartburg Castle, he translated the Scriptures and gave the Bible to Europe. John Bunyan spent twelve long years in Bedford jail, but in the Spirit he wrote "Pilgrim's Progress". John Nelson, as associate of John Wesley, was thrown into filthy Wathsome jail, and wrote, "I was so filled with love of God that it was a paradise to me." F.R.Havergal had a frail body and was pain-ridden, everyone was so sorry for her except herself, because she was in the Spirit and the result was an outpouring of Christian verse and lovely hymns, e.g. *Take my life, Lord speak to me, Like a river glorious*. Outward storm, but inward calm.

We may find ourselves on Patmos, but we can also be in the Spirit. God's living words are in the Bible. **There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother** (Proverbs 18:24). **You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you** (Isaiah 26:3).

Conclusion

The world gives us Patmos; God gives us His Spirit. The best way to conquer Patmos is not to pray for an easier situation and kinder environment but ask to be strengthened by His Spirit in the inner man. The inward can prevail over the outward.