

Lord Jesus Christ, we gather as your people to bring honor and glory to your name, seeking the grace that we need to worship you in spirit and in truth. And so we pray, O blessed King and Head of the Church, that by your Holy Spirit you would sound forth your voice in the reading and preaching of your word, giving us ears to hear and hearts to believe. We may walk in the light of your truth all our days, for we ask it through Christ our Savior. Amen. Our scripture lesson is found in the book of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which was given to John. Hear the word of God, Revelation chapter one, beginning at verse one. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth. To him who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us a kingdom, priest to his God and Father, To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so, amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. I, John, your brother and partner, in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day. And I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamon, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. And on turning, I saw seven golden lampstands. and in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice, was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand, he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me saying, fear not. I am the first and the last and the living one. I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore. I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, And the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. And the seven lampstands are the seven churches. Here ends the scripture lesson for today. This is the introduction to the very last book of the Bible. Possibly it was the last book to be written in the Bible. We really don't know that for sure. It's hard to date some of the books that we have in the New Testament. But John was believed to have lived the longest of all the disciples, well into the 90s of the first century, thus probably well into his 90s. And it is widely believed, though we do not have certain proof of this, that he saw this vision late in the 90s, that he had been exiled to the island of Patmos under the reign of the emperor Domitian. Some have thought that he might have seen it in the time of Nero when there was

widespread persecution. But what little testimony we have of the early church tells us that it came later in the reign of Domitian. Either way, it was a time of persecution. Though John doesn't tell us he had actually been exiled to the island, he does tell us he was there because of the word of God and of the testimony of Jesus. The vision that he saw, the first one, as well as the subsequent ones, take him all the way to the end of the world. So whether the book was the last to be written, it certainly is fittingly the last because this is where the story of the Bible ends. It ends with the coming of the new heavens and the new earth and the dawn of an everlasting age. In that respect, the end of the Bible somewhat matches the beginning of the Bible and brings its story to an end. The opening of the Bible is the creation of the heavens and the earth. And the end of the Bible is the creation of the new heavens and the earth. In the first creation, there was a tree of life in a garden where God had put the man and the woman. And as we see in the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, the tree of life returns with fruit to bear throughout the year and to feed and nourish all the nations. The book ends with a wedding. Well, the Bible had begun with a wedding, Adam and Eve. And there's a very important connection between the two because marriage, according to the Apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter five, is an earthly image of the union between Christ and his church. And the Bible fittingly ends by bringing us to that wedding where Jesus Christ is to be married to his bride and they will indeed live happily ever after. If you've ever wondered why so many stories ended with that phrase, it's because that is the story of the world which God has made. That is the intended ending. That God, with his people, Christ, with his church, will live happily ever after. We have so many stories that end that way because that's what's in our heart. That's what we're hoping for. And the Bible lets you know it can be that way, that it will certainly be that way for all who are in Christ Jesus. So John gets a vision all the way to the end of the world and to the beginning of the world to come, a world that will never have an ending. And in that world, All the curse that we have known in this world will be gone. Pastor was sharing that with us in the assurance of pardon that comes to us after we had confessed our sins to let us know that God intends to deliver his people entirely from the curse. When we get to the new heavens and the new earth, everything is made new. The bride of Christ descends out of heaven made ready to meet the bridegroom and she is clothed with the glory of God. And the announcement that is made at that time is that the dwelling place of God, the tabernacle of God, is now with men. He will dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them. And he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes. There shall no longer be any death, neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For all those former things will pass away. as he himself makes all things new." That was the vision that John gave. That's the hope that is set before us, the vision of that world without a curse. But when John wrote this letter, that was not the world in which he lived. As we mentioned, He's likely himself on an exile, taken away from his churches, sent to the island of Patmos. That's a little bit off the coast of southwestern Turkey. It's a volcanic island. There's evidence in the early church that there were penal colonies upon that island, and the Romans, if they didn't fancy killing people, and it was thought because John was so old they decided not to kill him, they would exile him, send him away, off to an island where he couldn't cause any problems for the emperor and his kingdom. Little did they know that he would see a vision on that island that one day would bring down the Roman Empire and indeed would bring down every empire in the world because the vision that he saw showed that all the

kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever. but that's not where John was living at the time. Domitian or Nero or some other wicked emperor was indeed upon the throne, and he was suffering for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. And the people to whom he wrote were suffering for the word of God. John addresses them. He says, I, John, your brother and partner, In the tribulation, and the kingdom, and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, on account of the word of God. John lived in a world of tribulation. Jesus had told him to expect it in the gospel of John, chapter 16, 33. Jesus said, in the world you will have tribulation, but take courage. I have overcome the world. But in the world, we do have tribulation. Sometimes it's like John's tribulation. It comes on account of the word of God. The world has fallen in sin. The world is in rebellion against sin. Jesus told his disciples, if the world hated me, it will hate you. And if you seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in this world, the world will hate you. We have lived in a culture that for very long had assumed the Christian culture that is given to us in the scriptures. We are living in a time where less and less of that is present in our day. Christian culture is in many places not even a memory. People have altogether forgotten truths of God that were once widely embraced. And if you seek to follow the word of God, You can expect to run into hostility. And indeed, the more faithful you are to that word of God, the more hostility you will meet. John met it in his day, and he was writing to people in the churches who would likewise face it. and he was writing to the churches of all the ages, not just that of the first century. This is a book that is for our age too. So John writes to us as our fellow partner in the tribulation, the tribulation that belongs to the church in this world so long as we live in this world until Jesus Christ brings us a new one. We come to a church surrounded by a churchyard. The memories of saints gone by. It's a witness to the fact that we live in a world of death. But we serve a Lord who has conquered death. Nearly every service begins here with announcements in which one family or another might have been stricken with death. We walk through the churchyard as we come from Sunday school, or even if you come from the other side of the street, you come past some of it. I remember when I first came to this church as a minister, I hadn't been here but a couple of weeks, and I was asked to participate in a funeral with Dr. Wardlaw. Dr. Kinect thought that my best introduction to the church was for him to go on vacation. So I came in July, and he took off in August, and I was left in the charge of Dr. Wardlaw. And I was soon to assist him in a funeral. And I shall never forget the experience of it. We lined up in the back of the church, and we were to lead the family and procession down. I was just kind of there to learn and follow along. The signal was given to the organist to stop playing, that we were ready to process, and Dr. Ward-Loss sounded from the back of the sanctuary. I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And down we possessed. And we went through the service that day, and on that particular day, we were actually conducting a burial in the churchyard. So at the end of the service, out we went into the churchyard, and there we went back to those words about the resurrection from the dead. And he set before us the second coming of Jesus Christ when all who are in their tombs will rise at the voice of the Son of Man, and they shall come forth." And I stood there in that churchyard, and I just wondered whether it was gonna happen while I was there. The Lord had come. We're touched by death. We're surrounded by death. Flowers here today in memory of one of our departed saints, Totti McNair. Her husband is with us this

day. Her children attend this church. We are ever reminded that we live in a world where we are fallen in death. But John, as he stood on that island, was able to look through all of that, all the way to the resurrection of the dead. and standing before him was the Lord Jesus Christ in all his glorious power. I was dead, he said, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Tribulation or death will never be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, because Jesus Christ lives forever. And here he is telling us that he will keep us to the end. Now in the English Bible, which I read for you today, we've got The Tribulation and The Kingdom and The Patient Endurance. But if you were reading it in the Greek text, you would find out that the article, which we translate as The, only occurs at the beginning. And coming at the end is that qualification in Christ Jesus, and that particular grammatical construction takes the three and binds them together. They're all covered by the one, and they're all covered by the end. So we might get the same idea if we put in a hyphen. The tribulation, kingdom, perseverance, which are in Jesus Christ. When you are in tribulation, you are in Jesus Christ. He is not apart from it while you are left to bear it. Your tribulation is in Jesus Christ and it will never have victory over you because in that tribulation there is also kingdom and therefore there is perseverance. When Jesus Christ is introduced in this chapter, we first see him as the prophet. This is the revelation of Jesus Christ. God gave it to him in order to show it to his churches, so he is carrying out his mission as the faithful witness, bearing witness to the truth of God. Then we see him in his kingly power. He's the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Domitian, Nero, every king that appears on the earth is under the lordship of Jesus Christ. When he ascended to heaven, he didn't go on vacation. He was ascending to the right hand of God to be inaugurated as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to take control of this universe. He is able to fulfill his promise to work all things together for good with those who love God because he controls all things. It is entirely under his power and dominion that we enter into tribulation. but we do it as part of his kingdom. He is the king, and as John says, he made us to be a kingdom and priests to our God. And that's where we see him appearing to John as a priest in the midst of the lampstands. There he is, standing. Indeed, chapter two, verse one says he's walking in the midst of the lampstands. You know, some parts of Revelation give you a vision that's rather hard to interpret. He decided to give us a softball up front. He gave us a vision and gave us the interpretation. The lampstands are the churches. Jesus appears as the Son of Man just as he does in Daniel chapter seven or Daniel chapter 10. There he is in all his glory. He has a robe that goes down to his feet. That same word is used to describe the high priest beginning in Exodus chapter 25. He has a robe down to his feet and a golden sash, and there he is among the lampstands as if he were a priest in the Old Testament tabernacle or temple, and he tends to the lampstands. The priest was there to keep the lamp burning. there was to be in the tabernacle of God, later in the temple of God, like there is in Arlington National Cemetery, an eternal flame, one that never goes out. So the priests had to go in there day after day to make sure the oil was supplied so that the lamp would keep on burning. Jesus is there in the midst of his lampstands. And as our prophet, as our king, and as our priest, he is there to make sure the lampstands keep burning. My friend, it is his purpose for each one of his people, for all those who have come to him, to make sure your light never goes out. the flame of God which is given to you by the working of the Holy Spirit as Jesus sent him to gather his people to him, he will preserve that work. Yes, there is

tribulation, but that tribulation is within his kingdom and therefore it issues in perseverance because he preserves. The apostle Paul was left with a thorn in the flesh. That thorn in the flesh, he describes as a messenger of Satan. You see, Satan sought to exploit that thorn in the flesh. But Paul also describes that thorn as being given to him by God, that in his weakness, God's strength might be perfected. In his tribulation, whatever that thorn in the flesh was, the devil would work to discourage him, to tell him that God didn't love him, to tell him that he was not worthy, to tell him that he was not favored. The devil would seek to exploit his suffering as he seeks to exploit your suffering. But Jesus Christ held on to Paul. And in his weakness, strength was perfected. Paul thought that thorn in the flesh was actually a great hindrance to his ministry. And so we read that three times he sought the Lord that it might be removed from him. We don't know what it was. As a thorn in the flesh, presumably it was some kind of physical ailment. Some kind of difficulty that made it hard for him to serve Christ. Some have thought that it might have been a speech impediment that was given to him because he reports that the Corinthians thought his preaching was terrible. At least some of them did. They actually described it with the word contemptible. Maybe it was that. Some have thought it might have been his eyesight. He refers to the Galatians as being willing to give their own eyes for him, so maybe he had an eye problem. Some have speculated he might have picked up malaria on his many journeys. We have no idea what it was, and perhaps that's God's design so that you can fill in the blank with whatever your thorn in the flesh might be. But whatever it was, it drew him down to his knees asking that God would deliver him from it. And he said he did it three times. I doubt that he meant by that nine, 10, and 11 o'clock. I think he must have meant that there were three seasons in his life, three periods where this thorn in the flesh weighed heavily upon him. And he sought the Lord that he might be delivered of it. Undoubtedly, so that he could be more effective. So that he could labor without such weakness. So that he could go on from strength to strength and be a witness for the power of God in somebody having been healed. But he was left with a thorn in his flesh. Now he tells us that God answered his prayer. God told him his strength was perfected in that weakness. And the first time ago, that apparently worked for a time. But then Paul comes to number two. And there's another season. But that too ends with the same answer. My strength is perfected in your weakness. Something happened the third time around. I can't tell you exactly what it was. I just know there wasn't a fourth time. It was just three times. And in that fourth time, he said he had come to be well content with weaknesses. But somehow or other, the third time around, he became settled in the fact that he was left with that. And then he goes on, and you see how fruitful this was in his life, because not only did he become well-content with weaknesses, he became well-content with insults. Insults. Yeah, he was writing to the Corinthians, the people who thought his preaching was terrible, that it was contemptible. I've told many a minister in my classes, if you're not prepared to accept insults, you're in the wrong business. Because there's always going to be somebody in your church that doesn't like your preaching. There's always going to be somebody that doesn't think you're very good at what you do. There will undoubtedly be somebody who will be the messenger of Satan in your life, who will continually tear you down. If you're not prepared for that, you're in the wrong job. But Paul found that God sustained him in it because you see in his tribulation there was kingdom, there was perseverance. He was kept there. His weakness actually made him more effective in ways that he couldn't see the first two times

around. But he came to see it. Trying to bring this truth home to my classes, I sometimes use an example I picked up from Immanuel Kant's critique of pure reason. Not recommended as devotional reading. Not recommended at all unless you just need to understand the history of Western philosophy. Kant is an important figure for that. But in the critique, he used this example to another end, but this is it. He said, a foolish bird upon beginning flight and feeling the resistance of the air against his wings might suppose that flight would be so much easier were the air not so resistant to his wings. What he doesn't know is that it is the resistance of the air that makes flight possible. Paul had seen his tribulation as a hindrance to his Christian ministry. It actually made it possible. And our weaknesses, our tribulations may do the same. I know the tribulations that come into your life hinder you from what you want to do. And they hinder me from what I want to do. They hinder us from the way we would like to live. But if we're sold out to the kingdom of God, my friends, those tribulations will make possible the witness that God intends for us. In our weakness, his strength will be perfected. and we can count on it because in our weakness, in our tribulations, there is kingdom and there is perseverance. The great vision, the great takeaway is that Jesus Christ stands present in the midst of his churches. He walks among the lampstands. At the end of the world, we have the following. Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men. He shall dwell among them. They shall be his people and God himself shall be with them. John is letting you know, you don't wait for the end of the world for Jesus to be present with you. The New Testament opens with Matthew telling us that he was born of a virgin because in him he was Immanuel, which being translated is God with us. That promise rings through the Old Testament over a hundred times. given to individuals like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or Gideon when he was sent, or Jeremiah when he was appointed to be a prophet to the nations and told in advance, nobody's ever going to listen to you. But God said, they will fight against you, they will not prevail against you for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord. And what he has said time and again to individuals, he says to his people and to his churches. Psalm 46, the Lord of hosts is with us. God is our refuge and strength. He will never leave us or forsake us was his parting words. So my friends, whatever tribulation you must deal with now, or whatever tribulation comes next in your life, it will come to you. within the kingdom of God if you are in Jesus Christ. And if it comes to you in the kingdom of God, there will be perseverance because he is here to make sure your light doesn't go out. He is a faithful priest who will do all he has been sent to do. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. Our God, our Heavenly Father, how we pray that you will steal our hearts with the truth that you are indeed God with us, that you will never leave us or forsake us. You will not leave us as orphans, but you will come to us, and especially in the time of our need. So be with us now, O Lord our God, and send us forth into the world with the knowledge Though we enter tribulation, we enter it as citizens of your kingdom, and you will preserve us so that we may persevere. We ask it through Christ our Savior. Amen.