

Is Your Church Essential?

By Jess Arnds

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Revelation 1
Preached on: Sunday, December 6, 2020

Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

Good morning, Providence. Let's go ahead and open our Bibles today to the book of Revelation 1. Before I get into the message today, I wanted to just continue to ask for your prayers for our future plans as a family. Next Sunday Grace Church in Napa is going to be voting on whether or not to confirm the decision of the elders to bring us out, for me to be an associate pastor out there, and it needs to pass by a 75% majority, and at this point, all the indications are that we're pretty confident that it will go through but, of course, anything can happen, but the most likely scenario is that it will pass and, in fact, I've already reserved a shipping container, started packing, trying to sell my cars, I've booked tickets, everything is reversible but that's, you know, we're in that process. So that means that if the vote goes through, our last Sunday here will be December 20, that is two weeks from now which is kind of surreal to say that. So we're planning to pack the truck up on the 19th which is a Saturday, our last Sunday will be here on the 20th and then we fly out on the 22nd to spend Christmas with my in-laws and then we'll go to Napa from there. So I just covet your prayers, you know, that the Lord... There's a lot to do. I'm preaching this week and next week and I'm doing a wedding in between and we're getting ready to go and plus we're just trying to say goodbye to you all. So it's going to be busy. I wish I could do dinner with all of you but I just want to let you know that regardless of what happens, it's a privilege to serve Christ and his people and to have seen, I get a front row seat into the work that God does in so many of your lives, and so anyway I just appreciate the opportunity.

So with that, I want to turn our attention to the word of God today and I want to, we're going to be in the book of Revelation this week and next and I've entitled these two messages "Is Your Church Essential?" Is your church essential. Due to the strange circumstances that we find ourselves in, there's been a lot of talk about what is essential and non-essential in the course of our normal lives, right? The conversation has taken place on a global scale because that's been the measuring stick that has determined what people were allowed to do, what businesses are allowed to open, what activities we are permitted to continue doing and which activities had to be shut down. It's caused all of us to take stock of what's important to a certain degree and, of course, how you define what is essential and non-essential largely is determined by your worldview or even by your expertise, right? If your name is Anthony Fauci, then the only thing that seems to matter is that COVID never exist again. At least in the early days of this crisis, we were unsure of how deadly this disease was and so extreme caution was taken to slow the spread, and

then in the early weeks after the initial shutdown, there began to be conversations about what was essential, critical infrastructure. Sit down restaurants were deemed non-essential while energy, water, emergency services, those were deemed critical infrastructure and for good reason. And of course, since April the question has been debated in the public square is church essential? Is it truly essential? Of course many churches and churchgoers have argued that, yes, church is essential meaning that you should not prohibit churches from meeting and singing because they are essential to the health of a person, you know, and their mental health and all kinds of different arguments. Of course others have decided that it's more important to be completely safe and to shut things down until basically we can make sure that there's no safety problems going forward.

Some churches have decided to do that and these arguments generally center around you could say at least three things. The public health argument, those that say that we should open the church for the public health reason and we say that it's harmful for people to not have access to their faith communities, right? Just in general, we're social beings and that's true. It's harmful to isolate people. In fact, I saw a report this week that in Japan, and who knows statistics, what's accurate and what's not, but the report out of Japan was that there was more suicides in Japan this past month than there were COVID deaths period, for the year, and that is a trend that is spreading throughout the world. Some argue that COVID-19 is not that significant of a health crisis, some even go so far as to say that it's a hoax. Who knows, I don't want to get into that. But those are the arguments, right?

Then there's a legal argument. You know, the First Amendment says that Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people to peaceably assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. There's numerous instances of churches challenging the government on this legal basis, citing that it's not legally permissible to restrict the practice of worship and especially not to target religious institutions. I personally know at least two churches that are bringing legal action against the state for their unfair targeting of churches, and they do have a legitimate case. The Supreme Court recently has ruled on those things.

And then lastly, there's the biblical argument. Of course, most famously, at least in our circles, you know, Grace Church and John MacArthur citing that Jesus is Lord and that we must obey him rather than Caesar. That argument basically says that whatever the government says, they don't have a right to restrict a church in its obedience to Christ and that it is up to each church to decide how they will interact with the public health issues, and that the elders must decide how they will apply the principles of Scripture in their context and so on it goes.

Okay, we're all familiar with those arguments but aside from these political, legal and even biblical arguments, I want to ask you today is your church essential? Is your church essential? The definition of the word "essential" in the English language is "absolutely necessary; extremely important; fundamental or central to the nature of something."

That's what it means to be essential. So I ask you again is your church essential? If so, if your answer is yes, then the fact that you're here today probably means that you believe it is, or at least you verbalize that. Why? Why is your church essential? What makes your church essential or absolutely necessary, extremely important, fundamental or central to your life? You know, on the continuum to be essential, things that are important, essential means extremely, on the extreme end of very important. Is your church on the extreme end of what is important to your life?

And if I were to look at your deeds over the past year regardless of what you've said, how have your decisions illustrated that point? How have your decisions communicated that your church is essential? Where is your heart? What absorbs your thoughts and captures your imagination, your desires? If you could do an x-ray of your soul, what would come out of that? What would the diagnosis be? What would be revealed? Is the church essential to you? Think about the effort that you give to the church, your work, your zeal, your diligence to the things pertaining to the church. What would your deeds say is actually essential to you?

I would imagine that for some what has proven to be essential to you is rest. You would rather rest than give your life to the service of Christ and his church. You would rather seek ease and comfort or pleasure or fun or safety at the expense of his church. Is your church your highest priority or is safety your highest priority? Think about this. If safety has been your highest priority, higher than what Christ has commanded you to do in a pandemic, what will you do when being a Christian is the reason why the government comes after you? When the culture persecutes you, throws rocks at you, opposes your gospel and your God violently? If safety is your top priority, what will you do then? What will happen when the threat is no longer a virus but persecution from a wicked culture? When going to church might cost you your job? Or when being associated with other believers might endanger them because they might be endangered by their association with you? What will it be like? Is your church essential to you? We pat ourselves on the back for good theology and philosophy of ministry and saying the right things so other people will pat us on the back, but what does your life say?

Keep these questions in mind as we open to the book of Revelation 1 and we'll just lay this out there. The church is essential because the Lord Jesus Christ is essential. Starting in verse 1,

1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, 2 who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. 4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood-- 6 and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father--to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." 9 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." 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. 14 His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.

We will stop right there.

Let's pray and ask for the Lord to show us his glory.

Lord Jesus, we come to You, we bow our knees before You. We ask that You would grant us understanding of Your word, that You would grant us a heart that is ready to hear what You have to say. Teach us, Lord. Show us Your glory. Impress it upon our soul. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is an amazing amazing book written by the Apostle John, according to most reliable sources of church history was written by him in the year 95 AD during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. According to the best sources that we have, Eusebius citing Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, that's when they said this writing took place. This is the same John who wrote the gospel of John, 1, 2, and 3 John as well, and he is known as the beloved disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved. He's the same one who leans on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper. He acted as an intermediary between Peter and Jesus, Peter

asking, "Hey, hey, tell the Lord to explain what He just said." And John would go and ask the Lord to explain it to him, right? And then he would go back to Peter and say, "Well, this is what that meant," right? That's how close he was to Jesus. He is the same one who Jesus entrusted with the care of his mother when he was hanging on the cross. Jesus hanging on the cross looks at John and his mother and says, "John, Mary is now your mom. Take care of her." He was the first one to reach the empty tomb after the women came and reported it. He and Peter ran to the tomb and he was the first one there and he was the first to believe, the first of the apostles to believe in the resurrection of the Lord. He also recognized the risen Lord when they were out fishing and the Lord said, "Hey, cast your net over here and you'll make a catch." And they did and John is like, "Peter, it's the Lord." That's where Peter dove into the water and swam to him. He is almost always mentioned together with Peter and he was there when Peter healed the crippled man in Acts 3. He was there testifying about the gospel to the Sanhedrin and the Council in Acts 4. They were whipped for doing so. And he was doing missionary work in Samaria. From what we can tell from church history, John was the only apostle to not die a martyr's death.

Think of this. He saw the trial and crucifixion of Jesus with his very eyes. He personally endured persecution at the hands of the Pharisees, like we just mentioned in Acts 4. In Acts 12, his brother, James, one of the three of the inner circle, was killed by King Herod Agrippa for his testimony about Christ. In the early 40's, within 10-15 years after the resurrection, his brother is killed. And one by one all of his friends, the apostles, throughout the rest of history are martyred and killed for the testimony of Christ along with many other friends and acquaintances, and now John himself has been exiled to the island of Patmos, a barren rock, a prison colony off the coast of western Turkey. In fact, Tertullian, an apologist from around the year 200 AD, says that the Romans had tried to plunge John into a vat of boiling oil to kill him but that he was miraculously unhurt by that. We're not sure if that's true or not but that's what's reported. And he was here on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. He had been banished there. It was a barren rock. He was allowed to freely walk about on this rock.

It wasn't like Paul's imprisonments but he was banished to this ugly rock in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea because of his testimony of Christ, and it is at this point that the Lord shows up to him and he says in chapter 1, verse 9, "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." And he says this speaking like a witness in court, like he's signing an affidavit. "I, John, I bear witness to this." He says that here and at the end of the book, "I, John, saw this." And he makes a point also to say, "I am just your brother and your fellow partaker. I'm on par with you. I'm just a regular guy. I'm just a normal dude. I was on this island called Patmos and me, John, this regular dude just like you, saw this vision of the Lord."

This word for "fellow partaker" comes from the word "koinonia," fellowship. He's a fellowship in the sufferings and in the tribulation and in the kingdom and the perseverance that are in Christ Jesus. The only other way that this word is used similarly in the book of Revelation, there's a cognate word in Revelation 18:4 where he says,

"Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins." We as believers are fellow partakers in suffering with Christ, in the kingdom of Christ, and in perseverance, not in sin. We come out of the world as the church, where we once were fellow partakers of sin with the world now we have left that behind to now share in the sufferings of Christ, in his kingdom, and in the endurance that is involved in all of that.

This is from one commentator who says this, "John insists that he shares with Christians in Asia Minor the tribulations of the end time which consist of possible exile, imprisonment, social ostracism, slander, poverty, economic exploitation, violence, and the constant threat of judicial action, and the proper response to all of this suffering is endurance. The major Christian response in this book and it always speaks of the perseverance of the saints in the face of oppression by the enemies of God and it's often accompanied by the idea of full obedience to God." This is the basic attitude of righteousness in the Old Testament and in later Judaism. It means both to wait upon God and to stand up against the temptations and the evil of the world. Both ideas are central. Every time it shows up in this book, the idea of perseverance, that it is perseverance in obedience to the Lord, and so we are to call for supreme steadfastness in light of both the soon return of Jesus and the persecution by unbelievers. In other words, its vertical aspect is faithfulness to God and its horizontal aspect is patient endurance of evil.

This is one of the major themes of this book, in fact, it's one of the major purposes of this book. The book of Revelation is written to elicit faithful endurance among his people and among his churches and it's been 60 years since the resurrection of Christ. The gospel has spread like wildfire around the Mediterranean world and even around the globe. There is some in church history that report that the Apostle Thomas made it as far as India with the gospel by the end of the first century. That first generation after Christ, made it all the way to India, all the way to Spain, all the way to the heart of Africa, even up into Russia, and in fact, there are some who speculate that the gospel made it to Japan within the first couple hundred years. That's amazing but these churches that this book is written to, the churches of Asia Minor and in modern Turkey, are the most established and mature. They're the ones that were planted by Paul, watered by Peter and John and many other faithful brothers. Ephesus, which is one of the churches here, Paul spent multiple years there, wrote several books to them. Timothy, his most trusted associate, was the pastor there all the way until 97 AD or so. John spent many years there. He wrote his epistles largely to Ephesus and from Ephesus. Peter's epistles address the churches in Asia Minor and now the book of Revelation is directed at this region.

What an amazing thing. All of the resources, all of the Scripture, all of the teaching that was directed at this area of the world, and so these churches were the most mature and the most established and they'd been there for decades by this point, and so who they were at this point was because that is who they had chosen to be. This is how they had chosen to respond to life and to the Scriptures that had been presented to them. They had the most access to biblical revelation of any churches in the world but now they were undergoing some persecution and some hard times and so the Apostle John exiled to Patmos takes pen in hand to write to seven specific churches in Asia Minor.

You see this in verse 4, "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace." But as we continue to read through chapter 1, we see in verse 11 that John is not writing of his own initiative, he's not writing out of the pure divine inspiration where the Spirit just moved him to write, not the way that Paul's epistles were where Paul was, you know, basically moved by the Spirit but in his own mind he's thinking, "I need to write to the Corinthians." So he takes pen in hand and he writes or he dictates it to a scribe who writes the letters and sends it. This is a different situation entirely. Verse 11, you see it right here. This is Jesus speaking, "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." Jesus tells him specifically, "Write this to these churches." This is not John sending a message to them of his own accord, this is God directing him specifically to do it. And verse 3 calls this prophecy, "Blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy." In verse 1 of the same chapter it's titled "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His bond-servants the things which must soon take place." You see, this is a different chain of revelation. God directs Jesus, who then directs his angel, and the angel then delivers the message to John who writes it down and sends it. This is not so much an epistle but a direct prophecy from God in the style of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and especially Daniel. If you read the book of Daniel you'll see so many parallels.

Jesus Christ himself has dictated to John what he is to write and specifically marked out these churches, and these are real churches, real churches in real situations. These aren't symbolic places. Just like Jesus is real, he is not symbolic. His return will be real, not symbolic. And the trouble that they were about to go through was real, not symbolic. There are many aspects of this book that are symbolic but these letters to the churches are not. But why does he pick out these specific seven churches for this prophecy? He chooses to address it to them and I believe it's for this reason, that they are representative of the variety of churches throughout history, that if you hit all the differences in these churches, every single church that reads this prophecy can find themselves in among these seven churches, find the similarities between them. This applies to every church throughout history. There's no church that can read this and make it through completely unaddressed and unscathed.

The purpose of this book, as I said, is to give them hope and warning so as to cause repentance and perseverance in their loyalty to Christ. Let me say that again: the purpose of this book is to give hope and warning so that it will cause repentance and perseverance in our loyalty to Christ. It's not just perseverance of belief, it's not just believing that Jesus is true and real and that these are going to happen, but it is a perseverance in the faithful testimony to the name of Christ, the public association of yourself with Christ because as Jesus says, "If you deny Me before men, I will deny you before My Father. But if you are faithful to Me before men, then I will be faithful to you before My Father." True faith is shown in that you are willing to identify with Christ when it will cost you something and this book is written so that you will persevere in the faithful testimony, public witness to Jesus Christ.

So as John writes to elicit this faithful endurance, he does this by reminding them of Jesus. He starts it out by listing out who Jesus is, what he has done for us, and what he will do for the world, and then he provides a vivid glimpse of the glory of Jesus.

So let's start with who he is. In chapter 1, verse 5, it starts out with "the faithful witness." Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, that means he is truthful and he is faithful to proclaim the truth. He never lies and he does not shirk back from declaring what was needed and necessary to say. He preached all over the place in Israel and he has continued to spread his gospel around the world. Wherever there are believers, wherever there are people who are ready to receive the gospel, he is sure to send his witnesses. This is why there's no one who is going to hell who wanted to hear the gospel. Jesus is the faithful witness it says here. If there's anybody that wanted, if there's anybody that truly sought the Lord with a pure heart, he would be sure to provide them a witness and Jesus is that faithful witness.

Second here in verse 5, it says that he is "firstborn of the dead." That means he is resurrected and alive. He's the firstborn, that means he is preeminent. He's the first one to be resurrected eternally. He's the first and he is the first among them as the Scripture says here, the firstborn among many brethren. That means there's many to follow. That means you and I and every other believer will follow him in this resurrection and he has led us through that gate. He's the firstborn of the dead.

In verse 18 it says he is "the living One." He was dead and behold he is alive forevermore. The fact that Jesus is alive is the whole basis for our faith. It's the whole reason we exist. If he's not alive, this whole thing is useless, worthless and pointless. If he is not alive, then you will not be resurrected and this life is all there is. If he is not alive, as 1 Corinthians 15 says, then you and I are most to be pitied because you and I are suffering for nothing. You and I are giving up our pleasures for nothing. But behold he is alive and he will be alive forevermore, and that is a promise of hope to you who believe and that is a threat to those that reject him. That's what Acts 17 says, that the Lord has fixed a day that he will judge the world and he has furnished proof by resurrecting his Son from the dead. The proof that God will judge the world is that Jesus is resurrected and that you will face him.

So he is the faithful witness, he is the firstborn of the dead, that means he's alive, and thirdly, he is eternally supreme. Eternally supreme. Revelation 1:5 says this, he is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." He's the ruler of the kings of the earth. You just have to let that sink in. He is supreme over every king, over every governor, over every Congress, over every President, over every dictator. He is the ruler of the kings of the world and all these people that gather, you know, at the World Economic Forum thinking that they are the kingmakers, thinking that they are the rulers of the world, thinking that they control the outcome of history, they are puny men who have no control and they are living a lie, they're living a farce, and they are living as usurpers of the rightful place of Christ and Jesus will not tolerate that forever. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Verse 8 says that he is "the Alpha and the Omega." He is the first and the last. Everything starts and ends with him. All things are to him, through him, and for him. He has existed eternally, it says he "who is," he "who was and who is to come." He has existed always in the past long before all of these arrogant men have, and he will exist long after they have been sent to the lake of fire, and he is to come.

And it says here in verse 18 that he has "the keys of death and Hades." You want to overcome death, you must go through Jesus Christ. You want to live eternally, you must go through Jesus Christ.

So Jesus, who he is, is that he's truthful, he's alive, and he's eternally supreme, and then John goes on and says what he has done for us. In verse 5, look at this, this is also something that we just cannot gloss over. Each one of these things deserves its own message. It says in verse 5, "To Him who loves us." Jesus loves you. This eternal, this living King of all loves you, his people. That means he wants what's best for you. That means that he cares about you. That means that he willingly sacrificed of himself for your good and your benefit. How much does it mean to you when someone in a high and lofty position cares about your situation? When they take thought of you? When they send you a note? When they go out of their way to help you? How much does that mean to you? Someone who has nothing to gain, someone who has all that they want, someone who is powerful, has many other things going on, and yet they reach out to you in your circumstance, they care for you, they love you? And now here the ruler of the kings of the earth is saying he loves you and as we'll see next week, he knows you.

He loves us and he showed this by releasing us from our sins and if you're a believer, that is the best news ever because a believer wants to be released from their sins, a believer does not love the slavery of sin, a believer wants out of it, wants to be set free, wants to be delivered, wants no part of it. Though they're tempted, though they give in at times, a believer wants to change and Jesus Christ has released you both from the power of sin and from its penalty. You're no longer enslaved to it and you're no longer going to be given the wrath that is due you for your sin. Think of your sin. He knows every single sin you've committed. He knows all of the angry words, all of the hateful thoughts. He knows all of the lazy actions. He knows all the lustful desires. And he knows how you have constantly ignored him. He knows how you are constantly distracted from him and yet he released us from our sins and look at what it took, his blood. The mighty ruler of the kings of the earth became a baby, subjugated himself to sinful parents, lived in almost complete obscurity until he was about 30 years old, and then did nothing but serve vile, wicked, self-centered, complaining, greedy people for three years to the point of exhaustion. Not only to the point of exhaustion but to the point of death. And not only to the point of death, but to the gruesome, painful death of crucifixion, naked publicly, beaten beyond recognition. By his blood, by his wounds you are healed and released from your sins.

So this faithful witness, this living ruler of all the kings of the earth loves you and by his blood released you from your sins and then he made us a kingdom and priests. So you once were fit only for judgment, fit only to be cast out, fit only to be thrown into the lake

of fire and eternal condemnation and torment because that is what your sins deserved, and not only out of love for you did he die for you and release you from that thing that held you captive, your sin, he has now given you a glorious job to be a priest in his kingdom. A priest is a mediator between God and man. A priest is a servant of God. A priest is someone who spends his time in the temple taking care of the things pertaining to God. It is the most elevated position that you can have serving the ruler of the kings of the earth. I mean, if you're a butler in Buckingham Palace, that is a place of honor. Though you are a servant, though you are essentially a slave, that is a place of highest honor, isn't it? You and I are priests of the ruler of the kings of the earth, priests of God Almighty because we have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, we have been made pure, we've been justified, we have been made qualified to serve him forever.

The church is his kingdom. There's nothing more important, there's nothing more glorious, there's nothing more elevated than that. You don't have a higher job than that. You don't have a more important role in your life than to be a priest in the kingdom of the ruler of the kings of the earth, and so we serve him as priests. We serve. Moms, you serve your children as a priest unto God. Husbands, you lead your family as a priest unto God. We are in this world representing the King of kings and calling others to worship him, showing them how, and we will have this eternal job in the kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth.

So he has loved us, he has released us from our sins, he has made us a kingdom and priests, and this results in worship as it says in verse 6, "to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever." All of these kingdoms will fade. America will pass away. China will pass away. Russia will pass away. Every single continent, every single king, every single kingdom will pass away, in fact, it'll be wiped off the face of the earth and replaced with the kingdom of God and his glory will shine through that kingdom, it will be known to all and it will be an everlasting dominion. He will rule forever and so this leads us to worship him.

Listen, just a few places in the book of Revelation, I just want you to listen to this and put yourself, imagine this coming from your voice, coming from your mouth, coming from your heart. Revelation 5:9-10, "they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and every tongue and every people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.'"

And then chapter 5, verse 11, it says, "Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb,' worthy is the Lamb, "that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.' And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, 'To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.' And the four living creatures kept saying, 'Amen. And the elders fell down and worshiped.'" You see the natural state of your heart is to want

that worship for yourself, to want that control and that power and that glory for yourself, to want people to praise your name, to say you are worthy and how great you are, and you are fine the way that you are, and to be accepted by everybody, and this is saying, no, when you see the glory of Jesus and what he has done for you and you don't deserve it, he died for you, you must now turn around and shout that praise to him and draw the attention to him. The attitude of a transformed purified heart is one that seeks that Jesus would be exalted, that you and I, that we would all, I would be calling you, Bill Maier, to worship Jesus. Don't praise me. Don't worship me. Even the angels in the book of Revelation tell John, "No, don't worship me, worship Him. Don't praise me, praise Him, serve Him. He is worthy. Give everything you have to His service."

Chapter 7, verse 9, "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.'"

To have this amazing opportunity to be cleansed and qualified to be a part of that throng of people who worship God together, there can be no greater privilege, there can be no higher blessing, there can be no greater job or role. Think of that. Think of that. Have you ever been in a concert where you just get goosebumps because, you know, the lights and the sound and everything is just amazing, right? That is just a taste of the worship concert in heaven where all these angels, we'll be praising with the angels this Lamb who sits on the throne, the one who is worthy, the only one who is worthy of such praise and adoration. To have a champion, to have a righteous king, to have a Savior, to have a great role in this kingdom, that has been granted to you not by your doing but because of his mercy, by the blood of Christ.

I mean, all you can do is just absorb that and realize that that starts today, and my job is no different today and it says what he will do, it says he is coming on the clouds. There will come a day in which Jesus Christ will come on the clouds of heaven. It says every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and they will mourn. Some of them will repent and others will call on the mountains and the hills and the rocks to fall on them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. He is coming. He has promised it many times.

And now in the remaining time that we have left, that's who he is, but what's really fascinating about this book is how Jesus presents himself to John. Look at verse 10, it says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, 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.' Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded

across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength." This is how he chose to present himself to the Apostle John here and we'll get into the symbolism of each description next week because these are symbolic representations, they mean something, okay? The fact that his hair is white and his eyes are a flame of fire and he has a sash, and all these kinds of things, these have meanings to them. But for now I just want you to take it in and allow this incredible sight to overwhelm your senses, visualize this with the Apostle John, put yourself in his shoes, focus with me on this.

Think about this. You're deep in prayer when suddenly you hear a loud blast behind you and it's unlike anything you've ever heard. The closest thing you can compare it to is a trumpet or the roar of a large waterfall, but it's not just a blast, it's a voice. Someone else is here and they're speaking to you, "Write in a book what you see." Can you imagine what your first reaction would be? It's behind you. But imagine you first crouch and freeze for a second and make sure it's safe, and then with your heart pounding, you look behind you and what you see absolutely terrifies you. Have you ever been terrified? Have you ever been utterly terrified? Have you ever been startled? To whatever extent you have, I guarantee you it's nothing compared to what John just experienced.

You first notice golden lampstands, seven of them, but your attention quickly moves from the lampstands to someone moving among them, and it's shaped like a man but it's not an ordinary man. His head and his hair are so white like wool, no, more like snow, bright white. You and I have never seen that. And his eyes are glowing like fire and so were his feet. They were like molten bronze glowing hot. And he's holding seven stars and a sword is shooting out of his mouth. And then he looks at you and his face is like the sun shining at its brightest.

That's hard to process. Completely overwhelmed and terrified, your strength leaves you and you crumple to the ground. That's the impact of this sight. This is the Lord of the church. There's no one like him. He is powerful. He is pure. He is holy. He is sacrificial. And he is righteous, he alone is righteous. You want justice? He is justice in bodily form. He's the promised Messiah. He is the point of all of history. He is the reason it exists. He is the one that keeps it going. The worship of Jesus Christ, the exaltation of this God-man is the theme of history and will be forever. This is essential Lord of all creation. Without him everything falls apart. He is the fundamental reality of the universe. He is the indispensable element. Without him none of it exists. And the church is essential because Jesus Christ is the essential Lord of the church and he has made the church his focal point. The church is the focal point of his work in history. The church is his most cherished possession, the thing he gave his life for. It is the thing that he protects, the thing that he purifies, the thing that he tends to and makes and gives health and life. It is the thing, it is the only thing that will last into eternity from this mortal world.

The church is the only thing that will make it from this world into the new heavens and the new earth and the church is his bride. Listen to Revelation 21. It says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband." This is the church. This is the church. This is what Jesus has been working on, the new Jerusalem.

The church, his saved, sanctified, cleansed and now glorified body of believers, you and I, coming down out of heaven and it says, "And I heard a loud voice," in verse 3, "from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,' he'll do it personally, "and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.' And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' And He said, 'Write, for these words are faithful and true.' Then He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.'" If you thirst, if you want Jesus, if you want his righteousness, if you want to be saved, you can come to him for free. He has purchased your pardon and he will give you of the springs of the water of life and you, for free, will be a part of this kingdom. That's incredible, people.

"He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." The church is essential and it's essential that you are in it because the other option is the lake of fire.

Now why does Jesus present himself in this way? Why didn't he just say, "Hey, John, write another epistle. Tell them to keep going. Give them a thumbs-up." Why does he present himself in this way? Why didn't he just inspire John to write an epistle, why is this different? Is he just showing off? Is this just for your entertainment? No, it has a purpose. You know, everywhere in Scripture where you see God show up in great glory, it has a purpose. You see, God doesn't, he's not just over there, you know, doing fireworks and stuff just enjoying himself and we incidentally happen upon it, and it has no purpose, no connection to our life. No, God has revealed this and pulled the veil back for a reason and the obvious answer is that we would be in awe of him and worship him. Yes, that is the point, right? That's the obvious answer and as any student of the Bible will tell you, you and I were created to worship God, to recognize that he is worthy and more worthy of worship than anything else in the universe, and God desires that every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. That is certainly one of the purposes for this, but there is one more specific reason and it is so that you will listen to what he says and take it extremely seriously, and this is most often why God shows up like this in Scripture, because he wants you to listen.

Listen to Exodus 19:9, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you

forever." That's why he's coming down in that thick cloud and thundering from the mountain, so that they would believe and listen and believe. Verse 16 of the same chapter, " Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. 10 The LORD also said to Moses, "So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder." And guess what comes right after this? The 10 Commandments. He gets their attention and then he delivers to them publicly in all of their hearing the 10 Commandments.

Then at the end of that in verse 18 of chapter 20, "All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.'" God showed up with such power and in such a dramatic fashion so that they would be motivated to fear him and to avoid sin, as we will see in the coming chapters next week, that Jesus has some things to say to the churches and he wants them to listen. Remember Isaiah 6, we read that last time I preached, he said after Isaiah falls on his face like a dead man, the Lord sends the tongs to purify his sin and then sends him on a mission to proclaim judgment on the people of Judah.

Then in Luke 9, listen to this, Luke 9 we have the transfiguration. I'll just read this to you. "Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray." Chapter 9, verse 28 and following. "And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him." And of course, Peter has this great idea, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Okay, if you know anything about Peter, he wants Jesus to skip the cross and start the kingdom right now. "Hey, great! Elijah and Moses are here, we can get started now. We don't have to wait. We don't have to go through this cross thing, Jesus."

"Not realizing what he was saying." Verse 34, "While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!'" Why does God reveal himself in this way? It's not simply so that you will see him but it's

because he's got something to say and you'd better pay attention. He has a purpose. He's got a message. Listen up.

So he says in verse 19, "Therefore write the things which you have seen, write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches." And then you see this repeated in chapter 2, verse 7, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 2. In verse 11, the same thing, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." In verse 17, the same thing. In chapter 3, verse 6, the same thing. In chapter 3, verse 13, the same thing and verse 22, the same thing repeated. Do you think he has a point here? He shows up in dramatic fashion to get your attention so that you will listen to what he has to say, and as the book of Revelation starts in chapter 1, verse 3, he says, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy," but not just that, "and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." Blessed are those who read, hear and heed the things that are written in it. Not just sing about it. Not just know about it. Not just praise God for it but listen and obey what he says.

So in conclusion, the church is essential because Jesus Christ is the essential Lord of the church and his focal point in history is the church and is the only thing that will survive judgment, the judgment day. It is essential not because we feel like it, not because it's a public health issue but because it's the whole point of history that Jesus is calling a people to himself who will worship him in glory. That's the church. Yes, the church is essential because it is essential to Jesus Christ. But if you remember the question I asked you at the beginning is not is the church essential, I asked is your church essential? I asked is your church essential. Listen to this verse, Revelation 2:5, "Therefore," speaking to the church at Ephesus, "remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent." The church universal is essential but not every church is essential to Jesus. Not every church is essential to Jesus. He will discard some of them, the question is, is your church essential to Jesus? That's the question. We will get to that next week.

Let's pray.

Lord, You are the essential Lord of all creation. All things depend upon You. All things remain through You and for You. Lord, impress upon our conscience Your glory and Your will. Help us, Lord, help us to worship You, and I pray, Father, that we would be a church that You deem essential. Please work in every heart, Lord, that we would pursue one another with the fervor of Christ, that we would confess sin, that we would repent of sin, that we would confront sin, that we would speak the glorious truths of our Lord, that we would be unashamed of Him in the public places for Yours is the honor and the glory and the dominion and the power forever and ever. We bow to You for Your glory and Your name. Amen.