

THE GLORY OF CHRIST:
Revelation chapter one (NIV)

*The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ**. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this **prophecy**, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*

John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father —to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.

*“I am the **Alpha and the Omega**,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”*

*I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone **like a son of man**, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the **First and the Last**. I am the **Living One**; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

For most Christians, the last book in the Bible is very strange and hard to understand. It is the only NT book that concentrates on prophecy. Revelation is unique; it often polarizes people. Some avoid it entirely while others are obsessed with its details. It is as fascinating as it is mystifying and terrifying. Its strange structure, symbolic images and use of numbers, have confused and baffled its readers. Some understand its language as literal, others as entirely symbolic, and others as both at once. Even stranger than the book itself, is the way that some Christians use it and misuse it. Over the centuries, Christians have debated how to interpret this book. One view is to combine parts from more than one interpretation. However, even when we do not understand with certainty, we can sense the value of this book. It tells us how history will end.

As Genesis describes past beginnings, so Revelation outlines future endings. God holds the future, and good will defeat evil, no matter how things appear to the contrary. It makes sense of a world that appears to be coming to an end, and reaffirms God’s just justice in the face of evil. At the end of time, God will destroy evil forever. God alone is sovereign; he remains in total control: *“Our Lord God Almighty reigns”* (19:6). Human history will climax with the return and eternal reign of Christ. The seven churches represent all God’s people who are given hope and encouraged to remain loyal and faithful to Christ, despite severe persecution.

It is a worship manual. Finally, we are left with the humbling thought that, after all we have done, by grace alone, God washes away our sin, clothes us with undeserved white robes, and adopts us into his family. Revelation unveils or uncovers hidden spiritual realities operating behind the events of history. It invites us to follow John through the “*door standing open in heaven*” (4:1), that is, to see the world, and the unfolding of its history, from the perspective of God’s throne. History has purpose and meaning. If that was important in the late first century, how much more crucial is it today when western culture has become secular, and even anti-Christian? Are we willing to have our grasp of reality expanded and enriched by this book? It uses timeless symbols that convey information and stir our emotions. Revelation offers hope for the future and challenges our complacency in the present. It offers us insight, encouragement and challenge in a compelling way, almost like no other book in the NT. Its visions confront us with God’s requirements and promises; they are not intended to satisfy our curiosity about minute end-time details. It is a challenge to all churches, of all time and place, to prepare for the arrival of Jesus, and warns them not to abandon their faith in Christ, or compromise with evil. We need this message today.

What kind of writing is Revelation? It has three elements: apocalypse, prophecy and a pastoral letter.

(1) The Greek word for “revelation” is “*apokalypsis*” meaning ‘unveiling’ or ‘revealing’. In most usage today, “apocalypse” means catastrophe and chaos, and the end of the world, because that’s what the book of Revelation seems to be mainly about. It looks at past and present events in the light of the future. Revelation uses picture language and symbolic numbers with spiritual significance. Seven, used frequently, suggests completeness, fulfilment and perfection. (Today some think of 13 as an unlucky number). In addition, Revelation is saturated with word pictures from the OT, especially from Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah.

(2) It is also a pastoral letter sent to particular people, in a particular place, (seven churches in the Roman province of Asia), at a particular time, (the first century A.D.), who faced the twin dangers of persecution and compromise. Today, from this book, we can learn what Jesus looks for in his Church.

(3) In addition it is a prophecy (1:3 and 22:18), looking to the future but doing so, as with the OT prophets, in order to show God’s perspective on the present. This extraordinary book is, in fact, “*the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ*” (verses 2 and 9) that can help us evaluate our own Christian lives today.

Christians have understood Revelation in four different ways:

1. It is a review of history that was mainly fulfilled in the first century of the Roman Empire. Yet the climax of the book is the return of Christ.
2. It is a preview or forecast of history that is mainly unfulfilled and relates to what will happen at the return of Christ. Yet this view robs the book of much of its relevance to the readers of John’s day.
3. It is an identifying of history between the first and second comings of Christ. However, different historical interpretations change from age to age.
4. It is a symbolic view of history, an allegory, with timeless spiritual truths, or moral principles, in the cosmic war between good and evil, between Satan and God, with no reference to time. Yet Revelation was specifically written to the existing churches of the first century.

It could be argued that **all** of these interpretations of John’s prophetic symbolism have a measure of revelation, and spiritual truth, applicable to **all** periods of history. One approach would be to combine the strengths of **all** four views.

John says from the beginning that the revelation he received is not the result of his own imagination; it was given to him by God, from Jesus, through an “*angel*” (1). He describes his experience in exile on the island of Patmos as being “*in the Spirit*” i.e. inspired (10). The blessing pronounced on those who “*hear it and take to heart*” (3) presents everyone with a serious challenge. His audience were to listen carefully, obey, and change their lives, as the following letters to the churches indicate. John’s emphasis was on moral living in preparation for Christ’s return and his eternal judgment. We must live committed lives devoted to God, if we want to participate in God’s victorious kingdom. John wants his audience of every age, and in all circumstances, to have confidence in the ultimate victory of the risen Christ who eternally reigns in glory.

Verses 5 and 6 describe three aspects of what Jesus has done for all believers: “*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father*”. (1) He “loves” us. This is the foundation stone on which our faith rests. Love brought Jesus into the world, took him to the cross, and flows from his heart to us from his throne in heaven. (2) The death of Jesus has defeated the powers that enslave us. This is a powerful image in an empire where slavery was commonplace. His death has “freed us” as the sacrifice for our sins. He died in our place to free us from the penalty and power of sin. The liberating power of the cross is at work in us today by the Holy Spirit. (3) We are called to be worshippers, standing before him as “priests” and declaring his praises. We are called to live as an expression of his “kingdom”, under his rule and reign, demonstrating his goodness to a watching world.

Verse 7 states the main theme of Revelation. The glorious return of Christ from heaven will be a reversal of his departure: “*Look, he is coming with the clouds,*” and “*every eye will see him, even those who pierced him;* and *all peoples on earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.*” (Mat. 24:30; Daniel 7:13; John 19:34). “Clouds” mean that he comes as God’s representative. Here “*every eye will see him*”, rather than being limited to Israel, as in Zechariah’s vision (12:10). God’s people are meant to be a people who are prepared for what is to come. His coming will have a universal impact. The emphasis is judgment. Many people “mourn” or wail, because it is too late to repent, and they see their coming judgment, whereas believers say, “*So shall it be! Amen.*” The world will be called to account. The challenge for believers is to live our lives so that what will be important on that day, is what is important to us now. The promise of Christ’s return helps to keeps us watchful and faithful in our service; it gives us steadfast courage under suffering. Regrettably, the promise of Christ’s return has been abused and misapplied over the centuries.

God confirms John’s prophecy that the returning Christ is Lord of history. The eternal Father is referred to as One: “*Who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty*” (8). God encompasses past, present and future. He is eternal; he governs time and eternity. This is an adaptation of God’s name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Everything began with him (the First), and everything will end with him (the Last). And in between, all is well because his purpose is being worked out, despite the schemes of Satan and the persecution of the world. The Holy Spirit is symbolized as “*seven spirits*” (Isaiah 11:2). The death (“faithful witness”), resurrection (“firstborn from the dead”), and present rule (“ruler”) of Jesus are emphasised (5).

Consider John’s statement that: “*Suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus*” (9). The revelation of the glory of the risen Christ comes when John is in a situation of isolation, loneliness and suffering. On a barren, isolated island, the veil between heaven and earth was drawn back to reveal the glory of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. Revelation was a book with a secret message, in code, that could be passed around and only understood by Christians, but an official of the Empire would not be able to understand it. At a time when the worship of the Caesars was spreading, this was a powerful message of hope for those early believers who had to suffer and die for their faith. In spite of the cruel power of the Roman empire, the Lamb of God would win the final victory. The fall of Babylon described in chapter 18, pointed to the fall of the Roman empire. This gave persecuted believers the courage to be faithful.

John is clear that the Christian life requires “patient endurance”(9) or “perseverance” (NASB). There is a gap between the reality of the present and our expectation of the future. In the present we experience suffering as a result of being “in Jesus”. This was the consistent teaching of Jesus: “*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me*” (Matthew 5:10-11). Anyone who wants to follow him must walk his way of suffering and self-sacrifice: “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Mark 8:34). Yet, we also experience a foretaste of the future, as the kingdom of God has broken into the present, in anticipation of what is to come: “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs —heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory*” (Romans 8:17).

While the emperor dominated “eternal Rome”, John is concerned with another kingdom, whose Lord is Lord of all. Jesus announces himself as the Alpha and Omega, (verses 8 and 17), using the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet as a symbolic way of referring to his position as **Lord over all history**, from beginning to end (Isaiah 41:4). Further, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, tell us Jesus is the **Lord of life and death**, the guarantor of our own resurrection. At the cross he defeated death and now lives to guide his Church. We are not alone. The risen Christ walks “*among the lampstands*” that represent the seven churches (13). The ever Living One is with us. He is **Lord of the future**. He has not only overcome death but has authority in Hades, the world of the dead. Keys are symbols of authority and power. The eternal destiny of the world and individuals lies with him. Knowing that Jesus is Lord of all is the antidote to fear and despair.

To John, the sight and sound of the risen Christ was literally breath-taking: “*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead*” (17). Jesus calms John with a touch of his right hand: “*Do not be afraid.*” There could be no stranger description of Jesus as the glorious and triumphant Lord. Here, allow your imagination to give you understanding: “*Someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance*” (13-16).

John uses biblical images of splendour to describe the greatest splendour. He draws freely on the vision in Daniel 7, and that of Ezekiel 1, as well as the description of the angel in Daniel 10. Jesus is described as someone “*like a son of man*”, exactly the words of Daniel 7:13, that also describes the Ancient of Days, the Lord God himself (Daniel 7:9). “Son of man” was Jesus’ favourite description of himself as the Messiah. Here John blends the two figures of the Ancient of Days and the Son of man into one Person. It is one of the most dramatic testimonies to the divinity of Christ in the NT. How great is Jesus to you?

John says that Jesus appeared to him as a person, but each part of his body was so dazzling that only symbolic language could describe it. Christ’s face is likened to the brilliance of the sun, an image of his divine glory. His eyes are like a flame of fire. His penetrating scrutiny allows him see through the false fronts of Christianity, like hypocrisy and empty ritual. He can say to each church, “I know”, infallibly discerning its spiritual condition. “*His voice was like the sound of rushing waters*”; stand by a rocky shore in a storm or a huge waterfall and let the majestic noise possess you, to get the sense. The feet like glowing bronze will crush any opposition. In Ezekiel and Daniel the brightness of shining metal like fire is connected with the appearance of the glory of God. The two-edged sword represents God’s Word, which discerns truth and judges rebels (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 19:15). His clothes were like that of the OT high priest and royalty. How can we keep a vision of the heavenly Christ so that it makes a difference to the way we live?

Christ tells John that the “*seven lampstands are the seven churches*”. The seven branched lampstand is a symbol of Israel and the Jewish Messiah. Jesus “*walks among*” the churches (2:1); he is closely involved with his suffering people. The imagery represents the individual churches of all time, churches that bear the light of the gospel of Christ to the world: “*You are the light of the world...Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14-16). In 2:5, Jesus warns that it is possible for a church to lose its place as a lampstand, through a failure to repent of cold, loveless orthodoxy. A church may continue to exist without being light in the world’s darkness. The churches are lights in a dark world, only because of their close relationship with Christ, the source of the light, through the Holy Spirit. May we pay close attention and “*hear what the Spirit says to the churches*” (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13, 22). Each church was to take to heart, the message given to all the other churches, as well as to itself.

APPLICATION TO DAILY LIFE

1. *"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!* (17-18) Remind yourself that God is in control and you have nothing to fear. How may this vision of the risen Christ make a difference to the way you live?
2. John was in exile as a punishment for his Christian leadership. Today, remember believers who are being persecuted for their faith. Pray for the suffering Church and for its steadfastness under trial.