

# Behold, I AM Making all Things New!

— Meditations on Revelation —

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[Note: it is planned that this document will be updated weekly (usually on Friday) with an additional entry as it is included in our congregational bulletin.]

## Contents

Revelation.....	4	John’s Commission to Write a Book.....	26
God Communicates to Mankind.....	5	Seven Golden Lampstands and Seven Stars.....	27
The Revelation of Jesus Christ.....	6	One Like a Son of Man.....	29
God Communicates Through His Messengers.....	7	John Fell at the Feet of Jesus.....	30
The Angels’ Roles in Revelation.....	8	Fear Not!.....	31
God Communicates to His Servants.....	10	The Living One Died and Yet Lives.....	32
Revelation Records the Fulfilment of Daniel’s Visions.....	11	Jesus Has the Keys to Death and the Grave.....	34
The Time Is Near.....	12	Symbolic Visions.....	35
The Primary Fulfilment Generation.....	13	Letter to the Church in Ephesus – Abandoned First Love.....	36
Blessings from Reading, Hearing and Obeying.....	15	A Hearing Ear.....	37
Reading the Word of God Aloud in the Church Assembly.....	16	Letter to the Church in Smyrna – Encouragement in Suffering.....	38
The Alpha and the Omega.....	17	Satan, in Revelation.....	39
Jesus Christ, the Victor.....	18	A Synagogue of Satan.....	41
Seven Churches, Seven Spirits.....	19	Letter to the Church in Pergamum – A Syncretistic Church.....	42
Blessing that Christians Receive in Christ.....	20	Letter to the Church in Thyatira – Moral Purity is Required.....	43
The Coming of Jesus with the Clouds.....	22	Jesus Knows Our Works.....	44
A Prisoner on Patmos.....	23	Letter to the Church in Sardis – A Dead Church.....	45
In the Spirit on the Lord’s Day.....	24	The Lamb’s Book of Life.....	46
The Lord’s Day is the Christian Sabbath.....	25	Letter to the Church in Philadelphia – A Faithful Flock.....	48

## Planned Future Entries:

- Letter to the Church in Laodicea – A Nauseating Church
- Names and Titles for Jesus Used in Revelation
- The State of the Church in Every Age
- Common Elements in the Letters to the Seven Churches
- Conquering in Christ
- Promised Rewards for Conquering
- Heaven
- What Must Take Place After This
- What Must Take Place
- The Throne Room in Heaven
- Elders and Living Creatures Around the Throne
- The Cherubim Worship Ceaselessly
- Holiness
- True Worship
- Worship of God – Modelled in Heaven
- Worshipping the Creator
- A Sealed Scroll
- No One was Worthy to Open the Sealed Scroll
- One Who Can Open the Sealed Scroll
- The Lion-Lamb
- The Resurrection of Jesus
- The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation
- Worshipping the Lamb
- Harps in Heaven (Part 1 of 3)
- Harps in Heaven (Part 2 of 3)

- Harps in Heaven (Part 3 of 3)
- Harps and Incense – Physical Types for Spiritual Realities
- Worship Jesus for Your Ransom
- They Sang a New Song
- Salvation for the Nations
- A Kingdom of Priests
- Angels Worship the Lamb
- All Creation Worships the Lamb
- The First Seal – a Rider on a White Horse
- The Second Seal – a Rider on a Red Horse
- The Third Seal – a Rider on a Black Horse
- The Fourth Seal – a Rider on a Pale Horse
- The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse
- The Fifth Seal – Martyrs in White Robes
- The Fifth Seal – Those Who Had Been Slain
- The Fifth Seal – The Martyrs’ Plea for Vengeance
- The Fifth Seal – Do Saints in Heaven Observe Events on Earth?
- The Sixth Seal – Temporal Fulfilment
- The Sixth Seal – Symbols of Judgement on the Nations
- The Sixth Seal – The Response of the Judged
- Angels’ Role in Sealing the Servants of God
- God’s Seal on the Servants of God
- Withholding the Winds of Judgement
- Sealing the 144,000
- An Innumerable Multitude
- The Great Multitude Praises God for Salvation
- Angels Rejoice that God Works Salvation
- Amen!
- The Ones Coming Out of the Great Tribulation
- The ‘Great Tribulation’
- Rewards of the Redeemed
- The Temple in Revelation
- Opening the Seventh Seal
- Silence in Heaven
- The Golden Censer
- Prayers of the Saints
- Trumpets
- The Seven Trumpets
- The Figurative Nature of the Trumpet Blasts
- The First Trumpet Blast
- The Second Trumpet Blast
- The Third Trumpet Blast
- The Fourth Trumpet Blast
- The Cry of the Vulture
- The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Apollyon, a Fallen Star
- The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Smoke from the Abyss
- The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Demons of the Abyss
- The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Torment for Five Months
- The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Releasing the Four Demon ‘Generals’
- The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Mounted Troops of Judgement
- The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Demonic Deception
- The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Not a Corrective for Sin
- The Angel and the Little Scroll
- A Command to Seal Up the Word of the Seven Thunders
- An Angel Swears an Oath
- Announcement of the Fulfilment of the Mystery
- The Bitter-Sweet Scroll
- John’s Recommissioning
- Measuring the Temple
- Jesus’ Two Witnesses
- The Two Witnesses Prophecy
- The Lord of The Earth
- The Beast from the Abyss
- The Great City Rejoices Over the Silencing of the Witnesses
- The Resurrection of the Two Witnesses
- The Glorification of the Witnesses
- The Second Woe
- The Seventh Trumpet – Christ Reigns
- The Seventh Trumpet – The Final Judgement
- The Seventh Trumpet – The Ark Revealed in the Open Temple
- The Woman and the Dragon – The Woman
- The Woman and the Dragon – The Dragon
- The Woman and the Dragon – The Woman’s Male Child
- The Woman and the Dragon – The Woman in the Wilderness
- War in Heaven and the Expulsion of Satan
- Christ’s Kingdom Has Come – Christ’s Reign
- Christ’s Kingdom Has Come – The Saints Conquer Satan
- Christ’s Kingdom Has Come – Rejoicing and Woe
- The Woman and the Dragon – The Dragon’s Vengeance
- The Woman and the Dragon – Safety from Satanic Attacks
- The Beast Out of the Sea, Introduced
- The Beast’s Mortal Wound is Healed
- The World Worships the Dragon and the Beast
- The Beast’s Blasphemies
- Why God Permits the Beast to Boast, Blaspheme, and Brutalize
- The Beast’s War on the Saints
- The Lamb Who was Slain from the Foundation of the World
- A Call to Hear and Persevere
- The Beast Out of the Earth, Introduced
- The Beast Out of the Earth Performs Great Signs
- The Beast Out of the Earth – State-Religion Alliance (Part 1 of 3)
- The Beast Out of the Earth – State-Religion Alliance (Part 2 of 3)
- The Beast Out of the Earth – State-Religion Alliance (Part 3 of 3)
- The Beast Out of the Earth – Mark of the Beast
- The Beast out of the Earth – Number of the Beast
- Satan and His Subjects vs Christ and His Church
- The Lamb and the 144,000, Standing on Mount Zion
- The New Song of the 144,000
- The Perfection of the 144,000

- The Eternal Gospel
- The Proclamation of the Eternal Gospel
- Announcing the Fall of Babylon
- Announcing Torment for Worshipers of the Beast
- A Call for Enduring Obedience and Faith
- The Blessing of Dying in the Lord
- The Harvest of the Earth – The Righteous
- The Harvest of the Earth – The Wicked
- Another Sign – Seven Angels with Seven Plagues
- The Heavenly Choir
- The Song of Moses and the Lamb
- Seven Angels Carrying the Bowls of the Last Plagues
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Affected Entities
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – The Plagues
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Praising God for His Justice
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Kings from the East
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Three Unclean Spirit-Frogs
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Jesus’ Coming will be Sudden
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Assembling at Armageddon
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – The City of Man Destroyed
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – The Wicked’s Response
- The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – “It is Done!”

- The Great Prostitute – The City of Man
- The Great Prostitute – Attributes of the City of Man
- The Great Prostitute – Her Cup of Iniquity
- The Mystery of the Prostitute and the Beast
- Identification of the Kings Symbolized by the Beast’s Seven Heads
- The Kings of the Beast Receive Authority for a Short Time
- The Beast’s War with the King of Kings
- The Called, Chosen, and Faithful
- War Between the Beast and the Prostitute
- Obituary for Babylon
- Come out of Babylon!
- Babylon’s Just Sentence
- Lament over the Fall of Babylon
- A Command to Rejoice Over the Fall of Babylon
- The Destruction and Desolation of Babylon
- Babylon is Punished for Persecuting God’s Covenant People
- Rejoicing of the Redeemed, Over the Fall of Babylon
- Hallelujah!
- The Marriage of the Lamb
- The Bride’s Preparation for Marriage with the Lamb
- God, the Only True Object of Worship
- The Rider on a White Horse – His Description
- The Rider on a White Horse – His Names and Titles
- The Rider on a White Horse – His Roles
- Righteousness
- The Rider on a White Horse – His Heavenly Triumph
- The Rider on a White Horse – He Punishes His

#### Enemies

- The Thousand Years – A Figurative Temporal Concept
- The Thousand Years – When it Began and Ends
- The Binding of Satan
- The First Resurrection and the Second Death
- The Saint’s Reign with Christ
- Is there an Intermediate State? (Part 1 of 3)
- Is there an Intermediate State? (Part 2 of 3)
- Is there an Intermediate State? (Part 3 of 3)
- The Defeat and Doom of Satan
- The Judgement Day
- The Second Death
- The Hope of the Resurrection
- Eschatological Timeline
- A New Heaven and Earth
- The New Jerusalem
- A New Physics in the New Heaven and Earth
- The Certainty of Everlasting Rewards and Punishment
- New Jerusalem’s Attributes (Part 1 of 4)
- New Jerusalem’s Attributes (Part 2 of 4)
- New Jerusalem’s Attributes (Part 3 of 4)
- New Jerusalem’s Attributes (Part 4 of 4)
- The Tree of Life
- God Redeems the City
- Jesus is Coming Soon
- Witnesses to the Authenticity and Importance of Revelation
- Holiness Necessary for Heaven
- The Beatitudes of Revelation
- Jesus’ Invitation to Come to Him
- The Grace of the Lord Jesus be with All. Amen!

## Revelation

(Rev 1.1-3)

Classic questions in philosophy include, “How do we know what we know?” and “How do we know that what we know is true or false?” The study of these questions falls within the realm of what is known as epistemology, which addresses the nature of knowledge, truth, belief, and the way we justify our beliefs.

Most philosophers (Christians and non-Christians) agree that there are a few basic forms of knowledge:

- Knowledge that we know innately—are born with—that is not acquired through any form of reason or experience.
- Knowledge that we develop through rational thought processes (e.g., logical inference) from previous known facts.
- Knowledge that we acquire through experience and learning—that is, by observing events in our environment and conducting experiments.

A primary difference between Christian and non-Christian explanations for the origin of knowledge falls within the area of the first class of knowledge—that which is innate. A non-Christian philosopher or natural scientist claims that innate knowledge (e.g., instinctual responses such as suckling or the ability to process language) developed incrementally through millions of years of evolution. In contrast, a Bible-believing Christian contends that a person is endowed by God with innate knowledge at his conception. This innate knowledge includes the ability to perform physical processes such as breathing but also the ability to think logically and apply concepts such as sequence, ordinality, equivalence, and non-contradiction. In addition, Paul informs us that innate knowledge includes facts about non-physical reality, since all men are born knowing of the existence of God and of his righteous moral requirements (Rom 1.18-20).

Christian and non-Christian philosophers both agree that we can acquire knowledge through reason and experience. The difference of opinion between the two ‘schools’ lies in how we approach the nature of truth and fact and the validation of our beliefs. At the root of the discussion about knowledge lies a fundamental consideration about the ultimate source for establishing truth. For a non-Christian, the ultimate source must be his own opinion. What he learns through personal observation or experience or from the word of others, must be processed through his own filters before it is accepted as true—that is through his presuppositions. For example, a non-Christian presented with a book assumes that it was written by a human author and produced through a mechanical printing and binding process designed by human engineers. Whereas, because he assumes that there is no God, he foolishly claims that the information contained in the human genome was assembled by random coincidental alignment using biochemical assembly processes that came into existence without an intelligent originator—that is, he holds the absurd notion that the information content of the genome was created by blind chance.

A person who believes the Bible to be true, also believes that much of human knowledge comes ultimately from God. We refer to knowledge that comes directly from God, and cannot be obtained through reason or experience, as *revelation*. As we have noted, revealed truth can be innate and built into our spiritual essence—e.g., that God exists—or it can be provided by God to men through secondary means, such as words formed in the mind (1.10-11; 2 Pt 1.21); angelic messengers (1.1; Dan 8.16-17; Lk 1.26-38); dreams or visions (9.17; Dan 8.2); or the living Word, Jesus Christ (1.2; Jn 1.1, 14).

Revelation is truth that cannot be acquired by human reason or experience but can only be obtained directly from God—truth that we could not possibly know or infer, unless God communicated it directly to us. Examples include the nature of God as a tri-personal unity, the events of what happened during the creation week before Adam was created, and events which will happen in the future. These forms of revelation can also be called prophecy (1.3; 22.7). Prophecy can refer to the revelation of God’s will such as the requirement to observe a Sabbath rest (Ex 20.8-11). We refer to this form of prophecy as ‘forttelling’. The other form of prophecy we call ‘foretelling’ (prediction), and it refers to revelation that tells of events before they occur.

John refers to the communication in this book as ‘revelation’, speaking of the contents of what he will communicate throughout it. He includes both types of prophecy (forttelling and foretelling) within the scope of his disclosure. He says that those who keep (obey) what is written in the book are blessed, he also speaks

of things which must soon take place. Thus, ‘revelation’ as John uses it here, is not speaking of the *form* of the communication, but the content. Thus, while we understand that the word ‘revelation’ is a translation of the Greek word ‘apocalypse’, it is not necessary to understand the word ‘apocalypse’ used here, to refer to the *form* of communication (i.e., visions) but to the *content*—that is, truth that is disclosed by God to mankind (Lk 2.32; Rom 16.25; 1 Cor 14.6, 26; Gal 1.12; Eph 1.17). While we often use the term ‘apocalyptic’ to refer to truth that God reveals through visions of strange phenomena, it can also be applied to the unveiling of any truth which we need to know but cannot know unless God makes it known to us. All of the Bible is actually ‘apocalyptic’, not just the book of Revelation.

## **God Communicates to Mankind**

(Rev 1.1-2)

John informs us that God communicated his revelation to make it known to his servants from among mankind. The fact that God communicates cannot be demonstrated through empirical study, such as with an experiment. It must be accepted as a presupposition and validated through God’s self-revelation in the Bible. Since man is the image-bearer of God, and we can communicate among ourselves, we infer that God must also be a rational, intelligent, and social communicator. The truth that God communicates is fundamental to our ability to know anything about him, the source of our ability to communicate, and the basis on which God holds mankind accountable.

Even though many men deny the existence of a personal and rational God who communicates with his creation, they know how important the ability to communicate is. We see this, for example, in mankind’s expectation that we will find extra-terrestrial beings who are also communicators. Scientists use radio antennas pointed at space and listen for signals from distant objects that appear to have been prepared by rational minds, rather than noise or repetitive pulses explainable by natural phenomena. It is expected that all intelligent beings will communicate their existence. The search for extra-terrestrial intelligence is an irony and a key indicator of the schizophrenia of natural man. On the one hand, he hopes to discover communication from beyond the earth because he thinks he could then declare mankind nothing more than a product of natural processes. Yet, he rejects the truth that communication has actually come to mankind from beyond the earth, from the Creator himself.

For there to be communication, there must be both a sender and a receiver of the communication. Thus, God communicates to mankind and we receive that communication. We are able to receive God’s communication because we are his creatures, endowed with the ability to communicate. According to a commonly accepted theory, human language developed from grunts and other noises of pre-hominoid, ape-like creatures. However, careful analysis shows that this idea is flawed. It is impossible to explain how:

- Supposed pre-hominoids could agree on what sounds meant.
- The complexity of language grammar could have evolved.
- Humans could process any language if we did not know how to process one.
- The human language processing system could have evolved to support many forms of language.

Language processing is an example of what the proponents of intelligent design call an *irreducibly complex system*—that is, a system that is too complex to have evolved from simpler, less complex predecessors. The irreducible complexity of language processing is rejected by the majority in the scientific community. But, in rejecting this idea, they must resort to unsupportable assumptions about the origin of human language processing. They try to get around the need to provide evidence to support their unwarranted assumptions by claiming that the emergence of language processing occurred in human pre-history, so there cannot be any historical evidence for its emergence. They also claim, conveniently, that no comparable emergence of language processing can be observed today.

Humans are distinguished, among other ways, from the animal creation by our ability to communicate abstract concepts verbally. And, to a significant extent, human personality, ideas, and society are determined by how we communicate. All of our conscious thinking and ability to form concepts is dependent on the use of words.

Consider for example, concepts such as ‘city’, emotions such as ‘love’, or descriptions of physical attributes such as ‘red’. All of these depend on our ability to use symbolic communication in words. Even when we communicate in images, for example through a painting, we often need words to describe the meaning of the image—consider for example, a piece of abstract art, which requires a title and often an explanation for it to be understood. Humanistic scientists in their desperate attempt to demonstrate that man is no more than an evolved animal, teach some animals, such as apes and dolphins, to communicate in symbols. However, language is not a finite list of symbols (or even a combination of a few symbols) or a repertoire of warning calls, it is a program for constructing an unlimited number of meaningful sentences. In addition, human children have an innate ability to process complex grammars without any formal instruction and to use words to speak about language—both of which no animal will ever be able to accomplish.

If we were not image-bearers of God, we could not communicate with one another. Your thoughts and my thoughts would be entirely random. For example, if I pointed to something sitting in a bowl on a table and called it ‘apple’, you might conclude that I wanted you to crawl under a bed. Your interpretation of the noise coming from my mouth would be as valid as the meaning I intended to convey.

Because we are all created in the image of God, we think God’s thoughts after him. Christians know and believe this. Non-Christians deny it, and yet assume Christian presuppositions in order to think, speak, and act. As image-bearers of God, they cannot avoid using their innate revealed knowledge that God communicates. Since he communicates, we, who are his creatures, must listen to what he says.

### **The Revelation of Jesus Christ**

(Rev 1.1-2, 4)

John declares that the revelation recorded in the book of Revelation came ultimately from God and was communicated through a channel that consisted of Jesus, an angel, and John himself. When John speaks of God, he makes a distinction between God the Father and Jesus who is the God-man—the second person of the Trinity, in his mediatorial capacity. Within the economy of the Trinity, God the Father is the originator and source of all truth. Thus, as the God-man, Jesus taught only what he had received from the Father (Jn 7.16; Jn 17.7-8) and communicated only what the Father had authorized him to communicate (Jn 12.49; Jn 14.10). Therefore, the contents of this book is God’s word and is of heavenly origin.

John refers to the contents of this book as “the revelation of Jesus Christ”. This statement can be understood in two primary senses: 1) the revelation *from* Jesus, or 2) the revelation *about* Jesus. In the first sense, John informs us that Revelation contains specific information, delivered by Jesus, that Jesus wished the seven churches of Asia Minor to know and heed: about “things that must soon take place”, including the pending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the coming persecution many believers in Asia Minor would have to face at the hands of the Roman administration; and how churches should engage with the pagan culture in which they were placed.

Jesus also communicates through this book to the Church in every generation. He wants his Church to:

- Be comforted as it faces persecution (2.10; 7.17; 21.4), with the promise that it will be victorious (15.2) and join Jesus at a glorious victory feast (19.9).
- Be committed to Jesus (2.4-5; 3.15-16), as he challenges us to believe correctly (2.13-16) and live out correct belief in obedience (1.3; 22.7).

We must consider seriously that this is a revelation from Jesus Christ which he wants us to understand and apply in our own lives.

In the second sense, “the revelation of Jesus Christ” is the revelation about Jesus himself. Thus, Revelation contains information about the nature and character of the risen Lord Jesus, the role he performs now from his abode in heaven governing and protecting the NT Church as it encounters the hatred of the world, and the role he will undertake as he brings history to its conclusion. In Revelation, we see Jesus in his resurrected glory and in his office as King of kings and Lord of lords (19.16), who will subdue pagan kingdoms (18.2), conquer his enemies (17.14), usher in the age of the new heaven and earth in which only righteousness will dwell (21.1, 27;

2 Pt 3.13), take his Church into his glorious presence (7.9), and consign forever Satan, sin, and death to hell (20.10, 14-15).

Many people think that Revelation provides a chronology of future events (e.g., when the battle of Armageddon or the rapture will occur) and miss the important truths that this book communicates about Jesus, in his glorious majesty, and the magnificent deeds he performs as he demonstrates his sovereignty over the created order. It should not surprise us that Revelation is about the person of Jesus. The entire corpus of Scripture is ultimately about Jesus and his role in redemptive history (Lk 24.44).

Thus, Revelation is the testimony (witness) from Jesus about Jesus. He is both the revealer of the mysteries of heaven and the subject of the mysteries. He is the living Word of God (19.13; Jn 1.1) who came to reveal himself to the world. The book of Revelation is not the revelation of John. John is but the channel through whom the message is communicated—he is the scribe, documenting the events in the visions, while Jesus is the author who sends the visions to John. Little of the John's personality comes through in this book, compared with his gospel and epistles. After he has identified himself in the opening section (1.1, 4, 9), he refers to himself by name only once more near the conclusion of the book (22.8). Thus, as the visions unfold, the identity of the human author disappears into the background, so that the message from Jesus, about Jesus, is the central focus.

Since the message of Revelation is attributed to God the Father and to Jesus, as God, its message is true. Any writing that contradicts the message of Revelation must therefore be false, since two contradictory statements cannot both be true. For example, Revelation declares Jesus to be eternal (1.8; 21.6; 22.13), the God who is worthy of worship (5.12, 14), the Creator (3.14) and the son of God (2.18). Thus, the teachings of Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons must be false. For example, all four of these religions deny the eternal divinity of Jesus:

- Jews believe that Jesus is a [false messiah](#), but [could be considered a rabbi](#); the [messiah is still expected to come](#).
- The *Qur'an* declares that Jesus was created, 'Indeed, the example of Jesus to Allah is like that of Adam. He created Him from dust; then He said to him, "Be," and he was.' ([3.59](#))
- Mormons say that [Jesus is the literal Son of God](#); and [a god](#).
- Jehovah Witnesses claim that Jesus is [the son of God, a god, but not the God; and the archangel Michael](#).

As we study Revelation, we will encounter Jesus, the God-man, in his glory.

### **God Communicates Through His Messengers**

(Rev 1.1-2, 9)

At times, God communicated the revelation that became part of his permanent record—the Bible—directly to people. For example, he spoke directly with Adam, Moses, and Paul. A record of these communications is included in the Bible. Direct communication from God to man is not limited to believers, since he gave words and visions to Balaam and Nebuchadnezzar. At other times he communicated through angelic intermediaries, such as when Gabriel spoke with Mary. We believe that since the incarnation of Christ, direct revelation with permanent authority ceased after the apostles concluded writing the NT (Heb 1.1-2). The book of Revelation is the final component of Scripture. Revelation continues today, since the Holy Spirit reveals Christ to every believer as a key step in the process of conversion. However, no revelation is given today that has equal authority with Scripture—not the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of a pope, the decrees of a council, the proclamations of a preacher, or the 'charismatic' utterances of a modern 'prophet'. Our final, and only, authority for faith and life is the 66 books, in what we call the Bible.

Revelation was given through a chain of messengers—Jesus, an angel, and John. Thus, it is not easy to determine who is speaking in every case—God the Father, Jesus, or the angel (e.g., 10.8; 21.4; 22.6). The angel who spoke in Revelation is not Jesus (22.8-9, 16). He may have been Gabriel who helped Daniel to understand

the visions he received (Dan 8.16; Dan 9.21-22) and brought messages to Mary and Zechariah about the birth of their sons (Lk 1.19, 26). The John who recorded these visions is generally believed to be John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, the author of the fourth gospel and of the three epistles that bear his name. Typically, this identification of John has been questioned by ‘scholars’. But his authorship has been accepted since at least the days of Justin Martyr (c 100-165 AD), who attributed Revelation to the apostle in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (81). There is no conclusive evidence to support the rejection of the attribution to John the apostle. It is fitting that the record of the visions of thunder (4.5; 6.1; etc.) should be associated with the apostle who was one of the ‘sons of thunder’ (Mk 3.17). However, the precise identification of the angel or of the human ‘author’ of Revelation is immaterial. As we noted in the previous meditation, John is the scribe who recorded what he saw, and not the author. The author is Jesus, who reveals to the Church what he wishes it to know in his final communication before he returns to wrap up this age. Thus, both the angel and John refer to themselves as servants (slaves) of Jesus Christ (1.1, 22.9). John, places himself in the line of Israel’s prophets (Is 49.5; Mal 4.4) and in the context of the other apostles and the half-brothers of Jesus (Rom 1.1; James 1.1; 2 Pt 1.1; Jude 1) who also call themselves servants, to identify his role as a messenger of God.

Many people claim that they would believe in God if he would reveal himself directly to them through a word, such as Paul heard on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.4), or an act of intervention in the natural realm, such as striking a tree with lightning. This raises a question: why does God use messengers to communicate his permanent revelation to mankind, and not reveal himself directly to every person. Some of the reasons are, to:

- Give responsible roles to men (Rom 3.2; Rom 10.13-15).
- Make men accountable for the knowledge of his existence and moral requirements with which they are innately endowed (Rom 1.18-23).
- Invalidate sceptical empiricism (Gen 3.1).
- Avoid placing himself at the whim of a creature (Lk 4.12).
- Engender trust in the faithful and reliable eyewitness accounts of his servants (1.2, 9; Jn 19.35; Jn 21.24); the ones sent—the Greek word translated ‘sending’ is from the same root as ‘apostle’.
- Engender faith in the revelation of God given in the Bible (Lk 16.27-31).

John, along with the prophets and apostles before him, bore witness to the Messiah. In John’s case, he was a witness to all that Jesus did during his earthly ministry—from his baptism to his death and resurrection—and to what he had seen in the visions given in this book. He presents his account in his gospel and in Revelation as that of a witness in a courtroom setting who testifies that the account of what he saw is “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”. He also presents his account as one consciously speaking on behalf of God. Thus, Revelation is true because it is the word of God.

This raises a second question: how can we know that the Bible is true? The correct answer is because the Bible says that it is the word of God and is true. Many people reject this answer and accuse Christians of applying circular reasoning. However, claiming that the Bible is self-authenticating is not irrational, since any attempt to prove that the Bible is true requires that we select a system of proof to demonstrate truthfulness. For example, if we subjected the historical statements of the Bible to a test of their historicity by comparing them with non-Biblical accounts of history, we would have to ask how we could prove that the non-Biblical writings are accurate. Any form of proof brought forward to defend a lower level of proof would have to be subjected to another, higher-level proof; and the argument would proceed into an infinite regress, with no hope of a solution. In addition, it is necessary to apply circular reasoning to validate *all* instances of ultimate authorities. For example, it is impossible to prove that logic is logical or true without assuming that the rules of logic are logical and true.

## **The Angels’ Roles in Revelation**

(Rev 1.1)

In the Bible, we encounter angels for the first time in the third chapter of Genesis (excluding the account of Satan, a fallen angel, who possessed the serpent to tempt Eve), in the form of the cherubim who were appointed as honour-guards at the gate to the garden in Eden (Gen 3.24).

There is much wild and fantastic speculation about angels that has been fueled by Jewish Midrashic myths, renaissance art, new-age infatuation with the spirit realm, and a misunderstanding of Scripture. From the limited information presented in the Bible, we can determine that angels:

- Are created, living beings (Lk 24.39 with Mt 8.16; Eph 6.12; Heb 1.7, 13-14), outside of our spatial-temporal universe. Because we cannot observe them with our senses, does not mean that they do not exist.
- May appear in different physical forms (e.g., with a lion-like body or a body that appears to be human).
- Are a separate order of creation and not elevated, glorified humans—human beings do not become angels at death.
- Were probably created on the first day of creation and observed the rest of God’s creative work.
- Were all created at one time; angels are not sexual beings and do not reproduce like humans (Mt 22.30).
- Are intelligent, rational, and moral creatures; but were not created in the image of God, as was mankind.
- Were able to sin. Some, led by Satan, rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven (9.11; 12.9). However, those who did not sin with Satan are preserved forever as holy.
- Do not have native miraculous powers and cannot foretell the future.
- Are not to be worshiped by men (19.10; 22.8-9).

In Revelation we find over sixty references to holy angels, considerably more (about three times more) references to angels than in any other book of the Bible. We come full circle from the closed gates at the entrance to the original paradise, to the open gates of the new, permanent paradise through the visions given to John. We will see heaven filled with a vast number of angels (5.11), who are assigned various roles, including:

- Delivering revelations in the form of visions to John in this book (1.1; 10.9; 19.9; 22.1) and providing explanations about what he had seen (17.1, 7, 15). The term ‘angel’ is derived from the Greek word for messenger.
- Making announcements in heaven (5.2; 7.2).
- Making announcements on earth about things which are to happen soon (14.8-10; 19.17; 22.6, 16).
- Announcing judgement on the wicked (5.11; 8.2, 6).
- Administering judgement, as proximate agents of God’s providential actions in worldly affairs (8.5, 7, 8, 10, 12; 9.1, 13, 14, 15; 20.1).
- Holding back winds of judgement, until they are to be unleashed (7.1).
- Sealing the servants of God (Rev 7.1-3).
- Worshiping God with praise in a corporate assembly in his throne room in heaven (7.11; 16.5).
- Serving in a priest-like capacity in the heavenly sanctuary by offering incense with the prayers of the saints (8.3-4).
- Waging war in the spiritual realm (i.e., outside of our current universe) against Satan and his demons (11.15).

Angels have other assigned roles documented in Scripture, that are not explicitly identified in Revelation, such as, comforting believers; ministering to the physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of believers and Jesus (e.g., after his temptation in the desert and in Gethsemane); protecting God’s people from harm, in particular children; making important announcements (e.g., to the shepherds in the fields); carrying messages and commands from God to specific people (e.g., to Daniel, Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary); and escorting believers in Christ who have died into the presence of God.

Many theologians assert that angels are a higher order of creation than mankind; based on a particular reading of Psalm 8.5. However, alternate translations for that verse can be considered, when compared with Hebrews 2.7 which reads “You made him for a *little while* lower than the angels”. Angels do have gifts or powers which men, at least in this spatial-temporal realm, do not have. However, mankind was created as the pinnacle of creation; mankind was created in the image of God, angels were not; angels are sent by God to be ministering spirits to men, men do not serve angels; Jesus did not take on angelic form, but became a man; Jesus loved

mankind enough to die for them, he did not die to give eternal life to fallen angels; and men, in Christ, will judge angels (1 Cor 6.3). Therefore, it seems to be inappropriate to say that angels are a *higher* order of being than man. At best, we can say that mankind and angels are *different* orders of intelligent, rational *creatures*.

Although angels are present in most of John's visions, he shows no interest in their orders, names, or duties. Of more importance for him is their service for Christ and support for the saints. Following John's example, we are not to make angelology into a major area for our consideration or study. We should focus instead on ensuring that we have a relationship with God, in Christ.

### **God Communicates to His Servants**

(Rev 1.1, 4)

An author, writing a manual for deploying robots in an automotive assembly plant, does not write it so that he can read it privately in his study. Rather, he hopes that it will be read by technicians in his target audience, and that his instructions will be used to guide the set up of an efficient production facility. Likewise, the authors of Revelation (the Father, Jesus, and John) intended the book to be read and applied (1.3) by their target audience, "his servants". Our word 'servants' does not have the strength of the Greek word, which is used by John, and means 'slaves' or at least 'bond-servants'—those who are owned by another person and must obey their master's commands. We tend to avoid using the word 'slave' because of our culture's aversion to slavery due to the wicked form by which it was known in the US, from 1619-1865. The word 'servant', in our cultural context, has a voluntary sense to it. But John is not writing to those who have voluntarily decided for Christ and chosen to work for him, but to those whom Christ has purchased with his precious blood (5.9). Thus, the servants John is addressing belong to Jesus because he is the one who paid the price for their ownership.

The servants to whom this communication is directed are not explicitly identified in the opening verses. However, they are identified elsewhere as:

- *The 'angels' of the churches in Asia Minor* (2.1, etc.). The specific recipients were the messengers ('angels') or pastors of the specific churches who had responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel and applying the visions given through the angel to their congregations.
- *The churches in Asia minor* (1.3-4, 11). The book of Revelation has the form of an epistle or letter (1.4-8; 22.21) from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, directed to a specific, intended audience. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not consider that it is designed to inform this primary audience will be at risk of misunderstanding the meaning and purpose of the book.
- *The NT Church* (1.3, 2 Tim 3.16-17). While Revelation has a specific application within the historical context of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire, this does not exhaust the purpose and application of the book, any more than the prophecies given to Isaiah for Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations exhausts the purpose and application of the book of Isaiah.
- *Congregations*. The message of revelation was to be read aloud in the seven churches, and in all churches. It is an open book that is to be read and understood by all the members of all congregations, not just by the intellectual or initiated elite who hold the revelation of the mysteries as if they provide a secret code for future prognostication.

Thus, Revelation is a communication directed to all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and who acknowledge his lordship over their lives (7.3; 22.3).

For there to be any form of communication, there must be specified content. John tells us that the content that God communicates to his servants, through the visions he received and recorded in this book, has two purposes:

- *Prophecy*. Revelation was given to "show to his servants the things that must soon take place" (1.1; 22.6).
- *Practice*. Revelation was given to inform his servants of what they must do, "to keep what is written in it" (1.3).

The book prophesies events, many of which were in the near future of its first recipients. It gave them insight to what challenges, such as false teaching (2.20),

temptations (2.14), and persecution (2.10), the fledgling NT Church would face from a pagan empire and how they were to face those challenges. God considered that placing those trials before the Church was necessary for its spiritual growth, as indicated by the phrase, “things which *must* soon take place” (1.1). If events must take place, then they are in accord with God’s decretive will, and will be fulfilled by his providential governance of the entire created order. This should encourage us. Even though God decrees events which will challenge his Church, yet he also decrees the demise of all pagan systems which hate his Son and his Church. God uses the trials he sends to build faith in his servants and bring glory to his magnificent name, as he confounds Satan and his hordes and destroys worldly kingdoms.

The book also addresses aspects of God’s prescriptive will—that is, what he requires his servants to do as they obey his revealed commands, published in his word—the Bible. In Revelation, there are explicit statements requiring obedience (2.5; 3.2), and ones which imply a precept that must be obeyed (3.4, 10). As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are required to obey our master out of love (Jn 14.15).

In human palaces and households, servants (slaves) were often treated as if they were part of the background furnishings, as the court or household went about its business. Servants could not expect to receive any communication from their masters, other than direct commands. They could not ask for a reason or explanation for why they were being asked to do something. In contrast, God not only tells his servants what he expects them to do but often gives them an explanation for why he is unfolding his commands and providences as he does. He is pleased to reveal matters to his servants because they are not only servants but sons (Rom 9.26; Gal 3.26). He treats them as if they were equals and reasons with them (Is 1.18). This is an extraordinary truth—God often shows his servants what he plans to do and why he is doing it.

### **Revelation Records the Fulfilment of Daniel’s Visions**

(Rev 1.1-3)

Sir Isaac Newton, in his *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John*, observed that, “The *Apocalypse of John* is written in the same style and language with the Prophecies of *Daniel*, and hath the same relation to them which they have to one another, so that all of them together make but one complete prophecy. ... The prophecy is distinguished into seven successive parts, by the opening of the seven seals of the book which *Daniel* was commanded to seal up: and hence it is called the *Apocalypse* or *Revelation* of Jesus Christ.” His observation provides a key to understanding the book of Revelation.

Daniel was given visions that prophesied of events leading to the arrival of the Messiah and of the destruction of Jerusalem, in 70 AD. The visions in Daniel 2, 7, and 8 provide a framework for interpreting the detail in the remainder of the book of Daniel:

Chapter	Babylon (605–538 BC)	Medo-Persia (538–331 BC)	Greece (331–146 BC)	Rome (146 BC–476 AD)
2.31–45 Dream image	Head of gold (2.32, 37–38)	Breast, arms of silver (2.32, 39)	Belly, thighs of brass (2.32, 39)	Legs of iron Feet iron/clay (2.3, 40–41)
7 Four Beasts	Lion (7.4)	Bear (7.5)	Leopard (7.6)	Strong Beast (7.7, 11, 19, 23)
8 Ram and goat		Ram (8.3–4, 20)	Goat with one horn (8.5–22)	

The vision in Daniel 2 ends with the destruction of the statue that represents the four successive pagan kingdoms. Their destruction is achieved by the introduction of the kingdom established by the God of heaven, which will never be destroyed (Dan 2.34-35, 44)—the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Daniel 9.24-27 covers a 490-year period. It begins with the decree of Cyrus (or Artaxerxes I) to rebuild Jerusalem and includes the once-for-all-time atonement for

sin in the crucifixion of Jesus (Dan 9.24-26). The prophecy in this section of Daniel concludes *after* the 490-year period, with the arrival of Rome's armies led by the general Titus, and the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus confirms that the abomination of desolation (Dan 9.27) is the Roman armies. We see this when we compare three of the gospel accounts (Mt 24.15; Mk 13.14; Lk 21.20). In Luke 21.20, Jesus identifies the 'abomination of desolation' as armies surrounding Jerusalem.

Chapters 11-12 of Daniel cover essentially the same period as the other prophecies in Daniel, but with considerably more detail. The prophecy begins with the Persian kings that followed Cyrus (11.2-4), progresses through the Greek and Seleucid periods, and covers the time of Herod the Great and the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem (11.36-45). The events in this prophecy end with the "time of trouble" and persecution (Dan 12.1, 10-11) that was to occur at the time when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by Rome's armies, and the sacrificial system was abolished (Dan 12.11).

Daniel is instructed to seal up the prophecies given to him (Dan 8.26; Dan 9.24; Dan 12.4, 9), because they refer a time many days (centuries) from when he wrote them down, around 550 BC. When we turn to Revelation, we discover that John is instructed *not* to seal up the revelation he received in his visions and documented in the book (22.10). The things that John saw in his visions were soon to take place (1.1). Thus, John indicates that the fulfilment of most of the visions of Daniel were being fulfilled during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

John uses allusions to Daniel throughout Revelation. For example, the phrase, "to show ... the things that must soon take place" (1.1) is a substitution for the phrase "made known ... what will be in the latter days" (Dan 2.28). Also, the Greek word for 'reveal', related to the Greek word 'revelation' (*apocalypse*), is used three times in Daniel (Dan 2.22, 28, 29) in the Greek translation of the OT, used at the time of John. Likewise, the reference to the 'son of man' (1.13; 14.14) connects Revelation with Daniel (Dan 7.13).

Former Jews in Asia Minor, believing in Jesus as the Messiah, who were recipients of this book, would have understood John to be informing them that the prophecies of Daniel were being fulfilled. They would have taken note of the particular "time of trouble" Daniel prophesied and associated it with the crises of persecution that John speaks of in Revelation. Thus, the visions which John saw deal primarily with the fulfilment of the prophecies in Daniel which remained to be completed as the kingdom of Jesus Christ was inaugurated and encountered the fourth kingdom of the image in Daniel 2—the Roman empire—and faced the tyranny of Titus and Nero.

However, not all the visions given to John in Revelation deal with the inauguration of Christ's kingdom and the period leading up to the conclusion of the Jewish ceremonial system with the destruction of the temple. Clearly some of the visions deal with Christ's second coming, the consummation of this age, and the advent of the new heaven and earth (referenced in chapters 20-22). These prophecies in Revelation are an expansion of Daniel's brief references to the end of time, in chapter 12.2, 13.

### **The Time Is Near** (Rev 1.1, 3; Rev 22.10)

There is a marked contrast between Daniel 8.26 and 10.14, and Revelation 1.1, 3 and 22.10. Daniel, prophesying of events leading to the arrival of the Messianic age and the end of the Jewish ceremonial system, speaks of "many days from now" and "in the latter days ... days yet to come". In contrast, Revelation speaks of events which "must soon take place" for "the time is near". Since the Messianic age had been initiated with the incarnation of Jesus and his death and resurrection, the only primary events prophesied by Daniel that remained to be fulfilled were those related to the end of the Jewish ceremonial system.

Daniel makes brief references that apparently speak about the end of time (Dan 12.2, 13). However, his prophecies deal mainly with the inauguration of Messiah's kingdom and the period following the resurrection leading to the conclusion of the Jewish ceremonial system, with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Revelation expands significantly on the inauguration of Messiah's kingdom, which was to break into pieces the pagan empires (Dan 2.34-35), but was also to be

marked by persecution, as the pagan system fights against its demise. Revelation then provides (in chapters 20-22) additional information about the end of time and of Christ's second coming, the consummation of this age, and the advent of the new heavens and earth.

The bulk of Revelation deals with events that were to be fulfilled in the near-term, during the lifetime of the recipients of this book. The word 'soon' is not to be understood merely to mean that the actions will be sudden when they do occur, but that the events are to occur imminently. John writes to the seven churches (1.4, 11), as representatives of Christ's kingdom, to inform them of "things that must soon take place" and to encourage them to face with courage the challenges they would encounter.

The events prophesied in Daniel were to occur mostly within 500 years from the time he wrote the book. These are the "many days from now" and the "latter days". Thus, when Revelation says that the events "must soon take place" and that "the time is near", it must be speaking of events which will occur much sooner than within 500 years of when the book was written. Therefore, it makes no sense to interpret much of Revelation as applying to the distant future, relative to the time of the recipients of the book. This means that the book of Revelation does not provide a timetable for events which occurred from John's day until our own day. While Revelation does speak of pagan religion (the false prophet) in general terms and the rise and fall of all forms of anti-Christ religion, it does not provide explicit prophecies about the growth of the papacy and the alignment of the church hierarchy with the political administrations of the kingdoms of Europe after the time of Constantine.

Likewise, Revelation certainly does not provide a timetable for events which are to occur in our future, until the second coming of Jesus. It does *not* give an outline of history, with datable events such as the following, which is often proposed by many today:

- The end of the church age (1-3) on May 14, 1948, with the creation of the modern nation of Israel.
- A pre-rapture tribulation. We can supposedly find signs pointing to when the rapture will occur, in the political events happening now, such as global government (e.g., the European Union and the United Nations), ozone depletion and devastating storms, the New Age movement, etc.
- A pending rapture of the saints, that could occur any day from now.
- A seven-year period of persecution called the 'great tribulation' (4-18), which will follow a rapture and conclude with the battle of Armageddon (19) centred in the Middle East.
- The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the reinstatement of the priesthood and sacrificial system with a red heifer.
- The start of a future reign of Christ on earth, from Jerusalem (20).
- The return of Jesus and the establishment of the eternal new heaven and earth (21-22).

Revelation is also not to be understood as providing purely trans-temporal symbols, relating to the 'Church age' and the general ebb and flow of history, with ongoing conflicts between God and Satan and between good and evil, until the final appearance of Jesus. Most of the visions given to John were to be interpreted by the early NT Church as warnings of events which would occur as Rome began to suppress Christianity and Titus and the Roman armies besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple (11.1-2).

Some of the events prophesied in Revelation can be associated with historical events in the ancient past—i.e., related to Titus, Nero and the destruction of Jerusalem. However, Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are to apply the prophecies related to the events in the last decades of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, in the same way as we would apply Isaiah's prophecies (Is 13-23) about the nations around Israel. God controls all events, in all nations, throughout history. History is under the sovereignty of the Lamb, since he was appointed heir of all things through his death and resurrection (Phil 2.8-11). He will guide events until they conclude with the final judgement and the definitive realization of his kingdom.

### **The Primary Fulfilment Generation**

We have noted that Revelation relates primarily to the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecies about the inauguration of the Messiah's kingdom and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. We have also noted that Revelation was addressed to the Covenant people living at the time it was written, to encourage them to face persecution, as the pagan system fought against its demise. Thus, we conclude that Revelation was written before 70 AD—likely before 65 AD—at the peak of Nero's reign.

Most scholars claim otherwise, and state that Revelation was written in 95 or 96 AD, before the end of Domitian's reign. They establish the 'late' date based on a statement of Irenaeus (130-202 AD), "We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign." (*Against Heresies*; book 5, section 30, paragraph 3).

Having taken Irenaeus statement as gospel-truth, they provide circumstantial evidence to support their position. The 'evidence' they provide includes the considerations such as the following:

- Emperor worship appears to be well established in Revelation—which, it is claimed, fits best with a late date. However, historians conclude that the Imperial cult developed gradually and began under Augustus, who was emperor at the time Christ was born. A temple was built in at Pergamum to honour Augustus, referred to as a 'Satan's seat' (2.13). By the time of Nero, emperor worship was already well-established.
- Persecution of Christians occurred under Domitian. However, Nero (54-68 AD) persecuted Christians; and Claudius (41-54 AD) probably did also, considering Christianity a sect of Judaism (Acts 18.2).
- The seven congregations in Asia had challenges (e.g., spiritual lethargy or pride over material wealth) which, it is claimed, would have taken time to develop; thus, this points to a late date for the book. Clearly people who make this claim have not read 1 Corinthians. Paul had been gone from them for five years, and the Corinthian church had a pack of problems.
- It is claimed that Revelation refers to a myth that Nero came back to life (13.3-4; 17.8, 11). Thus, they say, that if Nero had not died before John wrote, then he could not have incorporated the myth. However, if these verses refer to Nero, John's visions give prophesies of events shortly to happen, not history!

Evidence in favour of the early date for Revelation—that is, during the reign of Nero, includes the following:

- The [\*Muratorian Canon fragment\*](#) (c 170-190 AD), displayed in the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana in Milan, lists canonical books of the NT and states that John wrote to the seven churches in Revelation before Paul wrote to them, placing Revelation during the reign of Nero.
- The Syriac version of Revelation, translated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c AD states that John was exiled under Nero and Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403 AD) says that John was exiled under Claudius—this could be a reference to the emperor who preceded Nero or to Nero himself, since Nero was also called Nero *Claudius* Caesar, as reported by Suetonius (c 69-122 AD).
- Revelation (Rev 17.9-10) refers to seven kings ruling in Rome ("the city on seven hills"). Five of these kings have died and the sixth is reigning at the time of the vision. According to Suetonius (*The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*), Nero was the sixth Caesar. The vision says that the seventh king was to "remain only a little while". Galba, who followed Nero, reigned for less than a year.
- Revelation mentions that Jerusalem and the temple, which were to be trampled by the nations (11.1-2). This occurred in 70 AD when the Roman armies under Titus besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. Thus, Revelation was written before 70 AD.
- Rome is referred to as Babylon (17-18). Peter who wrote before 70 AD uses the same epithet (1 Pt 5.13). Christians knew as early as 33 AD that Rome was going to destroy Jerusalem, within the lifetime of those who heard Jesus' warning (Mt 24.15-28; Mk 13.14-23; Lk 21.20-24).

The claim that Irenaeus' statement outweighs other statements and evidence must be revisited. Irenaeus could have been mistaken—no contemporaries of Irenaeus

support the late date for John's having written Revelation. Thus, it could be that his statement has been misunderstood. The Greek ('that was seen') could refer to the John's visions or to John himself. Thus, Irenaeus may not be referring to the visions having been seen towards the end of Domitian's reign, but to *John* "who was seen ... almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign." Clement (c 150-215) quoted in Eusebius' *Church History*, indicates that John left Patmos "after the tyrant was dead" and conducted extensive ministry for many years. This supports a reference to Nero, since John would have been very old when Domitian died.

Thus, we conclude that the fulfilment of the temporal events prophesied in Revelation occurred around 70 AD. This conclusion is important for how we will interpret and apply the temporal prophesies in the rest of the book. They applied *primarily* to the generation living at the time John wrote Revelation.

### **Blessings from Reading, Hearing and Obeying**

(Rev 1.3)

North American Christians have little understanding of what constitutes true happiness. We have been fooled by pervasive commercialism and incessant declarations that we deserve to be pampered with material comforts. We believe that we could be happy if we only had sufficient money to purchase fashionable apparel, replace our car every few years, eat out twice a week, fund annual adventures in exotic destinations, and indulge in regular entertainment. The suggestion that true happiness could be obtained from reading the Bible or from obeying its precepts is beyond our society's comprehension. Yet John, in this first of seven beatitudes (see also, 14.13; 16.15; 19.9; 20.6; 22.7, 14), tells us that the person who reads the book of Revelation (and by extension, the Bible) in a public worship assembly, and the hearers of the word being read, are blessed. He also indicates that those who keep (obey) what is written in this book are blessed. John uses the word 'blessed' to mean, objectively, those being favoured by God (compare, Lk 1.45; 1 Pt 4.14); and subjectively, those experiencing a sense of happiness and deep joy (compare, 1 Cor 7.40).

John says that "the one who reads aloud this prophecy" and, in general, the Bible, is blessed. He is probably not speaking about a person reading the text aloud to himself, although that was a common practice at the time he wrote. Rather, he is speaking of the word being read aloud by the pastor ('angel'; e.g., 2.1) or one of the elders during a church worship service. One reason why the word was to be read aloud is because a portion of the congregation would have been illiterate. However, another reason is that much of the Bible is designed to be read with the mouth (rather than just with the eyes) and to be heard with the ears. A person who reads the Bible aloud in public worship is blessed because he has to prepare to read it and gains a better understanding of what is written. When John wrote Revelation, written manuscripts did not include word divisions or punctuation (they contained only a continuous string of letters) as you see in the text you are now reading. A person who was asked to read aloud, called a lector, would have had to practice diligently beforehand, working through the text multiple times to ensure that he knew where to divide words and where to breath and pause for emphasis. By doing this, he would have become intimately familiar with the information being communicated. In addition, it was considered an honour to read the word of God publicly, since the reader was declaring the words of God—not providing his own interpretation of that word. John knew that he was writing Scripture, the words of Jesus, and that the content of the letter was to be considered authoritative. Thus, he acknowledges the blessing associated with the privilege of reading it. The Church today needs to cultivate a greater sense of awe and reverence for the public reading of the word of God. When we do, we will be blessed.

Children enjoy having stories read to them, even after they have learned how to read. They particularly enjoy a story when the reader provides appropriate emphases—such as whispers or a loud voice and incorporating emotion and sounds. Similarly, we are moved when a passage of the Bible is read aloud by a skilled reader. This experience is rarer today than it was in the past, because churches rarely acknowledge the importance of public reading of the Bible, let alone of high-quality reading. Christian congregations hearing Revelation read in John's day, would have had their imaginations exercised as they heard voices of thunder and saw in their minds the images described in the text. We find exercising our imaginations in this way difficult because we are used to the special effects in movies and TV shows that create virtual worlds. We also find listening to someone read for more than a few minutes a challenge, because we are conditioned to expect transitions, cuts, and different camera angles every few seconds. As evidence, consider a video of a speaker. If the camera never moves from his face, the talking head becomes distracting, even if the speaker has excellent content and delivery. We expect to see regular pans, zooms, and cuts to maintain our engagement. We need to discipline

ourselves to hear and understand Revelation so that we can keep (obey) it, rather than setting it aside as a “riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”. One way to do this is to train our minds to hear what is being communicated as the Bible is being read aloud.

The primary blessings resulting from hearing Revelation (and the rest of the Bible) read in public, or from reading it privately, are that we learn what we must believe about God, hear the message of salvation, see how God is controlling the unfolding events of history, and determine what God requires of us if we wish to obey him. The book of Revelation was not given to the Church as a complex puzzle to test our intellects as we attempt to solve it, but to inform us how God wants us to live as we face the challenges presented by the Christ-hating world and as we watch God unfold his plan of redemption. The book is designed to encourage us to persevere in obedient service (1.3. 22.7). Jesus says, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” (Jn 13.17) The blessings that Christians may experience from obedience include: growing faith and assurance of salvation (Rom 8.28-30); confidence that regardless of what God providentially sends our way, he is our loving Father (James 1.2-3); power to resist evil (Eph 6.10-18); strength to face persecution at the hands of Christ’s and our enemies (2 Cor 4.7-11); and gracious temporal provisions (Mt 6.32-33). The converse is also true. Anyone who does not hear the message of Revelation (and the entire Bible) and does not keep what is written in it, will be cursed.

### **Reading the Word of God Aloud in the Church Assembly**

(Rev 1.3)

We once attended a service at a historic Presbyterian church in Savannah Georgia. During the service, there was no reading of the Bible, other than the short text associated with the sermon. There was considerable time allocated for singing during the service, and some for prayer; and there was also a 20-minute sermon. This is markedly different from our tradition. *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, contains a chapter related to the public reading of the Bible, in which the authors state that “all canonical books of the Old and New Testament ... shall be publicly read in the vulgar [common vernacular] tongue, out of the best allowed translation, distinctly, that all may hear and understand.” They recommend that all the Bible be read systematically week-by-week, with reading of a chapter out of the OT and NT at each public worship service. This kind of systematic reading of the Bible appears to be out of fashion within the Evangelical church today. Scripture, creed, tradition and practice all indicate that the Bible is intended to be read aloud.

The text of the Bible, in its original languages, often shows that it was intended to be read aloud. There are many wordplays which are based on the similarity of the sound of two Hebrew or Greek words or phrases. Also, its use of puns, alliteration, and aphorisms indicates that the text was directed to the ears of the recipients more than to the eyes of the reader. In addition, much of the text of the Bible has a cadence intended for oral reading rather than for silent reading. The revelation in the Bible was delivered in the context of societies in which there was no printing press or Internet for the mass dissemination of a text, the ability to read was largely confined to an elite class of scribes, and speeches and storytelling were the primary forms of communication and entertainment.

The practice of the scribes in the ancient world was to read aloud. This practice continued during the Middle Ages among the monks in the monasteries where the Bible was cherished, and copies produced. Augustine in his *Confessions* indicates his surprise when he saw Ambrose reading silently: “When he read, his eyes moved down the pages and his heart sought out their meaning, while his voice and tongue remained silent.” The rule of Saint Benedict said: “after the sixth hour, having left the table let them rest on their beds in perfect silence; or if anyone wishes to read by himself, let him read so as not to disturb the others.” Benedict instituted this rule because people did not read with only their eyes.

When punctuation marks were included in manuscripts during the late Middle Ages, after the time of Charlemagne, their purpose was to indicate to the reader where to put emphasis, as the text was read aloud to an illiterate audience. These marks were intended for the ear and not for the eye. For example, the ‘?’ and the ‘!’ were both originally intended for the oral reader of a text to indicate points of emphasis which would help the listening audience to follow the reading and understand its meaning. Punctuation for silent reading began to be incorporated after the invention of the printing press, and it became focused on showing the syntax of a sentence rather than for providing cues for oral reading. We have lost sight of the origins of reading and do not realize that silent reading is a relatively modern phenomenon, covering a period of

less than a quarter of the time since Christ's first coming.

John tells us that the Revelation was to be read aloud in the seven congregations to which it was directed. This is not surprising since Jewish practice included public reading of the text of the OT from the earliest days of God's covenant people. For example, Moses read the Book of the Covenant (Ex 24.7)—possibly the Ten Commandments or material that later became incorporated into Deuteronomy (Dt 4.13; Dan 31.11)—in the hearing of the people, and the people responded by saying that they would obey all that the LORD had spoken. Joshua followed the example of Moses (Josh 8.34), and Jeremiah directed Baruch to read the prophecies he had dictated before all the people (Jer 36.6). Nehemiah, laying the foundation for the synagogue form of worship—that is, worship with spiritual equivalents for the bloody sacrifices and symbols in the temple—had Ezra and the Levites read from the Book of the Law from early morning until midday (Neh 8.2-3, 8). Likewise, Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah before the congregation in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth (Lk 4.16-19). Oral reading from the OT was observed every Sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 13.14-15, 27; Acts 15.21). The NT writers continued the Synagogue practice in the churches (Col 4.16; 1 Thess 5.27), and Paul exhorts Timothy to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4.13).

Paul declares that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10.17). When the Bible is read, it is the word of the living Christ that is being read. The modern Evangelical church puts too much emphasis on its ‘ministry of music’ and not enough emphasis on the public reading of the Bible. If we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles, then we will recommit ourselves to the public reading of the Bible.

Reading the word of God aloud in the church assembly, and any other forum which is made available to us (e.g., on podcasts and in YouTube) is even more crucial today. Many of today's young people have grown up with earbuds sprouting out of their heads. They do not have the discipline to read anything with more text than a graphic novel. We need to make the word of God available to them in its oral form. The word of God was written down to preserve its important message from corruption. But it is intended to be read aloud!

### **The Alpha and the Omega**

(Rev 1.4, 8, 17; Rev 2.8; Rev 21.6; Rev 22.13)

John uses more than thirty different titles to refer to God, God the Father, and Jesus throughout the book of Revelation. These titles refer to God the Father's and to Jesus' attributes (e.g., ‘almighty’, 1.5; ‘faithful and true’, 19.11), their offices (e.g., ‘King of kings’, 17.14), and their roles (e.g., ‘he who searches mind and heart’, 2.23). Some of the titles are metaphors (e.g., ‘Lamb’; 5.5-9) and some use a figure of speech called a merism, in which opposites are stated, and it is assumed to include everything between the opposites. The titles, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, the ‘beginning and the end’ (21.6, 22.13), and ‘the first and the last’ (1.17, 2.8; 22.13) are all merisms. The latter two, of these three titles, help to define the first—all three are used in 22.13. The title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ uses the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to encompass all that is included. It is equivalent to our using the expression, ‘from A to Z’.

John uses the title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ first to refer to the eternal nature of God. He defines ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ by using the adjacent expression, “who is and who was and who is to come” (1.4, 8). Thus, God transcends time, existed before anything else came into existence, and will continue to exist after this universe is brought to its conclusion.

Another aspect of God's eternity implied by the title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, is his immutability, or unchanging nature and character (Ps 102.27; Mal 3.6; James 1.17). The writer of Hebrews refers to this immutability using a similar expression to ‘who is and who was and who is to come’, with the words, “the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Heb 13.8).

John also uses the title, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, to refer to God as the Creator of this current universe and the one who will consummate it in a fiery conflagration

(2 Pt 3.10-13). That John is thinking of God as the Creator is evident by his use of ‘the first and the last’ and ‘the beginning and the end’, and by his explicit references to God as Creator (4.11; 10.6). Thus, God is the master of history from beginning (Gen 1.1) to end (1 Cor 15.24), and of all that falls in between.

Finally, John defines the title, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, by the addition of the word ‘almighty’ (1.8). The Alpha and the Omega is the sovereign God who actively rules all of creation. He is not a god of the deists who plants the ‘seed’ of the universe and lets it unfold as nature’s laws and human whims dispose. The Greek word (*pantokrator*) John uses for ‘almighty’ is used (nine times) only in this book in the NT—except for a quotation by Paul from the Greek translation of the OT (2 Cor 6.18). In the Greek translation of the OT, the term ‘*pantokrator*’ is used more than 100 times, to translate different terms. Its English equivalent appears as ‘almighty’ (Job 5.17); ‘hosts’ in the ESV, as in ‘LORD/God of hosts’, and ‘LORD/God almighty’ in the NIV (2 Sam 5.10); and ‘power’ or ‘strength’ (1 Chron 29.12). The concepts contained in the OT’s use of ‘*pantokrator*’ are: supreme and universal rule, and infinite power or strength. John emphasizes God’s sovereignty over all of creation (life, space-time, and energy-matter) to reassure his readers, despite how it may appear in the midst of their trials, that God is the God of history from beginning to end. Nothing unfolds in history without God’s explicit direction. Thus, in the conflict between the forces of evil and the Church, John’s readers can rest in the certain knowledge that God knows their needs as they face persecution and that God is working out the course of history to bring victory for his Son and for his Church.

To this point, we have applied ‘the alpha and the omega’ generically to God. However, when we consider the three occurrences of this title for God (1.8; 21.6; 22.13) we find that their context indicates that two of the instances appear to apply to God the Father (1.4, 8; 21.6) and one to Jesus (1.17; 2.8; 22.13). To attribute ‘the alpha and the omega’ generically to God or only to God the Father reduces the importance of the title from John’s perspective. He reminds his readers that Jesus, to whom this letter is attributed (1.1), is God, equal in power and glory to the Father; or as the Athanasian Creed states it, “equal to the Father as touching his Godhead”. This is the same message that he communicates in the prologue to his gospel (Jn 1.1-18). With each of the occurrences of the title, we also find the opening words ‘I am’. This is an allusion to the covenant name for God (Jehovah, the LORD) used in the OT (Ex 3.14). That John is consciously connecting the title ‘the alpha and the omega’ with the name ‘LORD’ can be seen by comparing his use of ‘Lord God’ (1.8) with OT passages where Isaiah refers to God by his covenant name and associates the name with the expression ‘the first and the last’ (Is 41.4, 44.6, 48.12). Thus, John not only identifies Jesus as God, but as the Jehovah of the OT. Let be accursed (Gal 1.8-9) anyone who claims that Jesus is not, in his divine nature, the eternal, infinite, and omnipotent God; and, in his human nature, the promised Messiah.

Jesus declared that all authority was given into his hands (Mt 28.18). Paul, likewise, asserts the same thing (Phil 2.9-11). Thus, we can be assured, that Jesus, *the* Alpha and the Omega, reigns. Regardless of how it may seem today as we face the beast of secular government and the false prophet of religions like Islam, Jesus, who is God Almighty, reigns!

### **Jesus Christ, the Victor**

(Rev 1.5-6)

In these verses, John alludes to Psalm 89, where the future descendant of David is declared to be a faithful witness (37) and the designated firstborn (27), who has an eternal kingdom (29, 36-37), in which he rules over the kings of the earth (27). John tells us that Jesus is the:

- *Faithful Witness*. Jesus faced severe trials by temptation—at the beginning and end of his public ministry—and persecution from Jewish and Roman rulers, but he never wavered from his stand for truth. The ‘ruler of this world’ offered Jesus earthly kingdoms if he would worship him (Mt 4.1-10). But, Jesus rebuffed Satan with the true word of God, by quoting from Scripture. He declared that he had come into the world “to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18.37), and Pilate challenged him with the snide sneer, “What is truth?” Jesus, who was always ready to present truth to any sincere inquirer, did not deign to answer Pilate, because he knew that Pilate did not wish to hear the truth. Jesus refused to cast the pearl of truth under the feet of a Roman ‘pig’ (Mt 7.6). Jesus was the faithful witness to God’s truth (about God, sin, and salvation) in his trials, even to death. John encourages the churches in Asia to be like Jesus by being faithful in their

witness as they faced their trials (2.13).

- *Firstborn of the Dead.* Psalm 89 refers to David's descendant as the firstborn. Jesus was the firstborn of Mary and Joseph, both descendants of David, and held the honoured position of firstborn (Ps 2.7; Heb 1.5-6) and heir to David's throne. John extends the concept 'firstborn' by adding the words 'of the dead'. Jesus was not the first one raised from the dead. There had been reanimations of recently dead corpses (1 Ki 17.22-23; 2 Ki 4.32-35; 2 Ki 13.21; Mt 9.25; Lk 7.14-15; Lk 8.54-55; Jn 11.43-44). However, in these instances, they would die again. Thus, these resurrections hinted at a more permanent resurrection, which a few have already experienced (Mt 27.53). Through his resurrection, he conquered death and was declared to be the firstborn (firstfruits) from the dead (Rom 8.29; 1 Cor 15.20, 23; Col 1.18).
- *Redeemer from Sin.* In order for Jesus to rise from dead, he first had to die. John uses the word 'blood' as a metonymy to refer to the crucifixion of Jesus. Through the crucifixion, Jesus offered himself as a perfect sacrifice, which God the Father accepted as payment for the sins of the elect, thus freeing his people from the penalty and power of sin. There was no other possible way for God to provide forgiveness for sin and satisfy divine justice, than through the crucifixion (Heb 9.22), or God would not have subjected his Son, Jesus, to death.
- *Ruler of the Kings on Earth.* Through his obedience, death and resurrection, Jesus, in his mediatorial office as the Messiah, was awarded the highest possible honours (Phil 2.6-11)—death gave way to life, poverty gave way to riches, and humiliation gave way to exaltation. Jesus, as the God-man, is now the 'the ruler of the kings of the earth'. His kingdom is:
  - *Sovereign.* Jesus Christ has been granted all authority in heaven and earth (Mt 28.18) by the Father. He is the ultimate sovereign over all the kings of the earth. He is later said to bear the name, "The King of kings" (19.16). Thus, his will is absolute, providential decrees unassailable, commands indisputable, and rule irrevocable.
  - *Glorious.* The kingdom of Jesus Christ is glorious in its brightness (21.23; Jn 8.12), providing spiritual illumination to all who belong to it; holiness, open only to those who have been purified by the blood of the Lamb (7.14; 21.27; 22.14-15); and majesty, beyond anything we could describe from this world or imagine in the next (21.9-26).
  - *Universal.* Jesus Christ is not just the Christian king, reigning over only the redeemed. He is the universal king, reigning over every power, authority, and ruler, in heaven, on the earth, and in hell. His reign includes those on the earth who are antagonistic to his reign (6.15; 17.2; 18.3, 9; 19.19), and the demonic forces behind the rulers of this earth (16.14). Regardless of what men may think, their written constitutions do not stand above the law of Jesus and their parliaments and senates do not supersede the government of Jesus. The Ten Commandments are the summary of God's law, not the Sharia or Talmud.
  - *Conquering.* Jesus Christ is fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 2.44, which indicates that the kingdom of the Messiah will break in pieces all human kingdoms and bring them to an end. We are often unable to see how this is happening now. However, the Kingdom of Jesus continues to expand as people from every nation stream into the Church. Also, the hand of Jesus is present when nations and their rulers turn away from pursuing wickedness. At the end of time, we will see what Jesus has done and be filled with wonder and awe.

*Everlasting Ruler.* In Revelation, John quotes from, or alludes to, the book of Daniel at least 40 times. When Daniel gave the interpretation of the vision that Nebuchadnezzar saw (Dan 2), he said that the kingdom of the Messiah will never be destroyed, and the reign of the Messiah will stand forever (Dan 2.44). The Greek translation of the OT has 'into the ages', where the English translations have 'forever'. John uses the same expression, 'into the ages' (translated, 'forever'), and then adds 'of the ages' (translated 'and ever'). The reign of the God-man, which began at his resurrection will continue forever and ever. Therefore, John finds it necessary to interject the declaration 'amen' at this point, and thereby assert that Jesus Christ is the ultimate victor.

## Seven Churches, Seven Spirits

(Rev 1.4, 11)

John directs this letter to seven identified (1.11) churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Greek word used for 'church' (*ekklesia*, from which we get the word, ecclesiology) was used in NT times for assemblies gathered for political or religious purposes. It was the word used to translate the OT Hebrew word for the assembly of God's people (Dt 23.2; Neh 13.1; Mic 2.5), and means, in Revelation, a congregation of Christians in a particular city.

John's list does not include all the churches that were in Asia Minor, before 68 AD. For example, the congregation in Colossae, to which Paul wrote, is not included, nor are Hierapolis (Col 4.13), Troas (Acts 20.5-6), or Miletus where there may have been a church (Acts 20.15-17). These seven churches may be ones with which John had had direct contact during his ministry in Asia Minor. The fact that he only mentions his name, without giving an Apostolic title—as Paul (Rom 1.1), James (1.1) and Peter (2 Pt 1.1) do—seems to indicate that he was well known to the recipients of this letter and may have had a degree of Apostolic oversight for them. It has been noted that the order in which the seven churches are named, traces a circuit from the coastal town of Ephesus, nearest to the island of Patmos (1.9), along the coast to Smyrna, and then through the inland cities, from north to south. John may have conducted a regular program of visitation to these churches before being imprisoned on Patmos. It is also likely that this is the order in which the letter would be delivered to the congregations by a messenger. At each location, a copy of the original letter would have been made so that the congregation would be able to read it again after the messenger had left.

The specific audience for Revelation was the seven listed churches in Asia Minor that faced various challenges, including persecution from Rome, the incursion of false doctrine, temptation to grievous sins, and an infatuation with materialism. Congregations have faced similar challenges throughout the 2,000-year history of the Church. Thus, it is not necessary to establish whether John wrote specifically to these seven churches because they were under his direct care, or if he identified them as a form of symbolic synecdoche to represent the Church universal. The choice of communicating to *seven* churches is probably deliberate, since 'seven' is often used to express perfection or completeness in Scripture, both literally and figuratively—for example, days of creation, sprinkling (Lev 4.17), punishments (Lev 26.18), pillars in the house of wisdom (Prov 9.1), deacons (Acts 6.3), messages to the churches (2-3), seals (5.1), trumpets (8.2), and bowls of God's wrath (15.7). The Church recognized in its earliest years that Revelation was to be received as part of the NT Scriptures, with applicability beyond the bounds of Asia Minor. For example, a copy of the *Muratorian Canon* (from the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century), which is attributed to Caius, a presbyter in Rome (c 200 AD), includes Revelation in the list of received NT books and states, "And John too, indeed, in the Apocalypse, although he writes only to seven churches, yet addresses all." Thus, while John addresses this letter to distinct contemporary congregations, it is no different from Luke addressing his gospel and the Acts to Theophilus, and Paul addressing a personal letter to Philemon. We understand that these books of the NT are useful for our instruction.

John indicates that the grace and peace, with which he desires the churches to be blessed, comes from the 'seven spirits' who are before God's throne. This expression is only found in Revelation (Rev 1.4; 3.1; 4.5; 5.6) and is not easy to interpret. It has been suggested that this refers to the seven angels who are associated with each church (Rev 1.20; 2.1), or to the seven angels who stand before the throne of God and are sent out with the bowls full of God's wrath (8.2; 15.1, 6-8). However, many interpreters believe that the expression is a reference to the Holy Spirit—even though it is peculiar to refer to him in this plural manner, and John elsewhere refers to him directly, in the singular, as the 'Spirit' about ten times (e.g., 2.7). It is unlikely that John would indicate that grace and peace came to the churches from an angel. It is through the Holy Spirit, who is before the throne of the Father to execute his assigned role as the one sent by the Father and Son (Jn 14.26; Jn 15.26), that God blesses believers with the grace and peace of conversion and salvation.

It has also been suggested that John was not referring to seven different persons, but that he had in mind the sevenfold gifts and operations of the work of Spirit listed in the Greek translation (used at the time of John) of Isaiah 11.2-3, where the word 'spirit' is associated with: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, *godliness* (not in the Hebrew), and fear of the Lord. Others suggest that John has in mind the seven lamps that are the eyes of the LORD (Zech 4.2, 6, 9), to which he may refer later (1.12). Thus, it is possible that John uses the expression as a figure of speech, to refer to the working of the Holy Spirit in his manifold ways as he supports Christ's Church in its battles with its spiritual and temporal enemies.

If John uses 'the seven spirits' as a reference to the Holy Spirit, then he may be deliberately including a Trinitarian dimension in his prologue. Thus, the book of Revelation comes from God the Father, the eternal God (1.4); from the Holy Spirit, the 'seven spirits'; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. The entire Trinity is involved in a sevenfold way, through the Holy Spirit, to support the sevenfold Church of Jesus, in all places and at all times.

### **Blessing that Christians Receive in Christ**

John includes a traditional epistolary greeting in the opening portion of Revelation, which is also a prayer for his readers and a statement of their standing in Jesus Christ. He indicates that there are seven blessings that Christians receive in Christ:

- *Grace.* For the apostles, grace is not an abstract construct, like people today often use the words ‘love’ or ‘faith’ without objective content. Grace, in Apostolic teaching, is explicit. It is the undeserved and unmerited love of God which saves sinners from eternal damnation (Eph 2.5, 8). It is also the promise that God will preserve his elect, help them to resist temptation and falling away, and bring them into glory (2 Thess 2.16).
- *Peace.* All of the epistles (13) in which Paul names himself as the author in the opening sentence, extend a blessing of ‘grace’ and ‘peace’ to the readers. Peter includes it in both of his epistles, as does John in his second letter. Peace is the result of saving grace through reconciliation with God—peace *with* God—and through the assurance of forgiveness of sin and of a place in God’s household forever—peace *from* God.
- *Hope of the Resurrection.* Jesus is the firstborn of the dead—he was raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Through his resurrection, he conquered Satan, sin, and death. Where there is a designated firstborn (or firstfruits) there must, of necessity, be second-born ones (Rom 8.29; 1 Cor 15.20, 23). Thus, Jesus did not die in vain; all for whom he died will be resurrected on the last day into new, imperishable, glorified, powerful, and spiritual bodies (1 Cor 15.42-43), fitted for an everlasting new heaven and earth; and not subject to decay, illness, or pain (21.4; 22.3, 15; 1 Pt 1.4).
- *Love.* The supreme act of love has been displayed by God, “in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5.8). Nothing in our feeble human experience compares with this example of love. Our ‘love’ is always tainted by selfishness and petulance, and with an expectation of recompense. God’s love is freely offered and unwavering to those in which there is nothing lovely, who hate him, and are at war with him. If dying for sinners was not enough, Christ’s love toward us extends beyond the act of dying. His love preserves us through the valley of the shadow of death and brings us to the full realization of eternal life (Jn 3.16; Jude 21). In contrast, Jesus did not die for angels who left their first estate (Heb 2.5, 16) but cast them into hell (2 Pt 2.4).
- *Freedom from Sin.* You may note that modern translations have ‘freed’ whereas older translations have ‘washed’, in verse 5. In Greek, the two words sound the same, and only differ by spelling of a vowel sound. In the scriptorium, one scribe would read the text and other scribes would write what they heard. Thus, some manuscripts have one word and some the other. The ESV has ‘freed’—focusing on the redemption purchased by Christ, through his blood. However, the idea of having our sins cleansed by the blood of Christ is also supported elsewhere (7.14; Lev 14.14; Heb 9.22). Regardless, it is through the shed blood of Christ, on our behalf, that we obtain freedom from the enslavement, guilt, and consequences of sin.
- *Royal Standing.* John refers to God’s words delivered on Mt. Sinai, in which he declared to Moses that if the nation kept his covenant, they would be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex 19.6). Those who are united to Christ, through faith in his death and resurrection have a share in his offices. Some commentators suggest that we are to understand ‘kingdom’ as applying to the corporate organization (body) in which believers are citizens, and that it does not mean that believers are kings now. However, believers have been adopted into God’s household, are brothers and sisters of Jesus, share in his royalty, and reign with him now (he has ‘made us’; 1.6; 5.10; 20.6; 1 Pt 2.9). It is difficult to determine what it means for believers to reign with Christ (e.g., over what or whom). We may obtain a hint from Genesis 1, when Adam was created as a sub-sovereign to reign over the rest of the created order. The full realization of how we will rule with Christ will not be made known until the end of time (3.21; 22.5; 2 Tim 2.12).
- *Priestly Role.* All believers also have a priestly role—not just those ordained to an office within the Church. The prophetic office brings God’s word to the congregation. Whereas, the priestly role takes man’s offerings, confessions, and petitions and presents them to God. The tearing of the temple curtain, when Jesus died (Mt 27.51), symbolizes the unmediated access (by mere humans) all believers now have to God in his sanctuary. We fulfill our priestly role through praise and prayer, and by offering tithes and our lives (Rom 12.1). John’s reference to Exodus 19.6, indicates that the NT Church is the fulfilment of the promise made to Moses. The true Israel is not ethnic or cultural Jews (Rom 9.6), which are a synagogue of Satan and liars (2.9; 3.9), but those who are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Eph 2.12; Gal 6.16).

These verses (1.4-6) are doxological—John praises God as he contemplates the wonders of the blessings that Christians receive in Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you should meditate on what he has done for you in his love and grace, join John in praise of your redeemer with your lips, and glorify him with your

life (1 Cor 10.31).

## **The Coming of Jesus with the Clouds** (Rev 1.7)

Commentators agree that this is the first prophecy in Revelation; however, they don't agree about what is the subject of the prophecy. How we interpret this prophecy will influence how we interpret the remainder of Revelation, since this prophecy is a key part of the introduction into the contents of the book—this verse has been referred to, among other things, as the 'thesis statement', 'motto', 'keynote', or 'theme' of Revelation. Many commentators claim that this prophecy relates exclusively, or at least primarily, to the second (or final) coming of Jesus on the clouds (compare, Acts 1.9-11; 1 Thess 4.17), and make statements such as, "It is an obvious reference to the second coming of Christ." Whereas, others relate the words "he is coming" to a supposed future rapture of the Church, when it is claimed that unbelievers will be left behind on the earth. However, this prophecy refers primarily to the coming of Jesus in judgement on Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 AD.

The key for understanding what this prophecy refers to is found in Jesus' words, recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 24.29-35; Mk 13.24-31; Lk 21.25-33), and the fact that Jesus says that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt 24.30). The Greek word used for 'generation' by the three gospel writers is used in nine places earlier in Matthew. In every instance, it refers to contemporary people and a period of roughly 30-40 years. Thus, Jesus spoke these words about events that the people living in Jerusalem in 33 AD would see unfold within their lifetime.

In the first part of this verse (1.7), John refers to words that Jesus spoke (Mt 24.30), and he recalled, since he was present during the Olivet Discourse. Jesus used words from Daniel (Dan 7.13) to indicate that he was the 'son of man' of Daniel's prophecy. The application of this text to Jesus shows that he is its fulfilment and emphasizes his kingship over the nations. John indicates that those who crucified Jesus will see him whom they have pierced (an allusion to Zech 12.10)—a reference that he also makes in his Gospel (Jn 19.37) to show the fulfilment of OT prophecy. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus answers the first of the disciples' two questions (Mt 24.3) relating to the signs of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24.4-35). In the *following* verses (Mt 24.36-51) he answers their second question, about when this age will end.

Since the larger Biblical context for this verse relates it to the destruction of Jerusalem, the coming in the clouds mentioned by John in this book (1.7) and Jesus (Mt 29.30), should probably be understood symbolically, accompanying the glory of Jesus (Mk 14.62), as he exercised judgement—the witness of Jerusalem to the nations (the 'sun') would be darkened and the 'moon' of the Jews' moral example would be covered (Mt 24.29). Jews living in Jerusalem from every nation or tribe of the earth (Acts 2.5), and the Gentiles, who had crucified Jesus and pierced his side, would see his visitation as the city was besieged by the Roman armies under Titus and levelled to the ground.

At the destruction of the city, a great wailing went up. Josephus records the famine, brutal sacking of the city, devastation of the temple, and the slaughter of its inhabitants. At one point he says, "While the holy house was on fire, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain; nor was there a commiseration of any age, or any reverence of gravity; but children and old men, and profane persons, and priests, were all slain in the same manner; so that this war went round all sorts of men, and brought them to destruction, and as well those that made supplication for their lives as those that defended themselves by fighting." Jesus had warned the city that when the Roman armies came, there would be a great tribulation, which the world had not seen and would not see again, and would be cut short only because of the presence of some of the elect in the city (Mt 24.21-22).

John closes this brief prophecy with a double assurance—using the Greek word for 'yes' and the Hebrew 'amen'. He is not only asserting the truth that the city and temple will be destroyed but is acknowledging his acceptance of the rightness of what is about to happen. Jerusalem had become full of wickedness (Josephus speaks

to this, for example in *The Wars of The Jews*, bk 4, ch 9, sec 10) and apostate, and had rejected Jesus as the Messiah and forfeited their place, as a covenanted nation, in the kingdom of God (Mt 8.11-12; Mt 21.18-22; Mt 21.43; Mt 23.38; Lk 13.6-9). Thus, the city was ripe for its destruction and deserved to be cursed (1 Cor 16.22; 1 Thess 2.14-16). This does not mean that individual Jews cannot come to Christ, just as any other sinner can turn to him for salvation (Mt 23.39; 2 Cor 3.14-16; Eph 2.11-18).

John prophesies that the destruction of Jerusalem was going to happen shortly (1.1). Thus, the prophecy applies to those living in Jerusalem in 70 AD. However, this does not mean that it has no relevance for us, 2,000 years later. The destruction of Jerusalem is a sign of the pending destruction of this world, and what will happen to all who reject Jesus. But there is hope. The setting sun of the Jewish age and Jewish Church was a sad day for the earth. But it was not the end. We are in a new age, in which the peoples of the earth are being brought into the NT Church from the four winds (Lk 13.29), from peoples of every nation (7.9; Mt 28.19); and we now worship in a new spiritual form, no longer centred on the temple (Jn 4.21-24).

### **A Prisoner on Patmos**

(Rev 1.9)

It has been the long-held historic position, that John was banished by Roman administrators to the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, roughly 60 kms off the coast of modern Turkey, because of antipathy to his preaching the Gospel. Support for this view comes from writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Eusebius, and Jerome. However, as is typical of much of modern ‘scholarship’, there is now disagreement with the historic position. Some claim that it is more likely that he was on the island for other reasons—for example, he voluntarily went to Patmos to preach to the inhabitants of the island, he fled difficulties in Ephesus on his own volition, or a congregation (e.g., Miletos) in Asia Minor banished him due to his ‘troublesome prophetic activities’. It is now claimed that accounts of John’s banishment by Rome is a legendary embellishment. However, we assume that the historic position is correct, since John indicates that he was on the island “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”; which means that he was exiled because he preached and taught about Jesus (Jn 15.20). Victorinus (d. c 303 AD), the first to write a commentary on Revelation, mentions (in his notes on 10.11) that John had been assigned to work in the mines on Patmos. John, as a persecuted exile, aligns himself with OT prophets who were also exiled—Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel—from whose writings he often quotes.

Some commentators claim that there is no evidence that emperors prior to Domitian banished Christians, and that this supports a ‘late date’ (c 95 AD) for the composition of the book, rather than during Nero’s reign, before 65 AD (see, [The Primary Fulfilment Generation](#)). However, Jews were banished from Rome as early as 53 AD, under Claudius (Acts 18.2). Christians would likely have been included in the banishments of Jews, since Christianity was considered to be a sect of the Jewish religion, in the early days of the Church. And, John may not have been exiled by the emperor to Patmos, but by city administrators in Ephesus. The city had been sent into an uproar because of Paul’s ministry there (Acts 19.21-41) and may have reacted in a similar way when John made his base of evangelism in the city and surrounding regions.

John mentions that Patmos was an island because his contemporary readers may not have been familiar with its existence, and to provide an historical context for later readers of the book. That the Romans used the islands off the coast of Asia Minor for political prisoners can be confirmed by reference to writers such as Tacitus in his *Annals* (3; 4), and Juvenal (*Satire 1*). Patmos is a relatively small island (15 kms X 10 kms) with a rugged topography. It would have been reachable only by ship and impossible to escape from, without access to a ship. Prisoners could not have escaped as long as the port was patrolled regularly to ensure that they did not board a departing ship. Archaeological remains indicate that at the time of John, the island supported a sports centre and temples and oracle-shrines associated with the pagan cults of Artemis and Apollo. The population was likely not much different from the approximately 3,000 inhabitants it has today.

The rocky island with pagan temples, surrounded by a raging sea, provides an ideal setting for John’s vision of the evil confronting the Church. He often refers to the sea (about 25 times)—more than any other NT writer—and mentions mountains and islands (6.14; 16.20) and a monster coming out of the sea (13.1). His vision of

the new heaven and earth excludes a sea (21.1).

John states that he was a “brother and partner” with the recipients of his letter in their sufferings. He didn’t place himself in an elite class separate from them. Rather, he indicates that he is associated with them in the same way that Jesus is aligned with his people, as the suffering servant (Is 53). John says that he shared with them in their:

- *Tribulation*. His exile to Patmos was one instance of the persecution Christians can experience from the world that hates Christ and his people. The members of the seven churches may have been experiencing different types of persecution, but they knew that John, following the example of his Lord, was a sharer with them in their afflictions (13.10).
- *Kingdom*. Tertullian said in his *Apology* (ch. 50), “the more you mow us down, the thicker we rise; the Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more.” A hundred years before Tertullian, John indicates that tribulation (persecution) is one of the instruments that God uses for building his kingdom, as manifested on earth as the Church (Acts 14.22).
- *Patient endurance*. Paul informs us that suffering (from tribulations) produces endurance (Rom 5.3). One way by which God builds his Church is through the patient endurance of Christians facing trials (2.2-3, 19; 3.10; 14.12). Some unbelievers, when they see the steadfast endurance of true Christians and their non-retaliatory response, take note, and want to learn more about the Christians’ source of hope and joy

In the Greek, the definite article appears only once, and the statement appears as, “the tribulation and kingdom and endurance”. It should be understood as a unit, which indicates that the three words work together synergistically. Thus, Christians who suffer with Jesus in patient endurance, for the sake of the kingdom, conquer the world of sin and the dominance of Satan and share in the everlasting inheritance with their Lord (2.7, 11, 17, 26; 3.5, 12, 21).

### **In the Spirit on the Lord’s Day**

(Rev 1.10)

The term ‘the Lord’s day’ occurs in the Bible only in this verse. There has always been speculation about what it means. For example, some people have claimed that John is speaking of a ‘day of the LORD’ prophesied in the OT (e.g., Is 13.6; Zeph 1). Others claim that it is a reference to the day of judgement at the end of time, and that John was transported in the spirit to that day. It has also been suggested that John was speaking of the annual festival that is called ‘Easter Sunday’. However, it is most likely that John is referring to the day that people, in nations with a vestige of Greco-Roman culture, call ‘Sunday’—the first day of the week.

Elsewhere in the NT there are references to Christians assembling on the first day of the week (Jn 20.19; Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2). It has been widely believed by most Church historians that, by the time John wrote this letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor, Christians had begun to refer to the first day of the week as ‘the Lord’s Day’ in commemoration of Jesus’ resurrection (Mt 28.1; Mk 16.2, 9; Lk 24.1; Jn 20.1).

Early Christian writers use the same term, ‘Lord’s Day’, to speak of the first day of the week. For example, Ignatius of Antioch (c 35 - c 108 AD), in his letter to the Magnesians, refers to the day commemorating the resurrection as the Lord’s Day: “those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death.” Likewise, to the Trallians, he writes, “At the dawning of the Lord’s day He arose from the dead, according to what was spoken by Himself.” Other early Christian writers (Melito of Sardis, Dionysius of Corinth, Clement of Alexandria, etc.), following Ignatius, referred to the first day of the week as the ‘Lord’s Day’.

By calling the first day of the week ‘the Lord’s Day’, Christians declared their independence from paganism. In ancient Greece and Rome, the days of the week were named after gods in the mythological pantheon, and the planets that represented them. The first day of the week was called *dies Sōlis*, in the Latin of Rome, that is, ‘day of the Sun’. Likewise, the second day was named for the moon goddess (*dies Lūnae*), the third for Mars (*dies Martis*), etc. Some of the names we use in the

English-speaking world for the days of the week have been changed to represent Anglo-Saxon pagan gods (e.g., the fourth day is named after Woden and the sixth, after Frige), however the seventh day is still named after the god, and associated planet, Saturn.

By calling the first day of the week, ‘the Lord’s Day’, Christians in the Roman Empire also declared their allegiance to Christ and defied the imperial cult, which venerated the emperor as a god.

The names of the week used in English have no significance for modern unbelievers. They generally have no idea what was the original meaning behind the names of the days of the week or of months—e.g., January is named after Janus, the god of the doorway. Nevertheless, Christians can make a similar declaration for Christ as Lord, by referring to the first day of the week as the Lord’s Day, rather than using the common term ‘Sunday’.

From the earliest days of the NT Church, Christians assembled for worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2), and to remember the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Some early Christians, particularly those who were converted out of Judaism, also observed the seventh day of the week as a day for assembly and worship. Over time, Christians discontinued the observance of the Jewish Sabbath and assembled for worship only on the first day of the week.

John tells us that he was “in the Spirit” on the Lord’s Day when he received the visions that he records. Most commentators assume that what John means by ‘in the Spirit’ is that he was in an ecstatic state, or that he fell into a trance—as Paul did when he was praying (Acts 22.17), and Peter did when he was praying on a rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10.10). While it is possible that John received his visions while he was in a trance, we cannot conclude this from the statement that he “was in the Spirit”. Our English translations assume that John is speaking of being in the Holy Spirit and capitalize the word ‘spirit’. However, if John were saying that he was in a trance, then it is inappropriate to capitalize the word as it would apply to his personal state—that is, in my spirit (the Greek has only ‘in spirit’, not ‘in *the* spirit’). In Acts 19.21 Paul says that he “resolved in the Spirit” to go in a particular direction, and in Ephesians (Eph 6.18) he says that we should pray at all times “in the Spirit”. He also says that believers are “in the Spirit” when the Spirit dwells in them (Rom 8.9). Thus, John is not telling us that he was in a trance (although he may have been). Rather, he is informing us that he was in an attitude and place of worship—his mind and will were attuned to the working and influences of the Holy Spirit. Every believer who comes before God with true worship can likewise be ‘in the Spirit’ and receive spiritual blessings as he hears the voice of God speaking to him through the read and preached word in the assembly of believers worshipping on the Lord’s Day. Thus, Jesus says that those who worship correctly “must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4.24).

### **The Lord’s Day is the Christian Sabbath**

(Rev 1.10)

A commonly held view among modern Evangelicals is that ‘the Lord’s day’ that John mentions is not equivalent to, or a replacement for, the OT Sabbath. During the earliest period of the NT Church, some believers, primarily those with a Jewish background, kept the seventh-day Sabbath holy and observed the first day for worship and remembrance of Christ’s death and resurrection. However, the Church quickly formulated the position that keeping the first day of the week holy, fulfills the Sabbath principal and is a replacement for the seventh-day Sabbath. For example, Ignatius, of Antioch (c 35 - c 108 AD), who knew many of the apostles personally, said in his letter to the Magnesians, ‘If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day ... let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, “To the end, for the eighth day,” on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ.’ Similarly, *The Epistle of Barnabas* (ch. 15), written around the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, speaking about the OT Sabbath, says that the first day of the week is now how the Sabbath is to be observed, “Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (ch. 21, para. 7) provides a definitive summary of the Reformed understanding that keeping the Lord's Day holy is a fulfilment of the perpetually binding command (Ex 20.8-11) to keep the Sabbath holy, "As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath."

An antinomian lawlessness pervades the Church today, and many professing Christians do not like to hear the proposition that the Lord's Day, on the first day of the week, is to be kept holy. They are wedded to their creature comforts and use Sunday as a day for shopping, dining out, attending sporting events, and participating in recreational activities that undermine the worship of God. They also rationalize why it is acceptable for them to engage in activities associated with commercial employment. A few of the common arguments which are heard from Christians, against observing the first-day as a Sabbath for worship and rest, are:

- It is claimed that the Sabbath command is the only command of the Ten Commandments not repeated explicitly in the NT; thus, it must not be as important as the other commands. However, beside numerous references in the NT about the observance of the Sabbath by Jesus and the disciples, Luke 23.56 reiterates the Sabbath-keeping command. Luke wrote to a Gentile (Theophilus) and he mentions that the women rested "on the Sabbath in *obedience to the commandment*." If the Sabbath-keeping principle had ended with the death of Jesus, it is unlikely that Luke, writing 20 years after the events, would not have mentioned obedience to the commandment, but would have referred to Jewish custom (Lk 1.19; Lk 2.42; Acts 6.14; Acts 15.1; Acts 21.21; Acts 28.17; see also Jn 2.6; Jn 19.40).
- It is claimed that the Sabbath was revealed to Jews and not written on Gentiles' hearts. However, the Sabbath was revealed to mankind 2,500 years before the Ten Commandments were delivered through Moses (Gen 2.3). All people know, or sense, that they are to set aside a time to worship God, but they corrupt this with the rituals of worship for their false deities and in the ceremonies of their 'civil religion'. It is ironic that it is hard to convince Christians of the obligation for, and importance of, observing the Sabbath and yet it is easy for them to adopt the observance of pagan festivals such as Christmas and Halloween.
- It is claimed that the Sabbath was part of the ceremonial laws of the OT that are abolished with the finished work of Christ on the cross. However, the re-statement of the Sabbath principle in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.8-11) includes aliens. This shows that the fourth Commandment was not an essentially ceremonial law, that is, one pointing to Christ and spiritual separation and holiness. Uncircumcised aliens were generally not permitted to participate in the ceremonial rites of Israel (Ex 12.43, 45) and were allowed to eat unclean food (Dt 14.21) but were required to observe the Sabbath.
- Sabbath observance is excused if a boss requires a person to work on Sunday, with the stated (or implied) threat of being fired for non-compliance. However, if a boss required this person to do other things such as to steal or lie, or lose their job, we would expect him to refuse to comply. Yet, when it comes to the Sabbath command, it always seems to be easier to break than others of the Ten Commandments. Few Christians today are willing to take a principled stand for Sabbath observance. John writing to the churches in Asia Minor encourages them to be strong when they face persecution for their faith. Christians today need to be faithful to God's requirements for holiness and be willing to face persecution.

### **John's Commission to Write a Book**

(Rev 1.10-11, 19)

Since the visions John received were delivered on the Lord's Day, John was likely engaged in corporate or private worship when he was commissioned for his task of communicating to the Church the revelation from Jesus. We should not expect to receive extraordinary visions, like John, since the revelation of Scripture is now complete. However, when we assemble for worship with fellow believers or are engaged in our private time of Scripture reading and prayer, we should expect to sense the Spirit's presence with us, communicating truth to our minds and strengthening the faith in our hearts.

John was commissioned by a voice that had the volume and resonance of a trumpet. Although John does not attribute the voice he heard to an identified speaker, it was undoubtedly that of the resurrected Lord Jesus (1.1, 12), and the same voice that Paul heard when he was travelling toward Damascus (Acts 9.4). The voice that

Moses heard from the midst of the burning bush (Ex 3.2-5) when he was commissioned to lead the covenant people out of Egypt, was likely also the voice of Jesus—although in a pre-incarnate theophanic form. Jesus does not communicate directly through an audible voice to people today. But we can hear his voice as the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts (Jn 16.13) and as we hear his voice through reading the Bible (Jn 10.4).

The voice that John heard was loud, but not a mere rumble of thunder since it communicated an intelligible message. The volume of the voice indicates authority; and its being likened to the sound of trumpet indicates: 1) a call to assemble (Ex 19.13), 2) a call to action (Num 10.5-6), 3) a call to worship (Lev 25.9; Ps 81.3; Joel 2.15), 4) a sense of urgency and warning (Ne 4.18-20; Is 18.3; Ezk 33:3-6), 5) an announcement of great importance for the assembly (1 Sam 13.3; Is 58.1), 6) a symbol of the ingathering of the nations (Is 27.13; Mt 24.31), and 7) the announcement of the end of this spatial-temporal universe (1 Thess 4.16). The words of Christ in the Bible are a trumpet sound for mankind today, communicating all the same things as the audible sound of a trumpet communicated to the ancient people of Israel.

The voice and words of Jesus gave John a direct commission. He had already been commissioned as a disciple, apostle, and pastor/elder. However, he is now directed to write a portion of the revelation of Jesus that would become part of the Bible. Whether he wrote the book of Revelation before or after his gospel and his three epistles is debated. But what is clear is that he is specifically commissioned to write down the revelation he would receive. He alludes to the commissioning of prophets such as Moses (Ex 19.19-21), Isaiah (Is 6.8-9), Jeremiah (Jer 1.4-5), and Ezekiel (Ezk 2.2-3; Ezk 3.12) who were to deliver God's word to the people. Thus, he was conscious that he was writing a portion of Scripture that was to be communicated to the Church (1.3, 11). We believe that the authority to contribute to Scripture required a direct commission from God and that only those designated as prophets or apostles (or those under their authority, such as Luke) were permitted to provide content for inclusion in the Bible. Once the apostles had died, the canon of Scripture was closed and no additional revelation of equal authority with the Bible is being produced—not by councils, popes, professors, or charismatic preachers.

John was commissioned directly by the Lord Jesus to *write* down what he was about to be shown, in the form of a 'book'. The Greek word that is used (*biblion*), from which we derive the word 'bible', did not designate a bound book with pages and a cover—this form of book was adopted by Christians shortly after the time of the apostles for the easier dissemination of the Bible. Rather, John would have written Revelation on a scroll, made of cut rectangular animal skins stitched together, or strips of papyrus reed pith woven and glued, into a continuous roll about 30cm by 10m. He was told to commit the visions to written form for the purposes of preservation and transmission of their message.

John was also to *send* the book to the seven churches. A copy of Revelation would have been carried by courier to the recipient congregations in Asia Minor. It would have been read aloud to the congregations, and each would have made a hand-scribed copy for their permanent record and use. This allowed John's message to reach a wider audience than could have been reached through personal visitation.

The recording of the God's message to mankind—the Bible—began before the flood with Adam (Gen 5.1), Noah (Gen 6.9), and Shem (Gen 11.10) recording pre- and post-flood events. The development of the Bible continued with Moses (Ex 17.14), the prophets (Is 30.8; Jer 30.2), and the apostles (Lk 1.3). The contents of the Bible were not transmitted orally, as many liberal 'scholars' claim, and recorded centuries after the events had occurred. The Bible was committed to writing by men who were contemporaries, and often eyewitness, of the events they described. Manuscripts were copied with diligence and preserved by God so that we have over 10,000 manuscripts of complete (or portions of) OT books, including 200 among the Dead Sea Scrolls; and 5,800 complete manuscripts (or portions of) of Greek NT books. No other ancient texts have the abundance of support which the Bible has. We can be certain that the published Hebrew and Greek texts available to us today are essentially word-for-word what the original authors wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21).

### **Seven Golden Lampstands and Seven Stars**

(Rev 1.12, 16, 20)

The book of Revelation uses numerous symbols to communicate its message. At times, it can be a challenge to determine when we are to understand it to be presenting truth in a literal form, versus using figurative language. For example, it is clear that when John said that Satan's throne was in Pergamum (2.12), he does not mean that there was an physical throne in the city on which Satan sat, but that it was a city given over to pagan worship. However, when he describes the glories of the new heaven and earth, in chapters 21 and 22, we may rightly conclude that the tree of life (22.2) will be physically present in heaven, as it was in the first paradise. In addition, it can be a challenge to interpret each symbol John uses to describe the visions he received. We must be careful to extract the substantive meaning and purpose of each metaphor or image and not attempt to make every aspect of a description apply to a specific historical event or look for speculative allegorical interpretations. For example, we should not suppose that there is a distinct and deep meaning associated with each precious stone mentioned in 21.19-20.

In 1.12 we encounter the first symbol appearing in the visions recorded in Revelation—the seven golden lampstands. Associated with them are seven stars held in Christ's hand (1.16). We are given insight into the meaning of these two symbols in 1.20, as Jesus provides an example of how to interpret the vision—similar to how he interprets his first parables (Mt 13). This provides guidance for how to interpret other symbols in Revelation.

The seven lampstands stand for the seven congregations to which the book of Revelation was addressed. It is an image likely drawn from a vision shown to Zechariah (Zech 4.2-6). In the OT economy, there was one congregation, which assembled in Jerusalem a few times per year, around the temple—although local synagogue assemblies were organized at the time of Nehemiah and continued until the NT congregations were organized around that model. Under the NT economy, the Church is found throughout the world with no geographic centre. Seven is a sign of completeness. Thus, the seven named congregations of Asia Minor (1.11) represent all the congregations of the Church of Christ.

Many commentators raise questions about the nature of the lampstands, wondering if John saw one lampstand with seven branches—like the menorah in the tabernacle, and temple—or seven separate lampstands, each of which had a single lamp or seven branches with lamps. The natural reading suggests that there were separate lampstands among which Jesus walked. His walking in their midst is a symbol indicating that he is always in the midst of his Church, until the end of time (Mt 28.20), building it (Mt 16.8) and protecting it (Jn 17.12, 15).

Any debate about the nature of the lampstands distracts us from the primary message. All congregations are to represent Christ by being lights in the spiritual darkness (Mt 5.14-16; Lk 8.16-17). And, like the golden lampstands bearing light in the vision, congregations are to be pure and display the light of the Holy Spirit and encourage men to come into the light (Jn 3.19-20).

Jesus informs John that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The reference to 'angels' has engendered considerable debate. Various interpretations have been suggested; the most common ones are: 1) celestial angelic beings appointed as guardians of each congregation (Ps 91.11, Dan 10.13, 20, 21), and 2) human leaders or representatives of the churches. The most straightforward interpretation is that the 'stars' and 'angels' are the leading pastors (shepherds) or overseers of the seven churches. Some object to this interpretation, saying that the NT churches were not yet organized in this way—that is, a designated principal pastor among the elders. However, NT congregations likely followed the Synagogue model with a 'ruler' over the body of elders (Acts 18.8, 17). Others object saying that the word 'angel' is used elsewhere in Revelation as a designation for celestial beings. However, the word 'angel' in Greek means 'messenger' and can be applied to human beings or celestial beings. For example, the Greek translation of the OT uses 'angel' in Malachi 3.1. This is a prophetic reference to John the Baptist (Mk 1.2). It makes more sense that the letters sent to each congregation in chapters 2 and 3 (2.1, etc.), would be addressed to the congregational representatives (the pastors), rather than to celestial beings. John likely use imagery from Daniel, who informs us that those who turn people to righteousness shall shine "like the stars forever and ever" (Dan 12.3).

Jesus is shown holding the stars in his hands. This indicates that he upholds and cares for the pastors/elders of churches as they faithfully execute their mission to

provide guidance, like stars in the cosmic heavens, to those who are seeking spiritual direction. Both congregations and their spiritual leaders are symbolized as light-bearing bodies who are under the care of Jesus.

Jesus calls the vision a ‘mystery’. This does not mean that it is a deep secret to be shared only with an initiated elite. Rather, it is revealed truth from God the Holy Spirit about the wonder of God’s plan for saving a great multitude of mankind (7.9), by the God-man and through the instrument of his Church on earth (compare, Eph 1.9-10; Eph 3.1-13; Eph 5.32; Eph 6.19; Col 1.26-27).

### **One Like a Son of Man**

(Rev 1.12-16)

In this first vision, John sees an image of the resurrected (1.18) and ascended Jesus, standing among seven lampstands holding seven stars in his right hand. He says that Jesus appeared like ‘a son of man’. This is an obvious reference to Daniel 7.13, and to the designation Jesus used most often to refer to himself—for example, in Matthew’s gospel (8.20; and more than twenty-five other times). We are assured by this vision that although Jesus is glorified and residing in heaven, he is still also a man, sharing the essence of our human nature and form. The symbolic attributes John sees, similar to those seen by Daniel in a vision (Dan 10.5-6), are evidence of the divine majesty and glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ:

- *Clothing*. The robe and sash represent his official position in the throne room of heaven. They could be the garments of a king (Is 6.1; Is 22.21-22) or a priest (Ex 28.4). In the case of Jesus, they could represent his filling both of these offices (Zech 4.14). He is a king ruling over all the nations of mankind (Ps 2), and a high priest interceding on behalf of his people (Heb 4.14).
- *Hair*. His white hair indicates that he is the holy and dignified ‘Ancient of Days’ (Dan 7.9)—the eternal one (1.4, 8, 17).
- *Eyes*. His eyes, “like a flame of fire” (Dan 10.6), are the all-seeing eyes (Ps 139.3) of the omniscient one, which penetrate to the depths of a human heart (Mt 9.4; Lk 9.47) and determine the appropriate form of judgement for mankind (Dt 4.24; Is 66.15).
- *Feet*. His feet, of “burnished bronze, refined in a furnace”, represent the moral purity and holiness of the God-man, whose walk is perfect (Ps 1.1-2; 1 Pt 2.22).
- *Voice*. His voice, that sounded like “the roar of many waters” (Ezk 43.2; Dan 10.6), is the voice of the Almighty God, who with a word created a universe (Gen 1.3), sentences sinners (Mt 7.23), saves his elect (Rom 8.33), destroys the reprobate (Ps 29.3-9), and raises the dead (1 Thess 4.16).
- *Sword*. The “sharp two-edged sword” proceeding from his mouth is a symbol of the effectual word of God—the Bible (Eph 6.17)—which declares the law and the gospel, and blessings and curses, and cuts to the heart of man and exposes his inner nature.
- *Face*. The face of Jesus was displayed as shining like the sun at full strength. This is reminiscent of the glory that enveloped Jesus during his transfiguration (Mt 17.2). Jesus now abides permanently in heaven with his divine glory as the Sovereign Lord on full display.
- *In his Church*. The lampstands represent the Church and the stars the pastors of the congregations within the Church. Jesus is portrayed as walking in the midst of his Church and holding the pastors in his right hand. The ongoing work of Jesus, as head of his Church includes:
  - Building it, through evangelism (Mt 16.18; Mt 28.19-20)
  - Teaching it, through the Bible (2 Tim 3.16-17)
  - Commending and correcting its members (chapters 2-3)
  - Encouraging them in the face of persecution (Mt 5.10-12; Acts 14.22)
  - Comforting them through the Holy Spirit (Jn 14.16)
  - Protecting and preserving them (Rom 8:29-30)
  - Interceding with the Father of their behalf (Rom 8.34)
  - Receiving them into the glories of heaven (Mt 25.21, 23; Jn 14.2-3).

Only in Revelation are we given a physical description of Jesus—and then only in his glorified state, and only in symbolic form. We are not to think that the

resurrected Jesus actually has white hair, feet of bronze, and a sword protruding from his mouth. The NT gospels do not describe what Jesus looked like. God is silent about the physical appearance of Jesus while on the earth because Jesus is the visible representation of the eternal God (Jn 1.14; Col 1.15; Heb 1.3), and it is inappropriate for us to make representations of God in any form (Ex 20.4; Is 40.18; Acts 17.29)—whether with a stone carving or painting, or by an actor representing Jesus in a movie. John’s intention in providing this information is not so that we would attempt to portray an image of Jesus among the lampstands with artists’ media, but that we would come to appreciate his glory as the God-man full of grace and truth (Jn 1.14), and majestic beyond all sinful human conception and expression.

John said that when he heard the voice, he turned to *see* the voice—that is the one speaking to him, where the voice is a metonym for the person (Gen 3.8). He presents these symbolic attributes of Jesus so that we will turn with him toward the Lord Jesus Christ. As we read Revelation, we should not focus our attention on the events described but on the person of Jesus, who is the glorious God, and who rules and governs the universe. Revelation is not given to us to serve as a prognostication device but to point us to Jesus. John does not say, “the revelation of *future* events” but “the revelation of (about) Jesus Christ” (1.1)

Revelation has been a comfort to suffering Christians throughout the ages. It assures us that Jesus is God; he reigns supreme, governing the nations and limiting their petty attempts to usurp his authority; walks continually among the congregations of his Church; provides ultimate protection for his people, even when they face hatred and persecution in this age; and will take them into the glories of heaven to be with him forever.

### **John Fell at the Feet of Jesus**

(Rev 1.17)

To illustrate a reaction to certain classes of events, a director of a movie will often have an actor faint. For example, if a superstar appears unexpectedly at a fan’s door, the person opening the door will stutter a few incomprehensible words and then collapse in disbelief. In a movie in the horror genre, a person seeing a frightening sight will fall to the ground senseless. Or, in a sci-fi thriller, when the ramp on the flying saucer opens and an ugly alien exits an observer’s knees will buckle under him and he will swoon. These examples illustrate the reaction that we often expect if a person sees something that is truly amazing or awesome and beyond our natural experience.

The vision of Jesus that John saw (1.13-16) was so incredible that it caused him to faint out of fear. He experienced the same reaction as the prophets Daniel (Dan 8.17, 27; Dan 10.9) and Ezekiel (Ezk 1.28) who had seen perplexing visions. Paul had a similar reaction on hearing the voice of Jesus (Acts 9.4). In our current mortal and sinful state (even if converted), if any one of us saw a vision of Jesus in his glorious state in heaven, or heard his voice from heaven, we would also collapse (Is 6.1-5). The glory of the resurrected Lord Jesus is a muted or veiled form of the pure divine glory, since God says that no one who sees his unmasked glory can live (Ex 33.20); but it is still beyond anything that we could bear without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. If we think that we would not react by fainting if we saw such a vision, it indicates that we have no appreciation or understanding of how powerful the glory of God, shining through the resurrected God-man, truly is.

The reaction of John on seeing the vision illustrating the glory of Jesus is the only proper response we can make at the appearance of God. It teaches us how we ought to behave when we come into the presence of Jesus, who is the visible representation of the eternal God (Jn 1.14; Col 1.15; Heb 1.3). We should fall at the feet of Jesus who is the:

- Creator of the universe (Col 1.16).
- Ruler of the nations, to whom all kings and commoners should bow as his subjects (Ps 2.10-12; Ps 110.1; Phil 2.10).
- Holy One of God (Mk 1.24; Jn 6.69) who is without sin, while we are depraved sinners (Is 6.5; 1 Tim 1.15-16).
- Lawgiver who requires full obedience (Mt 5.22; Jn 15.14; James 4.12).

- One whose name is above every other name (Acts 4.12; Phil 2.9).
- One worthy of worship (4.11; Phil 2.11).

Peter understood how vast the distance is between Jesus and men, when he fell at the feet of Jesus and declared that he was a sinner (Lk 5.8). We need to ask ourselves if we know how glorious Jesus really is and what it means to honour him by falling at his feet.

Paul informs us that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow (Phil 2.10). All men will bow—either in adoring fealty or in abject fear. Believers in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord, will bow before him because they adore him as the one who is holy and pure, worthy of worship, and their Lord and Saviour. Ways in which we, as Christians, can bow before Jesus include the following:

- Worshipping him with proper praises—using his own words recorded in the Psalms.
- Honouring him through our prayers and petitions.
- Preserving his name as holy.
- Declaring him to be the only means of salvation from sin.
- Hearing his words, as declared through the Bible and biblical preaching.
- Obeying his commands.
- Keeping his day—the Lord’s Day (1.10)—holy.

Many professing Christians today think that they are falling at the feet of Jesus when they claim to be worshipping him with their praise bands and lyrical compositions. Instead, they do the opposite. They stand boldly in his presence and declare, “Look at me, aren’t I somebody special!” Ironically, there are hymnic compositions with titles such as “We Fall Down” (Chris Tomlin) and “I’ll Worship Only At The Feet Of Jesus” (Gaither). But all offerings of worship not expressly endorsed by Scripture are unacceptable offerings (Gen 4.3-7) and false fire (Lev 10.1-3); and a blatant disavowal of the sovereignty of Jesus and an act of rebellion against his majesty and holiness. We need to respect the awesome otherness of God by worshipping at his feet only in ways that he has authorized.

Another irony is that many people will fall at the feet of movie stars, business tycoons, popular politicians, and sport celebrities, while refusing to bow before Jesus, who exceeds them all in power and majesty. The apostle John had been a dear friend of Jesus and had been present at the transfiguration, where he had seen the glory enveloping Jesus. Yet, he could not stand in the presence of Jesus in his full heavenly glory. How will it be for those who have shown no respect for God, and have no desire to be near Jesus when they are called to give an account for a life full of sin? Unbelievers are preparing for a heart-stopping surprise. When they meet Jesus face-to-face on the day of judgement, they will fall before him in utter terror. Then, they will call on the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of Jesus (6.16). It is a fearful thing to think of the terror that awaits these people.

### **Fear Not!**

(Rev 1.17)

Fear is a natural reaction to sudden surprising events; to the appearance of previously unexperienced phenomena; and to known potential dangers. Fear in itself is not sinful, because the fear ‘instinct’ helps to keep us from facing potential danger such as going too close to the edge of precipice or entering a dark alley, and it can trigger an enhanced flight response. However, fear is expressed in people only because of the presence of sin. Without pervasive sin in the world, and its consequences, there would be no need for man to fear anything. In the original sinless paradise, there would have been nothing to fear, and mankind would have experienced no fear.

While fear, as a natural response to some trigger events, may not be sinful, it can be a sinful response to events that should not normally cause fear—for example, a person might be unreasonably afraid to go outside because he thinks that a bird could peck out his eyes. Some people become overwhelmed by events and are afraid

to act. Sinful fear can also arise when we refuse to trust those whom we should trust. For example, a person on a sinking ferry who refuses, out of fear of falling, to strap on a harness hanging from a hovering helicopter so he can be airlifted to safety, has an unjustified fear. Likewise, a person who claims to be a Christian, and has entrusted his eternal happiness to Jesus Christ, but refuses to trust him to provide for his welfare in this life, displays a sinful fear about what might happen today or tomorrow. People who succumb to unjustified fears often have deep psychological and physical problems such as paranoia, phobias, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, high blood pressure, or heart conditions. Unjustified fearful responses to events are an indicator of an underlying spiritual problem—unbelief and a lack of faith in God’s providential governance of all that transpires (Mt 10.31).

John fell to the ground after seeing the manifestation of Jesus in his heavenly glory. Then Jesus reached down, touched him with his right hand, and said, ‘fear not’. Jesus showed compassion for John’s situation with a touch and a word of encouragement, and then provided an explanation for why John should take courage (1.18). John had previously felt the touch of Jesus (after his transfiguration) and had heard the same word of encouragement (Mt 14.27; Mt 17.6-8). After any physical or mental anguish—a severe scare, a traumatizing accident, a deep disappointment, or a grievous loss—we need to be comforted by both a touch and a word. As humans, with two constituent parts (body and spirit), we need both dimensions of our persons comforted when we are confronted with challenging circumstances. This comfort needs to come in two forms, physical and mental/spiritual—a hug, a pat on the back, or a firm hand placed on our arm or shoulder; and sincere words of love, sympathy, or condolence.

As we have already seen in our study of chapter 1, John often alludes to the prophet Daniel. His experience of falling down on seeing the vision mirrors Daniel’s experience. Twice, Daniel saw visions that frightened or distressed him and caused him to collapse, and he had to be assisted by a touch and a word of encouragement (Dan 8.17-18; Dan 10.9-10, 18-19). This is a further indication that John was conscious that what he was writing in Revelation was from God and that he was writing with the authority of a prophet of God.

Following the touch and word of encouragement, Jesus explains to John why he should not be afraid (1.17-18)—because he: 1) is the living God; 2) identifies with John’s sufferings, “I died”; 3) has conquered death, and is the firstborn into a resurrected life; and 4) holds sovereign authority over the gates of hell. We will consider this explanation in our next meditation.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus displayed compassion toward the crowds that followed him (Mt 14.14) and healed their sick, often with a touch. He also healed Peter’s mother-in-law with a touch (Mt 8.14); and he blessed the children by laying a hand on them (Mk 10.16). He showed his personal care for Mary and Martha and encouraged them to trust him about the death of their brother Lazarus (Jn 11.23-26). While he was hanging on the cross dying, he provided for his mother Mary with a word of comfort (Jn 19.26-27). Likewise, he showed compassion toward the repentant thief hanging on a nearby cross (Lk 23.42-43). Most significantly, he displayed the ultimate example of compassion when he died in the place of sinners (Rom 5.8; Eph 5.2). John was an eyewitness to all of these examples of the love of Jesus, and many more. He knew that Jesus displayed amazing love toward all the people that he encountered—even toward his enemies (Lk 23.34). In addition, John had seen Jesus transfigured (Mt 17.1-2) and later in his resurrected form (Jn 21.1, 14), and had seen him depart for heaven (Acts 1.9). If this were not enough, John knew of a special fondness and affection that Jesus had toward him (Jn 13.23). Therefore, John, of all people, should have known that Jesus cared greatly for him and should not have been afraid when he saw him in his heavenly glory. However, we will not blame John for showing fear. We, who are believers, also know that Jesus loves us and yet we exhibit little faith that he cares for us and is truly working events for our good. Jesus tells us not to fear, because it is the Father’s good pleasure to give us everlasting rewards (Lk 12.32). Thank God, that in the new heaven and earth all causes of fear will be removed forever!

### **The Living One Died and Yet Lives**

(Rev 1.18)

After John had fainted, Jesus laid his right hand on him and declared to him that he is the eternal God—‘the first and the last’ (1.17). We have already considered that statement (see, [\*The Alpha and the Omega\*](#)), so will not address it again. He then added that he is the “living one” who died and is “alive forevermore”. With this

threefold truth—living, dead, living—he injects his eternalness into the spatial-temporal realm to encourage John.

You and I declare that we are alive since we can do things such as breathe, move our fingers, and process the electrical signals flowing from our sensory organs into our craniums. However, our definition of what it means to be *alive* is often limited to physical attributes. This is not correct since *life* is not something material and cannot really be defined by physical attributes. God and angels are alive (living beings) but have no physical aspects to their essential existence. Notice that Jesus does not say that he is ‘alive’, but that he is ‘the living one’. He is not saying that he had a physical body that came into existence through the conception in Mary’s womb. Rather, we ought to understand ‘the living one’ to be a title for Jesus, and should render the verbal, present, active participle form as, ‘the Living One’ (NIV). This is a unique title for Jesus, used only here. Thus, Jesus declares that existence is a necessary part of his being, that he is uncreated, and that his life and existence are derived from no one else. He exists from, of, and for himself; and he gives life to others and sustains all created life (Col 1.16-17). This is another declaration (along with his being the ‘first and last’) of his divinity.

Jesus follows with a statement that appears to present a paradox—“I died”. Since life in its essence is non-material, rational spirits are everlasting and cannot die, and Jesus is himself eternal, then how is it possible that he could die? The explanation lies in the fact that Jesus is also man—he became man through the virgin conception. As a man, Jesus died—his eternal spirit was separated from his physical body, and his body ceased to function. Thus, Jesus refers to his incarnation and crucifixion, and reminds John that the person he knew on earth for three years is the same person who was standing before him as the glorious Son of Man. The incarnation is the only way that the self-existent, eternal, and immutable God could die and act as a vicarious substitute for those who deserved to experience eternal death.

Next, he says, “I am alive forevermore”. He is alive because he is the “living one” who cannot die, and he is alive because he was raised from the dead into a new glorious body. He says that his ‘aliveness’ is *forevermore*—the Greek reads, “into the ages of the ages”. By this expression, he places himself outside of, and above, history and time in this created universe; and is again declaring that he is God (Dt 32.40; Dan 12.7). He bookends his humanity with his deity.

John is known for recording in his gospel, the “I am” statements (Jn 6.35; Jn 8.12, etc.), that Jesus made during his public ministry. It is possible that Jesus continues to declare here that he is the ‘I AM’, with the statement “I am alive” or, better, “I am the Living One”. If this is another “I am” statement, then we should note that Jesus is reinforcing his declaration to be the eternal God. The Hebrew consonants YHWH, which are derived from the root of the verb ‘to be’, or ‘I am’ (Ex 3.14)—specifically from the imperfect form—mean ‘he who is’. It is one of God’s unique ways of referring to himself, and preceded all manmade religions, since it was used before the flood by God (Gen 2.4). The name “I AM” is not derived from the Egyptian, Sumerian, or Babylonian definitions or names for their gods. No manmade religion uses the name ‘I AM’ for one of its gods, even though they use terms such as ‘god’ and ‘lord’. For example, Islam uses the Arabic expression *allah*, ‘the god’, which is a cognate of the singular form of the word *elohim*. God has providentially preserved the universal term ‘I AM’ for attribution to the one true God. Probably every language ever used includes the verb ‘to be’ or the expression ‘I am’. This ensures that the LORD can be known in every culture, and that Jesus can be declared to be the ‘I AM’.

While delivering words of encouragement to John, Jesus says ‘behold!’, or ‘see!’ The ESV, NASB, and NKJV do not indicate that in the original Greek the imperative form is used. The NIV includes an exclamation mark after ‘for ever and ever’ and starts a new sentence with ‘and’. Jesus demands that John and his readers pay attention to what he is communicating. John knew that Jesus is God (Jn 1.1; Jn 20.28), that he had died and been raised from the dead (Jn 19-20), and that he has authority over death and the grave (1.19; Jn 3.35; Jn 5.27; Jn 17.2). However, in the midst of a fear-response John needed to be reminded of these things. If John needed this reminder, we need it even more. When we face persecutions for Christ; have doubts about our health, finances, careers or interpersonal relationships; or are afraid of death; we need to rest in the assurance that our very existence and everlasting salvation are in the hands of Jesus, who has promised to care for us (Heb 13.5). When we have a deep confidence in the sovereignty of Christ over everything that happens now, as we pass through death, and as we enter the new heaven and earth, we can declare “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Heb 13.6) and be better equipped to resist compromise with the world’s temptations.

## Jesus Has the Keys to Death and the Grave

(Rev 1.18)

Keys are a sign of authority—e.g., to open doors and invite people in, to lock doors to keep intruders and thieves out, and to bind criminals with chains and locks. Keys are also symbols of honour. Mayors of cities award a key to the city to those whom they wish to honour. For example, Toronto mayors have awarded a ceremonial key about 50 times, from 1998 to the present. Some of the recipients include: Mickey Rooney, Nelson Mandela, Celine Dion, Yo-Yo Ma, Mickey Mouse, Neil Young, Donald Sutherland, J. K. Rowling, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Joni Mitchell, Sylvester Stallone, Muhammad Ali, and Drake. In Revelation, Jesus is said to hold “the keys of Death and Hades”, “the keys of David” (3.7; Is 22.21-22), and “the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit”, which he delegates to an angel (9.1; 20.1). Thus, Jesus uses his keys of authority directly and he assigns them to others to apply.

Jesus declares first that he has the “keys of Death”. The ESV capitalizes the word *death*, personifying death as the ‘owner’ of Hades. However, it may be better to understand *death* as it is used here, as the event which separates the human spirit from a person’s spatial-temporal body. Jesus declares that, as ‘the Living One’ (1.18), he is the one who grants existence to mankind, including physical and spirit life, and sustains all created life (Col 1.16-17). Since he has authority to create life, he also has authority to appoint death. Thus, when Jesus says that he holds the keys of death, he means that he determines when and how each person shall die.

Jesus also says that he has the keys to Hades. The older Tyndale (1536), Geneva (1560), and King James (1611) versions of the NT state that Jesus has the keys to “hell and death”. Modern versions do not translate the Greek word *hades* as ‘hell’ but transliterate it into our Roman alphabet. Thus, we need to determine what Jesus meant when he chose the word *hades*. Other Greek words (*gehenna* and *tartarus*) are translated in the ESV as ‘hell’. So, it is probable that *hades* is used to refer to something other than hell. The word *sheol* is used often in the Hebrew OT. When the OT was translated into Greek, before the time of Jesus, the word *sheol* was translated as *hades*. Without conducting a complex word study, on *sheol* and *hades*, it appears that the most straightforward way to render, in English, what Jesus says is as, “death and the grave” (compare, 20.13-14). Jesus, in this instance is not speaking of a place of eternal punishment nor is he speaking of a temporary spiritual place of residence for those who have died. Rather, he is speaking of his power to raise the dead from the grave.

Jesus has the authority and power to open the graves (20.13; Ps 9.13), restore physical life to all people—believers and unbelievers (Jn 5.28-29)—and cast death and the grave into the bottomless pit (20.14). However, his authority extends beyond death and the grave. Jesus is sovereign over the entire created order (Mt 28.18; Col 2.10; Phil 2.10), and the keys which he holds extend beyond life, death, and the grave. He has authority to judge all mankind (Acts 10.42; 2 Tim 4.1, 8), welcome the believing elect into glory (Mt 25.21, 23), and sentence unbelievers to everlasting damnation (Mt 22.13; Mt 25.30).

Jesus delegates the keys of the bottomless pit to an angel (20.1) and commands his angels to conduct unbelievers into the pit of hell (Mt 13.30). Likewise, he delegates the temporal keys to the ‘angels’ of the churches (1.20) who are the pastors/elders. Jesus speaks of this delegation when he declares that he will build his church (Mt 16.18-19). Since death will be destroyed by Christ, it is not the final arbiter of a man’s destiny. Man’s standing before God in *this* life determines his standing in the next life. So, God invests authority in human officers (as symbolized by the keys of the household steward) to rule in his Church and to dispense teaching, the sacraments, and discipline. Peter in this instance represented all the apostles and elders to whom the keys of the Church are delegated (Mt 18.18; Jn 20.22-23). We are not to conjure up the image of Peter standing at the pearly gates determining who may, or may not, enter heaven. Rather we are to understand this delegation of authority to apply in the temporal realm. When the elders admit a person into a congregation through baptism and the Lord’s Supper or when they remove the privilege of access, they are binding and loosing. Peter was the first to exercise this authority in the NT Church—on the Day of Pentecost and over Ananias and Sapphira, Simon, and Cornelius’ household (Acts 2.14; Acts 5.1-11; Acts 8.21; Acts 10.28). The administration of the kingdom in this world by church officers is recognized in heaven. This does not mean that elders can ultimately determine who is, or is not, saved. But it does mean that when elders act in the will of God, their decisions with respect to the difficult matters of admission and demission are ratified by Christ himself. This teaches us that we must respect and obey the

elders in the Church to whom Jesus has delegated his authority (1 Thess 5.12-13; 1 Tim 5.17; Heb 13.17).

Jesus hold the keys to physical life and death, to the grave and to resurrection, and to eternal death and eternal life. Thus, it is imperative that we understand and have reckoned with his authority and role. In the end, our life and death, and our destination after the resurrection are in the hands of Jesus, to whom we all must give an account (Rom 14.11-12; Phil 2.10-11). Our everlasting welfare depends on what we think of Jesus (Mt 22.42) and on our relationship with him (Jn 3.16).

## **Symbolic Visions**

(Rev 1.19)

John is commanded to create a written record of the symbolic vision that he had just seen, and its interpretation; and whatever else of the mystery that was to be revealed to him in subsequent visions. Since the risen and glorified Lord Jesus revealed himself to John in the opening vision and gave this command, John knows that what is being revealed is important and to become part of the Scriptures (see, [\*John's Commission to Write a Book\*](#)), along with the gospels and epistles which were already circulating among the early churches. He is commanded to write down what he has heard and seen so that he would not forget the contents of the vision and its interpretation; so that he could make it available to a wide audience (the seven churches in Asia); and so that it would be preserved for all time, to be made available to the broader Church. Revelation is not a miscellany, rather it is a carefully crafted and structured record of what John saw and heard—with associated commentary from Christ, an angel, and John himself—with perpetually relevant instruction in theology and for how we are to walk as Christians in a hostile world.

Jesus refers to three temporal categories associated with the revelation that John was receiving—“what you have seen”, “what are”, and “what is about to be after this”. What Jesus intends to include in these three categories is the subject of much deliberation among commentators and scholars—one author said that this is a “notoriously difficult threefold clause” to interpret. Some believe that Jesus is speaking of three periods of history—the past, present, and future. They conclude that the second clause (“what are”) refers to events occurring around the time John wrote (e.g., 1.1-8.6) and that the third clause (“what is about to be after this”) refers to future events (e.g., 8.7-22.21). Some extrapolate from this conclusion and state that the third clause refers (primarily) to remote eschatological events which will occur at the end of this current age. Others suggest that the temporal categories identify three divisions of the text of Revelation. They suggest, for example, that the ‘what you have seen’ applies to the vision that John had just received (1.12-18); the ‘what are’ refers to what he is about to hear—the letters directed to the seven churches (in chapters 2-3); and the remainder of the book (chapters 4-22) provides information about an unspecified future (‘what is about to be after this’). However, the contents of chapters 4-5 and 12 appear to contain references to John’s current time and possibly to future events. Others suggest that the statement ‘what you have seen’ refers to the visions themselves, and the ‘what is about to be after this’ to the interpretation and application of the visions. Some have hypothesized that Jesus is speaking of three literary genres—visions, interpretation, and eschatological prophecies. There is no clear consensus on how to understand this verse.

Taking the statements in this verse in their plain sense, Jesus appears to be telling John that the visions relate to events that he personally had seen and experienced, would see and experience shortly, and would see and experience later—not necessarily confined to some distant eschatological future. We should not attempt to divide the book of Revelation into three sections to represent these three temporal categories. Rather, the entire book deals with events that affect the Church in every age—the rise of false religions and of governments that are antagonistic to the Gospel and the Church, the dangers of heretical movements entering the Church, the prospect of persecution for the cause of Christ, the sovereignty of Jesus over the nations, and the victory of Christ and his Church over the forces of evil.

The difficulties associated with interpreting this verse and many other parts of Revelation, and the use of visions of strange phenomena to communicate its message, leads us to ask, why is the book of Revelation so difficult to understand? We might wonder why God did not communicate the mysteries he reveals in this book with simple propositional statements or narratives. For example, Daniel 2 provides a vision similar to the visions in Revelation. In contrast, Daniel 11 provides a straightforward historical narrative of events—but written centuries before they occurred. We might think that if Jesus wanted us to understand the future challenges

the Church was going to face, he could have said, something like this, “Thirty years after the death of Emperor Nero, such and such will happen.” Since God could name Cyrus (Is 44.28; Is 45.1), about 150 years before he was born, he could have done the same with the Roman emperors, such as Nero and Titus. A logical extension of our question, is why did God use various forms of literature (e.g., historical narrative, parables, poetry, proverbs, stories, and symbolic visions) to communicate his revelation to man, and not confine it to straightforward propositional statements? Possible reasons include the following:

- To engage our minds, as rational beings, created in his image.
- To make us dependent on God the Holy Spirit for illumination and understanding, and to remind us that we are finite creatures.
- To make the contents interesting, stimulating, and memorable.
- To increase our faith, by making us acknowledge that we cannot know everything that God has done or plans to do.
- To encourage us to approach the study of his Word as a systematic whole, not focusing on a single verse or passage but putting everything into the context of progressive revelation and historic fulfilment.
- To remind us that our hope is to be placed in the living Christ, not in our abilities to decipher a text or belief that we can predict the future.

### **Letter to the Church in Ephesus – Abandoned First Love**

(Rev 2.1-7)

Jesus commences to dictate to John letters directed to seven churches in Asia Minor. The first was addressed to the pastor of the church in Ephesus, who represented the congregation. Ephesus was a significant centre of commerce and the main port of transfer for travellers and goods arriving from throughout the Roman Empire. The congregation was founded by Paul about 30 years before this letter was sent to them, and shortly after Paul wrote his own letter to them. Extra-Biblical historical records indicate that Timothy became the pastor of the congregation after the death of Paul, and after the book of Revelation was written. He is reported to have suffered martyrdom during a festival in honour of the goddess Artemis, whom the residents of Ephesus held in high esteem and served as temple guardians (Acts 19.21-41).

Jesus reminds the Ephesians that he holds the pastors/elders of the Church in his hand and walks among their congregations. By this, he indicates that he upholds and cares for the pastors/elders as they faithfully execute their mission to provide guidance, like stars in the cosmic heavens, to those who are seeking spiritual direction. He also indicates that in his omniscient knowledge he knows all that is transpiring in every congregation.

Jesus begins his observation of the state of the congregation in Ephesus with a commendation of their good work, before addressing the problem that they had. He uses a good practice for encouraging people to correct and change their behaviour—focus on the positives before mentioning the negatives. The commendations were that they:

- *Knew how to work hard.* They had learned to continue in the Christian life of worship, obedience, and service; not growing weary, even when facing the challenging circumstances of a city filled with all the luxuries of the world, worshippers of mammon, and pagan deities.
- *Endured suffering patiently.* Based on Paul’s mistreatment in Ephesus, we can surmise that the populous continued to be antagonistic to the preaching of the Gospel that proclaimed the uselessness of pagan deities, and to persecute Christians.
- *Maintained correct doctrine.* Faced with challenges to their beliefs, they were unwilling to compromise and were hostile to heretical teachings and the claims of false apostles, which they were skilled at discerning. Their diligence was likely the result of the foundation Paul had laid when he organized the congregation, and the warnings he gave about false teachers who would attempt to deceive them (Acts 20.28-32).
- *Hated evil.* They hated what God hates—sin, and those who attempt to defend lawlessness. No one seems to know precisely who the Nicolaitans were. However, the consensus seems to be that they taught a form of antinomianism—which claims that as long as a person professes belief in Jesus, it doesn’t matter how he lives. For example, they likely said that a Christian could participate in pagan festivals and consort with temple prostitutes. Paul dealt with the same issue in Corinth (1 Cor 6.12-20).

Jesus charged the Ephesians with a single deficiency—they had abandoned the love they had had at first. Some suggest that the love they had abandoned was a passion for witnessing to those outside the Church. However, this is reading into the meaning of the text, rather than reading what it says. If they were not witnessing to Christ in Ephesus, they would not have suffered persecution. Christians are to have two great loves—for God and for their fellow men (Mt 22.37-40). Jesus emphasized the first when he reinstated Peter (Jn 21.15-19), and Paul, the second (1 Cor 13). Jesus is saying that within about two decades since they received salvation, the intensity of their love for him (Jer 2.2-13) and for one another had diminished. Like the Galatians (Gal 1.6) and Israel of old (Ex 32), it doesn't take long for individual Christians and a congregation to drift into a lassitude toward their Saviour. This rebuke is a reminder to us that it is possible to hate gross sins and yet be unloving. And, it is possible to be doctrinally accurate and ritually correct and yet be unloving. As Paul says, without love we gain nothing (1 Cor 13.3).

The danger of a Christian's first-love waning is real for every one of us. Jesus exhorts the Ephesians, and us, to:

- *Remember.* Continue to call to mind the sacrificial love of Jesus by which we have been saved and in which we are called to serve. We need to recall the depraved depths from which we have been saved and the great spiritual heights to which we have been raised in union with Christ.
- *Repent.* Confess our sins (James 5.16; 1 Jn 1.9) of haughty disregard and lack of concerned compassion for Christ and his brothers in the Church.
- *Return.* Demonstrate our love for Christ and his Church through works of loving service to others; not through mushy emotions, expressed with mindless mantras.

A congregation that does not display love, will be visited in judgement by Jesus. He will remove its lampstand—its light-bearing witness to himself and the Gospel. The Ephesians appear to have heeded Jesus' warning for a time, since Ignatius in a letter to them (chapters 6 and 8) praises them for their exemplary faithfulness. However, their passion for Christ waned and the Church in Ephesus ceased to exist long ago. Today, the area around the ruins of Ephesus is shrouded in the spiritual darkness of Islam. The consequences of being an unloving congregation of Christ are dire indeed!

### **A Hearing Ear**

(Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 29; Rev 3.6, 13, 22; Rev 13.9)

In the conclusion to each of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, Jesus says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus concluding a number of his parables with essentially the same counsel (Mt 11.15; Mt 13.9, 43; Mk 4.9, 23; Lk 8.8; Lk 14.35). John does not repeat the phrase in his gospel since he does not record any of the parables. However, he uses a similar admonition, later in the book of Revelation, when he directs his readers to consider the beast that came out of the sea (13.9).

The meaning of the statement appears to be easy to understand, since it basically tells the one hearing the book being read to pay attention to what he is hearing and to apply the exhortation. However, there is more below the surface of the words, since we could observe that everyone has ears, and yet Jesus implies that some do not, since they do not hear—that is, "If you have ears, then hear". It is therefore helpful if we consider the larger Biblical context for the statement. When Jesus used the statement in the conclusion of some of his parables, he appears to be drawing it from the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 6.9-10), with allusions to the prophetic voices of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 5.21. Ezk 3.27; Ezk 12.2). These three OT prophets warned Judah of divine judgement if they followed in the footsteps of the apostate northern kingdom and gave themselves over to its idolatrous practices. Direct declarations of the pending disaster were often scoffed at by the stiff-necked populous. Thus, the prophets often resorted to the use of symbolic parables (e.g., Is 11; Jer 24; Ezk 17) and visions to present their message. This form of communication was used when direct warnings were ignored by the spiritually blind and God chose to reveal his truth only to the spiritually enlightened (Mt 13.10-15).

Within this broader context of the OT and the Synoptic Gospels, we observe the following about the recurrent admonition used in Revelation:

- The letters are addressed to individual congregations, but this concluding statement is addressed to all the churches. What is said in each letter to one congregation applies to all congregations. The book of Revelation is a universal message intended for every congregation, in every age. The NT Church is the

continuation of the true Israel of God (Gal 6.16).

- The message given by Jesus to the churches will enlighten the minds of some but be spiritually opaque to others. Like Israel in the OT and the Jews at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, there are some in the visible Church who are devoid of spiritual enlightenment and others who have their minds attuned to the mind of the Spirit (Gal 5.25).
- The book of Revelation is directed primarily to the *Church*—to admonish and encourage it. It is not intended to convey the evangelistic message announced in the gospels. Thus, we should not attempt to communicate the message of salvation from sin to pagan unbelievers by directing them to a study of the book of Revelation, since it can only be understood by those who have already been converted by the Holy Spirit. Christians are mistaken when they attempt to use supposed end-time fulfillments of Revelation's visions as a means of awakening the unconverted.
- Israel in the OT compromised God's worship with idolatrous practices. The religion of the Jews at the time of Jesus was essentially a formalistic observance of ritual, with no understanding of the spiritual significance of the ceremonial system—in particular, of how it applied to the Messiah. The Church in every age tends to introduce syncretic elements, imbibe false worship, and decline into formalism. Congregations become as spiritually lifeless as the idols they honour—with no eyes that can see or ears that can hear (Ps 115.4-8). Revelation is a warning to us, since the human heart is perversely directed toward false worship and we always live in the midst of an idolatrous generation, just like 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome.
- Each letter, all of Revelation, and all of Scripture is from the Holy Spirit—we are to hear what the *Spirit* says. God communicates through the written word, the Bible, which was written under the direction of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21) and makes us wise unto salvation and is profitable for our training in righteousness (2 Tim 3.15-17).
- While the letters are addressed to congregations, the closing admonition is addressed to individuals (third-person, singular). Therefore, each person must hear and heed for himself. We need to listen to each of the seven exhortations and apply them to our situations. We can also expect to benefit from the associated promises, if we overcome temptation.
- The study of science or psychology (etc.) can have merit, especially if our study increases our usefulness within our community. However, we cannot employ our 'ears' to anything that is of more value for this life and for the next life than the study of Scripture. Adapting, and countering a common quip, we must conclude that we can never be so Biblically minded so as to be of no earthly good.
- Jesus says that we are to *hear*, not to feel. Hearing implies that we are to apply mindful processing of the information communicated by the Holy Spirit. Christians are expected to reflect on what they hear, apply critical judgement by testing it (2.2; Acts 17.11), and then to guide their wills, emotions, and actions by correct thoughts and beliefs. If we are unthinking, and undisciplined in our thoughts, we will not hear what the Spirit says, no matter how wide we open our ears.
- We must now hear what is said; there may not be another opportunity.

### **Letter to the Church in Smyrna – Encouragement in Suffering**

(Rev 2.8-11)

Smyrna, on the Western coast of modern-day Turkey, about 60 kms north of Ephesus, was considered to be one of the most beautiful cities in Asia Minor; except after heavy rains when its streets turned into open sewers. It was a prosperous city due to an excellent harbor and fertile surrounding farmlands, which produced abundant grape harvests. It housed a temple erected (in 26 AD) by the Roman senate to honour Tiberius (14-37 AD), who was emperor at the time of Jesus' ministry (Lk 3.1), and contained temples and shrines dedicated to a number of gods. In addition, an annual festival was held in honour of Dionysus (or Bacchus), the god of grapes, winemaking, and wine, and of religious ecstasy and wild parties. Today's inhabitants of wealthy San Francisco and the nearby Napa Valley, would have felt comfortably at home in ancient Smyrna. There is no record of who founded the church in Smyrna, but it is valid to conjecture that Paul organized it during his three years' residence in Ephesus (Acts 19.26).

In the opening of his address to the church in Smyrna, Jesus refers to himself as the source of life ('first and the last') and as the one who was resurrected or

revitalized (‘who died and came to life’). These were appropriate self-references in the context of the pagan city where the festival of Dionysus celebrated life and fertility, and the associated rites were based around a seasonal death-rebirth theme. At the time of the exodus from Egypt, God sent plagues which demonstrated that the Egyptian gods were powerless (Num 33.4)—for example, the goddess of fertility, Heket, was portrayed with the head of a frog, and the god of creation, Khepri, was portrayed with the head of a fly. Likewise, Jesus declares that Dionysus is not God. Jesus is the true source of life (Jn 11.25) who can encourage a struggling church, facing poverty and tribulation, because he was acquainted with material deprivation (Mt 8.20) and knows what it means to resist persecution ‘unto death’.

Of the seven churches to which letters were directed in Revelation, only two did not receive a rebuke from Jesus—Smyrna and Philadelphia. However, the church in Smyrna is challenged by Jesus, who knew of their sufferings, to continue faithfully facing:

- *Tribulations*. Christians suffered persecution from government officials, Jewish leaders, and hostile crowds throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 13.45, 50; Acts 14.2-7, 19; Acts 16.16-24; Acts 17.5-9; Acts 19.23-41; Acts 24). This consisted of confiscation of property, beatings and torture, imprisonment, exile, and execution. Polycarp (69–155 AD), who was a pastor of the congregation in Smyrna not long after Revelation was written, provides an example of the persecution about which Jesus speaks. Irenaeus gave a description of his martyrdom, in [\*The Martyrdom of Polycarp\*](#), and presents Polycarp as an example of a person who heeded Jesus’ exhortation to “be faithful unto death”.
- *Poverty*. Even though Smyrna was a wealthy city, the Christians living there were poor in material terms. Their poverty was the result of the persecutions they faced, not from a lack of industriousness on their part. They may have lost their livelihoods because they observed the Lord’s Day as a Sabbath, or because they would not participate in pagan rituals. As a form of persecution, their neighbors shunned them and no longer purchased their products or merchandise, or engaged their services.
- *Slander*. Christians have been subject to slander (Greek: ‘blaspheme’) since the beginning of the NT Church (Acts 2.13)—following the Lord’s example (Mk 15.3; Lk 23.10). Governments accuse them of treason and disloyalty (e.g., refusing to reverence the State or to fund abortions in corporate health plans) and society condemns them as intolerant (e.g., for referring to Islam as a false religion and to homosexual practices as sin).
- *Imprisonment*. Jesus does not identify the *human* instigators (that is, civil authorities or Jews) of the persecutions in Smyrna. However, he mentions a particular instance—imprisonment—and identifies Satan (the devil) as the instigator, who acted through government officials to imprison some of the Christians in Smyrna.

Jesus strengthens them with messages of encouragement:

- *You are Rich*. He reminds them that Christians are truly rich—in the favour and love of God (Rom 1.7) and gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12.4; Heb 2.4), and heirs of treasures and positions in heaven (Mt 6.20; Mt 25.34). In our society, where wealth and status are as important as they were in Smyrna, we need to cultivate our understanding that true riches lie in the arms of the Almighty, not in the belly of the beast.
- *Fear Not!*. Even if they face persecution unto death, they are not to be afraid of what men or the devil can do to their bodies or possessions. Their lives are in the hands of the risen and living Saviour who has conquered death, sin and Satan; and who will bring them through persecutions and death into his glorious presence (see, [\*Fear Not!\*](#)).
- *Limits to Persecution*. He assures them that, as a congregation, their persecution will be temporary and enduring—for “ten days”. While this could refer to an actual ten days, it could also be symbolic for “a little while” or a “brief time”. Whatever the amount of time, it will end.
- *Promised Rewards*. As in all of the letters, Jesus promises them victory if they conquer. We will consider all of the promised rewards as a separate (see, [\*Promised Rewards for Conquering\*](#)).

## **Satan, in Revelation**

(Rev 2.9-10)

The first mention of Satan, in Revelation, is in the letter Jesus sent to the Church at Smyrna. In this letter, he is also called ‘the devil’. Elsewhere in Revelation, he is

given various other names and titles—such as Abaddon or Apollyon (9.11), Accuser (12.10), Ancient Serpent (20.2), Angel of the abyss (9.11), Deceiver (12.9), Dragon (12.7), and Star (9.1).

Through a survey of Revelation, we learn that Satan is:

- *The tempter of mankind.* Satan makes his first appearance in Genesis 3, where he uses a possessed serpent as his instrument to tempt Eve to taste the forbidden fruit. In Revelation, Satan is associated with the serpent (12.9, 20.2), and thus as the source of Eve's temptation. Satan has not changed in 6,000 years. He, and his legions of demons, continue to direct people to consider the tantalizing 'fruit' of sin (e.g., illicit sexual encounters, expressions of anger, or prideful self worship) and question God's prohibitions against sin; and they suggest arguments for how men can rationalize disobedience (Mt 16.22-23; Mk 4.15; Lk 4.1-13; Lk 22.3).
- *The accuser of the brothers.* The name Satan is a Hebrew word, and a title given to the prime opponent of God. His God-given roles, in his rebellious state, are to provide temptations and then to accuse those who succumb to temptation (Job 1.6-12; Job 2.1-7; Zech 3.1-2). In Revelation, his role as accuser is reiterated (12.10). He wants believers in Christ's redemptive work to doubt the assurance of their salvation, and the full remission of sins, by dwelling on their past sins.
- *The source of false religion.* Hypothetically no religion could be true. However, assuming that there can be an instance of true religion—that is, one which represents and honours the true God correctly—then there can only be one true religion. If Christianity is the true religion, then all other religions must be false since they are blatantly inconsistent with the teachings and practices of Biblical Christianity. For example, Islam and Judaism cannot be true since they deny the Trinity and the deity of Jesus. And, Hinduism cannot be true because it posits many gods. All religions that are not founded on Christ are false, and come from Satan (2.9, 13, 24; 3.9). Satan's demonic spirits are the empowering force behind false prophets (16.13-14). This is not a 'politically correct' statement, but it is based on Scripture—we must state emphatically that all other religions, besides Christianity, are demonic.
- *The deceiver of the world.* Satan's falsehoods extend beyond the explicit domain of 'religion'. As the deceiver of the world (12.9; 20.10), his falsehood extends into every other area of life—including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, science, and economics. He deceives people so that they believe that mankind is nothing more than an evolved 'ape', who is from birth good, and that men can solve all their problems without consideration of God or his laws.
- *The power behind the imperial monster.* Satan is the evil spiritual force behind governments which oppose Christianity (13.2-4; 16.13-14). For example, he drives politicians who enact laws to regularize same-sex 'marriage', endorse the murder of the unborn through abortion and the slaughter of the infirm through euthanasia, permit commercial activities on the Lord's Day, ban the Bible, and outlaw Christian worship services.
- *The enemy of the Church.* Satan was created as an angel to serve God in heaven and among men. However, shortly after his creation he rebelled. Rather than obeying God by ministering to those inheriting salvation (Ps 91.11; Heb 1.14), he became the avowed enemy of Christ and his Church (12.3-6, 16-17). He does everything he can, in ways he conjures up, to discourage believers, sow discord in congregations, and spawn heresies.
- *The instigator of persecution against Christians.* When Satan is unable to deceive believers in his attempts to weaken their faith in Christ and the word of God, he uses instruments of physical coercion to remove them from the battlefield. He cajoles uncivil magistrates and unruly mobs to silence a Christian witness in the public forum—through imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom (2.10).
- *Expelled from heaven.* At one time, Satan, as an angel of light, had access to heaven. After his rebellion, he waged war against the heavenly host. But, he was defeated by the angels that remained loyal to God, and was thrown out of heaven (9.1; 12.3-9)—in a manner similar to Adam's expulsion from the garden of Eden.
- *Bound for a thousand years.* At the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, he conquered Satan and neutralized his power over death. During the interval between Jesus' incarnation until his second coming, Satan's powers have been severely limited (20.2-3; 7-8). However, this does not mean that his wiles can be ignored. He is no less cunning today and his powers of deception and temptation are still strong. Although defanged, he is still a "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pt 5.8).
- *Consigned to everlasting hell.* His prospect is torment in an everlasting hell (20.10). However, no regrets arise in his mind. His hatred is only increased, and his resolve hardened as he seeks to drag those who hear the Gospel into his gloomy abode (Mt 13.19-22).
- *King of hell.* He knows that his destiny is sealed, and in hatred against God, he attempts to fill his kingdom, the abyss of hell (9.11), with as many reprobates as

he can. His wish is to shake his fist at God and say to him, “You have failed, look at all the men I have claimed for my realm!”

## **A Synagogue of Satan**

(Rev 2.9; Rev 3.9)

In his letters to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, Jesus says that there are liars who say that they are Jews and are not, but belong to a synagogue of Satan. These individuals slandered (Greek: ‘blasphemed’) those in the church in Smyrna. Thus, the individuals of whom Jesus is speaking were outside of the congregation of true believers. They were those who aligned themselves with ethnic Israel—that is, physical descendants of Abraham (Jn 8.33, 39; Rom 4.1)—but were not part of spiritual Israel—children of the promise made to Abraham that through his offspring all nations on earth would be blessed (Gen 26.4; Mt 3.9; Rom 9.6-8).

Paul uses the term ‘Israel’ with two senses—ethnic and spiritual (Rom 9.6). Likewise, Jesus implies that the term ‘Jew’ can be used with two senses—ethnic and spiritual. A true Jew is anyone who has believed that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) and has professed faith in him, even if he is uncircumcised and not demonstrably a physical descendant of Abraham. Thus, all true Christians are spiritual Jews.

Many Christians today do not agree with the identification of Christians as Jews. They believe that we must maintain a distinction since, they claim, God has a distinct salvific future for ethnic Jews. However, there is considerable Biblical evidence that there is only one Church—in the OT it was represented by those who placed their faith in the Messiah who was coming. Today it is being filled with those who place their faith in the Messiah who has come. Paul says that all believers in Christ, who worship by the Spirit are ‘the circumcision’ (Philip 3.3); there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile) in Christ, and all in Christ are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3.28-29); there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for God bestows riches on all who call on him (Rom 10.12-13); and the Church is the Israel of God (Gal 6.16). Also, John indicates that the Church, which is made up of people from every nation, is the spiritual fulfilment of the twelve tribes of Israel (7.4-9). He also identifies the NT Church as the continuation of the Jewish nation of king-priests (1.5b-6 with Ex 19.6; compare 1 Pt 2.9).

God no longer deals with ethnic Jews (direct descendants of Jacob—named ‘Jews’ after Judah) as a people. They have been cut off and are now treated as pagans (Mt 8.11-12; Mt 21.18-19, 28-46; Lk 13.6-9; Acts 18.6; Acts 28.25-28; 1 Thess 2.14-16). The destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD) is the decisive indicator that God has ceased dealing with the Jews as a nation. This of course does not mean that individual ethnic or cultural Jews cannot come to Christ, just as any other sinner can turn to him for salvation (Mt 23.39; 2 Cor 3.14-16; Eph 2.11-18). In addition, the physical descendants of Jacob’s twelve sons can no longer be identified. Those who call themselves ‘Jews’ today may have blond hair and blue eyes, dark skin and black curly hair, or olive skin and dark brown hair. No person today who calls himself a ‘Jew’ is able to demonstrate that he is descended from Jacob. To be Jewish is something cultural; it is not even adherence to particular religious beliefs (some cultural Jews claim to be atheists), nor is it provable physical descent from Jacob. The people Paul is concerned about (Rom 10.1-3) no longer exist as an identifiable people. Israel according to the flesh no longer exists.

Some argue that the term ‘Jew’ used here provides strong evidence for an early date for Revelation. While we agree that Revelation was written ‘early’ (see, [The Primary Fulfilment Generation](#)), the use of the term ‘Jew’ does not provide any evidence for dating the book. Jesus is informing John, the congregations in Asia, and us that anyone who has rejected him as the Messiah is not a true Jew and not part of the true Israel. They are Jews in name only and are in reality pagans—opponents of the Gospel and not worshippers of the true Trinitarian God revealed in the Bible, and as revealed in the God-man, the Messiah.

At the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna, not long after Revelation was written, Gentiles and ethnic Jews demonstrated their rebellion against God by participating in the condemnation of Polycarp to death, gathering wood with which to burn him, and persuading the Roman soldiers to burn him alive. They joined in the cry, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower of our gods, he who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods.” Jews claimed that Christians perverted the law, committed blasphemy by worshipping a mere man who had made blasphemous statements (Mk 2.7; Mk 14.64), and

was crucified as a criminal (Lk 22.37). The ethnic Jews who attacked the church in Smyrna rejected Jesus as their Messiah and denied that Christians are God's people, and thus were members of a synagogue of Satan.

Anyone today who claims to be a Christian and yet rejects Jesus as God and Lord is also part of Satan's global synagogue. Most people in Unitarian assemblies or associated with liberal denominations fall into this category. They use the name 'Christian' but do not believe in the Trinity, that Jesus is God, that he was born of virgin, and that he died and rose again from the dead. They often become virulent haters of true Christians and slander them by calling them ignorant 'fundamentalists'. As in John's day, all 'Jews' are not Jews, so in our day all 'Christians' are not Christians.

### **Letter to the Church in Pergamum – A Syncretistic Church**

(Rev 2.12-17)

Pergamum was near the coast of modern Turkey (southwest of Istanbul). It was situated on a hill on the north side of a river, above a fertile plain. At the top the hill, and around it, was a cluster of temples dedicated to the Greek gods, Zeus, Apollo, Athena (the goddess of wisdom), Dionysus, Aphrodite, and Aesculapius (the god of medicine and healing)—it was known in the ancient world as 'the city of temples'. It was the birthplace of Galen (about 60 years after John wrote Revelation), the most accomplished physician, surgeon, and medical researcher of the ancient world. It had a large library, designed to circulate air to preserve the manuscripts, with a statue of Athena standing in the main reading room. Plutarch says that the library contained 200,000 volumes, second only to Alexandria. However, Mark Antony (83-30 BC) removed all the books and took them to Egypt as a gift for Cleopatra. Pergamum dominated the manufacture of parchment ('parchment' is derived from the Latin *pergamenum*) in the Hellenistic period. Legend has it that Pergamum invented parchment to replace the use of papyrus, the production of which was monopolized by its rival, Alexandria. Thus, the city served as a royal residence, 'college' town, research centre, centre for advanced manufacturing, and the focal point for religious rites. A modern near-equivalent could be a city like metropolitan Boston, which is a state capital, has over 50 universities and colleges (including theological schools, like Gordon-Conwell), three research hospitals, and many high-tech facilities.

Jesus refers to Pergamum as the city where Satan has his throne and dwells. This is a fitting appellation for a city full of temples for the gods of the Greek pantheon, including one with a large throne for Zeus. In addition, it is appropriate since a live serpent was kept in the temple of Aesculapius, who was called "man's saviour and champion against diseases" by Claudius Aelianus (c 2<sup>nd</sup> c). Serpent-worship and healing 'miracles' were prominent in the city. You can view examples of coins from Pergamum, listed on e-Bay for a few hundred dollars, which show the healing staff of Aesculapius with a twined serpent. Elsewhere in Revelation, Satan is referred to as a serpent (12.9). Pergamum was the epitome of the *City of Man*, given over to pagan idolatrous practices, care for the human body, the knowledge of man, and the development of technology. It was opposed to the *City of God* in every way. Men may look on cities like this with awe, but Jesus exposes the problem at their core—they are where Satan places his throne.

Jesus declares that he has a sharp two-edged sword, to remind them that:

- While the civil magistrate has the delegated power of the sword (Rom 13.4), Jesus is the supreme ruler over the *City of Man*, sitting on his throne (Ps 2.2, 4; Ps 9.4) and executing justice with his sword (Ps 45.3)
- His word is the sharp sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.17) that discriminates between good and evil in the hearts of men (Heb 4.12-13).

Jesus' commendation of the church in Pergamum is brief. They had not denied the faith, even when one of their members, Antipas, had suffered martyrdom. We know nothing more about Antipas, which is surprising because the Church honoured many of the early martyrs. However, he is known to Jesus, who recognizes his faithfulness. Since only Antipas is mentioned as a martyr, the Pergamenes likely had not experienced systemic persecution from external enemies. The reason appears to be that they were willing to make compromises by eating foods sacrificed to idols so that they could participate in the social and cultural life of their neighbours.

Jesus lays a serious charge against them. They had in their midst some who held to the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Balaam had enticed Israelite males to consort with Moabite women and to sacrifice to their gods (Num 25.1-2). Some in the church in Pergamum appear to have rationalized that visiting temple prostitutes was not a moral problem for Christians, if they believed that Jesus was Lord and that all their sins were covered by his blood-sacrifice. The Church at Ephesus also had some who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We noted that this was likely a form of antinomianism, which claims that if a person professes belief in Jesus, it doesn't matter how he lives—allowing Christians to participate in pagan festivals and consort with temple prostitutes. They claimed that their freedom in Christ overrode the limits imposed by the moral Law and permitted them to commit sin, as long as they believed in Jesus and believed that idols were false gods. They turned the grace of God into sensuality (Jude 4). In paganism, idolatry and sexual immorality are found together (Col 3.5). However, Christians must have both right beliefs (orthodoxy) and right practice (orthopraxy); and must guard against the world creeping into the Church and corrupting it—for example, when denominations permit practicing homosexuals to be ordained or to be members. Proper toleration does not condone openly perverse sins.

Jesus exhorted the entire congregation in Pergamum to repent of allowing members to participate in idolatry and sexual sins. They needed to exercise congregational discipline against open sins and expel the evil persons (1 Cor 5). Repentance involves more than a change in belief; it must include a sincere desire for moral reformation and a striving after proper worship and sexual purity in the Church. If they did not repent, they would experience the visitation of judgement by the 'sword' of God's word against them.

### **Letter to the Church in Thyatira – Moral Purity is Required** (Rev 2.18-29)

Thyatira was a town in Asia Minor, situated on a river and near a Roman road. It was resettled with Macedonians by Alexander, after the Persian campaign. It was a city of craftsmen, with prominent guilds representing the different crafts. Among its more significant crafts were wool and linen weaving, production of a reddish-purple dye (likely made from the Madder Root rather than from the Murex mollusc, since Thyatira was not on the coast), and fabrication of items made of copper and bronze. Lydia, a seller of dye, was from Thyatira and living in Philippi, a city of Macedonia (Acts 16.14). The Roman government was not supportive of guilds but overlooked them when they produced products useful for its militaristic ambitions. A favourite god of the guilds in Thyatira was Apollo Tyrimnas (the sun-god).

In the opening of his letter to the church in Thyatira, Jesus addresses their contemporary context. He refers to himself as the "Son of God". In the earlier vision, John refers to Jesus by his self-referential title 'son of man' (1.13). However, Jesus changes it to 'Son of God' here. Clearly, he places himself in contrast to Apollo, the son of the mythical god, Zeus. He mentions his eyes of shining flames of fire. He is the true source of light who created light (Gen 1.3; Col 1.16) and the sun (Gen 1.15), which the Greeks associated with Apollo and worshipped. In addition, he uses a unique Greek word (translated 'burnished bronze'; also, in 1.15) to refer to his feet. It is a different word than is used to refer to bronze generically in Revelation (Rev 9.20; 18.12) and was used when Daniel 10.6 was translated into Greek. The Thyatirans would have recognized this as an allusion to their locally made product. Thus, Jesus stood on feet made from the metal they would have used to honour their gods. His opening remarks are a polemic against the pagan deity honoured in Thyatira. Jesus is the true patron of his people, not the pagan deities of the guilds.

Jesus briefly commends the Thyatirans, by mentioning their "love and faith" and their "service and patient endurance". The focus of their commendation is on their works—which are not identified but may have included care for the sick and destitute. They patiently withstood ridicule for their kindness, which had become more evident than when they were converted. While the Thyatirans displayed love, they were careless about doctrine and being holy. Their emphasis was on the 'social gospel'. They stand as a marked contrast to the congregation in Ephesus, which was commended for its orthodoxy and moral purity, but was rebuked for its lack of love. All congregations of the Church must be doctrinally pure *and* loving (Jn 13.35).

The presence of guilds in Thyatira presented a problem for Christians, since they often required participation in pagan religious rites, eating food offered to idols, engaging in debauched events, and ritual prostitution, held in their temples. The rebuke of Thyatira is the longest and most solemn among those given to the churches

that are rebuked by Christ. Their overwhelming problem was that they tolerated the evil and immorality of those in their midst who participated in the rites and attended the orgies of the guilds.

How could such a thing happen in a church of professing believers? A ‘Jezebel’ had seduced the congregation. This woman is symbolically named Jezebel by Jesus, to class her with Ahab’s wife who encouraged him to sin through idol worship (1 Kgs 16.31). She would have been known by her real name to the congregation. She arrogated to herself prophetic and teaching authority on matters doctrinal and moral. However, she had no right to this office (1 Tim 2.12); and Jesus says that she “*calls* herself a prophetess”, indicating that her claim was false. We can infer that her teaching was similar to that of the false teachers in Pergamum—proponents of “the teaching of Balaam” (2.14) and the Nicolaitans (2.15). She claimed that Christian liberty permitted a licence to eat meat sacrificed to idols, as long as Christians did not honour the false gods, since the gods had no real existence; and to consort with cult prostitutes since acts of the body could not pollute a holy spirit. The Council of Jerusalem explicitly prohibited these sins (Acts 15.28-29).

Jesus says that he had given her time to repent of her sin, but she despised his commands and had not repented. So, he declares emphatically (‘behold’) that he will punish her—her bed of sin will be her bed of sickness—and will visit those who adhered to her teaching with great tribulations, leading to death, if they also refuse to repent, on hearing this letter of rebuke read to them. Her retribution will serve as a warning to all who think that they can be licentious and ignore God’s command to be holy (Lev 11.44-45; 1 Pt 1.16).

Some in the congregation had not yet been led astray by the teachings which the false teachers called ‘the deep things of God’, but Jesus sarcastically called them by what they really were, ‘the deep things of Satan’. Paul labels this teaching as falsely called philosophy and knowledge (Col 2.8; 1 Tim 6.20). The mystery cults (e.g., Sibylline oracles) and the incipient Gnosticism in their day claimed to initiate novices into a deeper spiritual awareness—which was often nothing more than the equivalent of a drug-induced stupor. Jesus ridicules this supposed knowledge and encourages the Thyatirans to do nothing other than to hold fast to what they had—the truth that they had learned when they came to faith and their dedication to love, faith, service, and patience, in Christ’s name.

### **Jesus Knows Our Works**

(Rev 2.2, 3, 9, 13, 19; Rev 3.1, 8, 15)

Jesus informs each of the seven churches that he knows their works, or trials. He uses the word ‘works’ in a broad sense, as it is used elsewhere by John (Jn 3.19-20; 5.36; 7.3; 8.39; 1 Jn 3.8). Thus, he informs the seven churches that he not only knows about their conduct and the trials others inflict upon them, but also knows their character—their weaknesses and strengths, their fears and courage, and their doubts and faith. He knows both the inner source and the outer manifestation of their works, as they live their lives as Christians in the hostile environment of a world in rebellion against its creator.

On reading the statement “I know your works”, we might think that Jesus is informing them that he knows what is transpiring on the earth because he sits in heaven and observes everything that is happening among the nations of men. This idea could possibly be supported by the mention of eyes of shining flames of fire (1.14; 2.18; 19.12), which some interpret as a reference to the power of his eyes to penetrate the deepest caverns of the human heart and reveal the moral temperature of man. However, this interpretation of the imagery is not accurate. Jesus does not know what is in man because he *observes* what man does. This would make his knowledge contingent rather than absolute.

We are told that during his earthly ministry, Jesus responded to the actions of men in specific ways because he knew what was in their hearts (Mt 9.3-4; Lk 9.46-47; Jn 2.23-25). The knowledge Jesus had of what was in their hearts was not because there was something that could be observed, since their intimate and unrevealed thoughts were not necessarily knowable through their outward actions. For example, we are aware that there are people who are such experienced actors that they can feign sincerity or concern, and yet are devils incarnate. Nor was his knowledge based on a general understanding of sinful human psychology. Rather, the knowledge he had, while on earth, went deeper. The temporary veil between his infinite and eternal divine nature and his acquired human nature was lifted and Jesus

as a man accessed the depths of the infinite omniscience of the Trinity.

The Greek word used here is *oida*, rather than *ginosko* (from which we obtain the English word ‘know’). The two words overlap significantly in their usage. However, it appears that we can detect a subtle difference between them. The first word is applied more often to innate knowledge and facts (Mt 25.12-13; Mk 10.19), whereas the second is applied more often to knowledge acquired through observation or experience (Mk 13.28-28; Lk 1.18). Thus, the choice of word used here may indicate that Jesus is emphasizing that his knowledge of each church’s works and trials is based on his omniscience rather than on his having observed events.

There may also be a deeper meaning indicated by his statement, “I know your works”. He may be speaking of his foreknowledge and divine predestination of all that transpires in the created realm. We will not take a digression into defending the doctrine of predestination (attested in Scripture: Acts 4.27-28; Rom 8.29; Eph 1.4-5, 11) or consider how man can be held responsible for his actions when they are predestined. Rather, we observe that Jesus, in his divine nature, does not acquire knowledge as we do. His knowledge is complete—he knows *all* things, possible and actual; simultaneously, not sequentially. There is nothing that he does not know and must learn—e.g., through observation. He does not use instruments of sensory perception; does not observe processes, events or states; and does not use empirical methods as we do. Nor is there anything that happens within the universe that is beyond the realm of his knowledge or is a surprise to him. Our past, present and future are not past, present and future to him. They are all one ever-present component of his total knowledge. Jesus’ foreknowledge is not based on his looking into our future to see how we will act toward him, so that he can then make decrees (e.g., about our election or reprobation) based on that foresight. That is a parody of what divine foreknowledge means.

Foreknowledge has another meaning than ‘foresight’. Thus, there is another sense in which we can understand what Jesus means when he says, “I know your works”. The word ‘know’ is often used in Scripture in a way that includes an element of intimacy—for example, as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Gen 4.1, 25). Therefore, Jesus could be informing each church that what he knows of their situation is embedded in his foreknowledge—his ‘for-love’; they have been loved and held close to his heart from eternity. Jesus, the infinite, eternal creator of the universe has a special concern for each congregation in his Church and for each member of it. His declaration that he will build his church (Mt 16.18) is settled in eternity because he gave his life for his people (Jn 10.15) and will ensure that each one of them is successfully brought through every trial and through death itself, to be with him forever (Jn 10.29).

Knowing that we are known by Jesus, how will we respond? Will we attempt to hide from him in shame, as Adam did (Gen 3.10)? Or will we rest in the understanding that, despite our weaknesses, fears, and doubts, Jesus knows and accepts our works—our actions, courage, love and faith—because he has first loved us (1 Jn 4.19).

### **Letter to the Church in Sardis – A Dead Church**

(Rev 3.1-6)

Sardis was at one time the wealthy inland capital of Lydia, a province in Asia Minor. It was supposedly an impregnable city; but was captured by Cyrus in 586 BC as he expanded the Persian Empire. It was the northwestern terminus of the Persian royal road that extended from Persepolis (in today’s western Iran). It was burned during the Ionian revolt against Persian rule (c 495 BC). Alexander annexed it into his empire in 334 BC. It was unexpectedly sacked by Antiochus III in 214 BC and absorbed into the Roman Empire in 133 BC as control of Lydia was taken from the Seleucids. It was devastated by a major earthquake in 17 AD. Archaeological remains indicate that it was rebuilt after the earthquake—apparently funded entirely from its own wealth. During the Islamic conquests of the 11<sup>th</sup> century it went into decline and was destroyed in 1402 AD by Tamerlane, the Turco-Mongol warlord. At the time of John, the city contained a prominent temple to Artemis and housed a significant Jewish community. The history of the city illustrates the contents of the letter from Jesus—it was a spiritually dead, pagan city.

Jesus informs the Sardians that he holds the “seven spirits of God”, along with the seven stars (1.16, 20; 2.1), which represent, collectively, the pastors/ elders and

congregations of the Church. Jesus adds the description about his holding the ‘seven spirits of God’ to the vision that John had seen (1.12-20). We determined that the expression ‘seven spirits of God’ probably refers to the Holy Spirit (see, [Seven Churches, Seven Spirits](#)), and may be used in the sense of ‘the seven-fold Spirit’, referring symbolically to the completeness or perfection of his activity. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus to bring spiritual light into the pagan darkness of this world (5.6; Jn 14.26; 15.26), like that which engulfed the city of Sardis.

The church in Sardis was living a lie—it was spiritually dead but had a reputation for being alive. When the church was founded it had been alive—true believers lived by faith and worshipped the Lord. However, its works were not complete before God the Father’s sight. The church had not produced fruit in the form of a subsequent generation of true believers. And, many of those who were in the congregation had succumbed to the idolatrous practices around them—as is indicated by the reference to ‘soiled garments’ (3.4). Even though it applied the name ‘Christian’ to its assembly and congregants it was no more Christian than were the participants in pagan temple cults of John’s day or the later adherents of Islam in the city. Sardis represents dead churches throughout history and the world. For example, many denominations (e.g., the United Methodist Church in the US and the United Church of Canada) are spiritually dead. They claim to be Christian, and may have a few true believers in their midst, but their official doctrinal statements on topics such as the deity of Jesus and the resurrection, same-sex unions, the reality of eternal damnation of the reprobate, and the uniqueness of Christianity and the Gospel are anti-Biblical, blasphemous, and an offence in the sight of God. It is a sad situation when those who have had the word of life (1 Jn 1.1), have known the living Saviour (1.18), and have had a mission to the lost world are now spiritually dead. They wear the garments of Christ but are wolves in sheep’s clothing, they claim to be soldiers in his army but are traitors like Judas who fight on Satan’s side.

The church in Sardis receives limited praise from Jesus. He observes that there were a few who had not abandoned the faith and had not been polluted by participating in idolatrous practices. Their currently pure ‘garments’ and their worthiness are not of their own doing but are derived from the holiness and merit of Jesus who graciously holds them in his hands—they had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7.14; 1 Jn 2.2). The presence of true believers in a dead church should cause us to be cautious about what we declare about the salvation of individuals—only God knows those whom he has called. Just as at the time of the Reformation there were true believers in a largely apostate Church, a church today may be dead but individuals within it may be under the protective eye of the Saviour.

Jesus exhorts the Sardians to overcome their spiritual deadness, by taking action—in particular, the following:

- *Wake up.* Since he tells them to ‘become one watching’ (Greek), this indicates that, by the grace of God, spiritual deadness can be overcome. Their normal state has been spiritual lethargy and sleep. Instead they are to become alert and on-guard against the ease with which a person can fall into sin in the midst of a pagan culture.
- *Strengthen.* The flicker of faith remaining in the congregation needs to be fanned into a full flamed passion for service in the name of Jesus.
- *Remember.* They need to reflect on the truth that they had heard in the past and their reception of it.
- *Obey.* They are to retain the correct doctrine and to keep the associated commands which they had received from the apostles.
- *Repent.* They need to confess their sin of complacency and unbelief.

If they do not take these actions, Jesus says that he will come against them suddenly, like a thief. This is likely an allusion to the suddenness of the historic attacks of Cyrus and Antiochus. The demise of the church in Sardis is a type for the visitation Jesus has in store for every denomination and congregation which drifts into a smug disregard for Christ and his word.

### **The Lamb’s Book of Life**

(Rev 3.5; Rev 13.8; Rev 17.8; Rev 20.12, 15; Rev 21.27)

The Lamb’s book of life is one of three classes of metaphorical books mentioned in Revelation—the three are: the record of the works of mankind (20.12; Ps

139.16), plagues against unbelievers (5.1-9.21), and the Lamb's book of life that records the names of the elect. The book of life has OT precedents (Ex 32.32; Ps 69.28; Is 34.16; Dan 12.1) and Paul also refers to it (Phil 4.3). It is the citizenship roll of the heavenly Zion. We now consider what we can learn from the six references to the book of life in Revelation.

The book of life includes the names of a specific group of individuals from mankind, since not every person's name is written in it (13.8; 17.8; 20.15; 27.27). Some commentators argue that it is not possible to determine the grounds upon which a person's name is included within the book of life. For example, one writer suggested that the names are included in it on the basis of "divine foreknowledge rather than divine will"—i.e., that God sees that individuals will choose to believe at some point in the future and that he then includes their names in the book. In his attempt to defend the psychological fiction that sinners have free wills—they don't (Jn 8.34)—he claims that God's foreknowledge is not his will, and ignores the reality that God states that he elects and predestines some individuals to eternal life (Acts 13.48; Rom 8.28-30; Eph 1.4-5, 11), and does not elect others. The idea that God only foresees what men will choose to do but does not decree (predestine) their actions is an impossibility. In a world of truly contingent events, no one could know with certainty what would happen in the future. So, unless God were to make events happen, he could not foresee them. However, God decrees all things, and ensures that his plans unfold with absolute fidelity (Ps 139.16; Prov 16.33; Is 14.24; Acts 2.23; Acts 3.18; Acts 4.28). Nevertheless, men are still truly and fully responsible for their actions (Jer 17.10; Ezk 18; Rom 6.23; Mt 16.27). God even states that events are both predestined and the actions of responsible agents (Gen 50.19-20; Acts 2.23; Acts 4.27-28).

The names of the elect—those who will be saved—are written in the book of life, from the foundation of the world (13.8; 17.8). The names of the rest of mankind—that is, those who are inveterate rebels and refuse to repent (9.20-21)—are not included, since they are not among the elect, but are those who are predestined to everlasting reprobation (Rom 9.11-13, 21-23). Someone might object, saying that God judges mankind on the basis of their works and not on the basis of election. It is true that God will judge mankind on the basis of what they have done (2.23; 20.12-13; Mt 16.27; Rom 2.6; 2 Cor 5.10; 1 Pt 1.17). However, this judgement is rendered on whether a person's name is written, or not written, in the book of life (20.12, 15; 21.27). There is no contradiction between these two statements. Intrinsically all of mankind's works are sinful (Gen 6.5; Jer 17.9). People can do nothing of themselves that is worthy of consideration before God, or which could repay their debt of sin. Thus, any good work that a person does is because he has been elected, saved by God's electing love ('foreknowledge'), and declared righteous in the blood of the Lamb. No one is saved based on his works (Eph 2.8-10). Rather, those whose names are written in the book of life have Christ's works credited to their account and, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to perform works that are pleasing to God.

Those who conquer in the Christian life will not be blotted out of the book of life, but have Jesus confess their names before the Father and his angels (3.5). Some infer from this statement that it is possible for a person to lose his salvation and have his name removed from the book of life. However, this is a mistaken understanding of what Jesus states. If it were possible for a person to do something that could cause him to lose his salvation, then there could be no election from the foundation of the world, no assurance of salvation, and our salvation would depend on our works and be a contradiction of salvation by God's grace alone—salvation by grace is clearly what Scripture teaches. The statement in 3.5, is an example of a hypothetical warning (such as that given in Heb 6.4-8) used to encourage perseverance to the end. Rather than focusing on the apparent support for the belief that true Christians can lose their salvation, we should focus on the positive aspect—all Christians who persevere to the end will be welcomed into heaven and declared righteous in the great assembly. True believers simply cannot lose their salvation (Jn 5.24; Jn 6.37; Jn 10.26-29; Rom 8.28-39). Nothing can separate them from the love of Christ. It is impossible for Christ's work to fail. If a person is elected by the Father, and his name is written in the book of life, he will be saved! Does this mean that a saved person can go and freely commit grievous sins, since he cannot lose his salvation? Absolutely not! Paul is emphatic about this (Rom 6). God who saves also works to purify the lives of his people and to preserve them as they face temptation. Of course, Christians still sin during their lives on earth. There is no perfection in this life. But they do not persist in sin (1 Tim 5.20; 1 Jn 3.9) and they repent of their sins.

The list of the names written in the Lamb's book of life is known only to God. However, you can know if *your* name is there. If you have repented of your sins and have believed in Jesus as your saviour, then your name is in his book. It is foolish to worry about whether you have done enough to be saved or to think that you might lose your salvation. Rather move forward with the assurance that your name is written in heaven (Heb 12.23).

## Letter to the Church in Philadelphia – A Faithful Flock

(Rev 3.7-13)

The ‘City of Brotherly Love’, in the Roman territory of Lydia (the western portion of modern Turkey), is believed to have been named after a Lydian king, Attalus II Philadelphus, who ruled from 159-138 BC. He was called *philadelphia* (‘brother-lover’) because of his faithfulness to his brother Eumenes. The part of Turkey in which Philadelphia is located is in an area of volcanic activity, and subject to earthquakes. Philadelphia and nearby Sardis were destroyed in an earthquake in 17 AD, about 50 years before this letter was written. It is probable that Jesus makes an indirect reference to the destruction of the pagan temples in the city during that earthquake when he assures the Philadelphians that they will be a pillar in the temple of God and go out and in forever (3.12). Despite the earthquakes, the city continues to be inhabited because the rich volcanic soils are ideal for growing grapes. At the time of John, the Philadelphians recognized Dionysus, the god of wine and the harvest, as a titular deity. Today, the city (now called Alaşehir) produces Sultana raisins and is the source of a popular mineral water. Of the seven churches to which Jesus wrote, Philadelphia is the only one left today with a strong Christian presence (surrounded by adherents of Islam). In this letter, the church is not rebuked by Jesus, but only encouraged. Thus, it may be that the promises of verses 8 and 12 have temporal as well as spiritual fulfilment.

Jesus refers to himself with two titles, by which he declares his deity:

- *The Holy One*. This is a frequently applied name for God. It occurs about 40 times in the OT; most often in Isaiah [27 times]. The only other uses of this title in the NT are by John (Rev 16.5; 1 Jn 2.20), and from the mouth of a demon-possessed man (Lk 4.34). Holiness is an essential attribute of God (4.8; Is 6.3). It separates God from the false gods of the pagans (Ex 15.11) who were capricious, filled with lusts, and debauched. For example, we can align the Olympians with sins—Zeus or Hades with greed, Hera with envy, Aphrodite with lust, Ares with wrath, Athena with pride, Dionysus with gluttony and drunkenness, and Hermes with sloth.
- *The True One*. This is the only place that this title is applied to Christ (or God). However, God is the true God (Jn 17.3; 1 Jn 5.20), and only tells the truth (Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18). Jesus is the true light (Jn 1.9), true bread (Jn 6.32), true vine (Jn 15.1), and only source of truth (Jn 14.6). He stands in stark contrast to the false gods of the pagans whose mouths are full of lies. For example, Zeus deceives his wife Hera, goddess of marriage, by attempting to conceal his affairs with nymphs and mortals.

Jesus also declares that he holds the key of David, which he alone uses to open and shut. This is a reference to Isaiah 22.22. By this statement, Jesus claims to be the legitimate representative of the house of David and the one who has ultimate royal power. His sovereignty extends beyond the kingdom of Lydia or the Roman Empire, to absolute authority over those who will be admitted into the kingdom of heaven, the Church (Mt 16.19), and over death and the grave (1.18).

The Philadelphians receive unadulterated praise from Jesus. They had to contend with paganism, Jewish hostility (3.9; [Ignatius to the Philadelphians](#), ch. 6), and materialism. Although they were a small assembly of believers and had little worldly power, they had obeyed Jesus, endured their sufferings with patience, and not denied his name. Thus, they are promised immediate:

- *Success in evangelism*. The opened door, that cannot be shut, appears to be a reference to the congregation being granted an opportunity, of which they would not be deprived, to preach the Gospel (1 Cor 16.9).
- *Reversal for ethnic Jews*. Noah blessed Japheth with a promise that his descendants would dwell in the tents of Shem (Gen 9.27). Throughout the OT era this was understood as Gentiles having to become part of Israel to receive blessings from God (Ps 86.9; Is 45.14; Is 49.23; Is 60.14). But, since ethnic Jews had rejected their Messiah, they were no longer Jews, but only said that they were. True Jews are believing Christians (see, [A Synagogue of Satan](#)). An ironic reversal has occurred. Now those who claim to be ethnic Jews fill the former role of Japheth’s descendants and can become true Jews only by acknowledging that Jesus is the Messiah (the Christ). After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, many Jews fled to Asia Minor. As witnesses to the fulfilment of Jesus’ prophecies (Mt 24.15-35) and God’s love for Christians, some of the ethnic Jews joined the fledgling church in Philadelphia and, figuratively, bowed at their feet.

- *Preservation through trials.* Some understand verse 10 to be speaking of an eschatological rapture, based on a faulty interpretation of what Jesus teaches (e.g., Mt 24.3-21; Lk 17.34-37). Rather, Jesus promises that they would be kept—protected, or possibly exempted—through the soon to occur persecutions. This is consistent with his prayer (Jn 17.15), which has the only other NT occurrence ‘kept from’. Jesus does not ask for their physical removal but for their protection from temptations of the evil one.

To realize these blessings, they must persevere in their profession. Thus, he exhorts them to hold fast to the crown which they already possessed—the truth, and their faith and salvation. Trials were to come soon—Jesus visited the unbelieving Jews with the destruction of Jerusalem and tested his Church through the Roman persecution of Christians throughout the Empire. The fact that he tells them to ‘hold fast’ is an encouragement that they will survive.