

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 1:1

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The revelation of 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 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 the peoples of the 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. His head and hair were 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 out of his mouth came 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 behold 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 (Rev. 1:1-20).

Many Christians find the book of Revelation intimidating . For some, it is the most difficult book in the Bible. The reasons lie in the later chapters rather than these opening ones. The first chapter of Revelation contains a vision of the sovereignty of God. More precisely, it is a vision of the majesty of Jesus Christ, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave..." (1:1). It is God's last word to us about His Son. It is important to keep this focus clear: Revelation is about Jesus Christ. He is the key that unlocks its mysteries. What the Gospels give in spoken form, Revelation gives in pictorial form.

In some ways, Revelation is the outworking of what Jesus told Peter, "...on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). If these words from Matthew comprise the still photograph, the book of Revelation signals the movie. In a day when the visual and cinematic takes precedence over the written word, the genre of Revelation seems particularly suitable. Revelation is a book of pictures. Like coffee-table books, it is designed to appeal to the visual senses. As we turn over its pages, we are meant to be overwhelmed by its descriptions of the Savior. Noting that the prevailing command in the book is not "Listen!" but "Look!," we do well to recall what G. K. Chesterton once inscribed in a child's picture book as we thumb through the chapters of Revelation:

Stand up, and keep your childishness,
Read all the pedant's creeds and strictures
But don't believe in anything
That can't be told in coloured pictures!

The Book of Revelation is meant to humble us by a vision of the absolute sovereignty of God over history: past, present, *and* future. There is nothing outside of God's control. Every power, every evil-power is subject to the rule of God. 'There is not a single inch of the whole terrain of our human existence,' wrote Abraham Kuyper, "over which Christ ... does not proclaim, 'Mine!'" This is the perspective of the last book of the Bible.

Prologue

Just as the Bible begins with God (Gen. 1:1), so it ends with God (Rev. 1:1; 22:21). The focus is theological. It is a view of God that we are meant to reap from these closing pages. To a church facing persecution and death, the message they most need to hear was one that assured them of a Helmsman, a Governor, a Transformer who would keep His people, no matter what. The prologue is meant to convey just that message.

The key word with which this book begins is *apokalupsis*! What we are about to study is in the nature of an apocalypse, that is to say, an unveiling, a revelation. The curtains are about to be pulled back to disclose sights and sounds almost too strange to relate. We are going to be transported to a different kind of literature from, say, the gospels, or Paul's letters. But more of this later. For now, it is important to grasp that God is showing us something He wants His 'servants' (v. 1) to know.

Five things follow in quick succession in the opening three verses which give meaning to this revelation, or apocalypse:

(i) As to its *source*, ultimately it is from God the Father. 'The revelation... which God gave' (v. 1). These strange visions, with their gorgeous colours and vivid descriptive power, are not the product of a deranged, hallucinating mind. These are 'visions from God' (cf. Ezek. 1:1). At the same time, the revelation comes from Jesus Christ. The opening verse wants us to appreciate the role Jesus always plays as a mediator between God and men. It is from God through Jesus Christ to John (and eventually God's servants) that this revelation emerges. It is possible that the phrase: 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' can mean that the revelation is *about* Christ – the *book* of Revelation is certainly about Jesus Christ! But, the words 'gave Him' would seem to imply the meaning we have indicated. One way, or another, Christ is central. The Greek is very emphatic, putting the name *Jesus Christ* immediately after the word *apokalupsis*. Everything about this unfolding revelation has Christ in it, one way or another. He will be the focus of our attention. Like two book-ends, it is the name 'Jesus' that straddles this last book of the Bible, but in the opening five verses, the more intimate name 'Jesus' is heightened to the full, dignified 'Jesus Christ' three times. We are not to be in doubt as to the focus of this study. We are going to be told about Jesus. Furthermore, these visions are mediated through an 'angel'. There are two ways

of understanding what is meant by, "He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John." Taking the angel as Jesus Himself, it could mean that God made it known to John by Jesus, repeating the opening phrase; or, more likely, that Jesus made it known to John through an angel – the angel mentioned in the closing chapter (22:16). John is so struck by the majesty of this angel that he falsely offers worship and is immediately rebuked (22:8). The ministry of angels is very important in the book of Revelation (5:2; 7:2; 10:1-2; 14:19 etc.).

(ii) As to the *recipients* of the revelation, there are two: John and 'his servants'. A scribe in the fourth century seems to have added the words, *tou theologou*, 'the theologian' to the text at this point. It thus appears as, 'John the Divine' in the Authorized Version. This is John: the son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21), brother of James (Mk. 1:19, the apostle who died in 44 b.c.), Jesus' first cousin (through his mother Salome, Mary's sister [Mk. 15:40; 16:1-2]), fisherman (Mk. 1:19), one of the inner circle of three (with Peter and James – the Lord's brother [Lk. 9:28]), the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 13:23), pastor (bishop) of Ephesus and now prisoner on Patmos (v.9)

It helps us to understand the nature of the Christian life if we introduce the picture of service: the recipients of this apocalypse are 'slaves,' willing slaves of Christ. All Christians are bond-slaves of Jesus. To believers facing what appears to be a troubled future (cf. v.9), the knowledge that we are in the service of our Master keeps us going.

(iii) As to the *content* of the revelation, two things are said about it: John bears witness to the word of God, attested as it is by Jesus Christ (v.2), and then writes it down in the form of 'words' (v.3). He is to "write on a scroll" what he sees (v.11). The prologue, written after the main part of the book in much the same as authors do still, attests to the divine origin and self-authenticating character of Revelation as Scripture, inerrant because its author cannot lie, invaluable because the Shepherd of our souls corroborates its truthfulness. Though we are introduced here to visions of great splendour and complexity, they are still 'words,' needing to be read and studied.

(iv) There is *great blessing* promised to those who read and study the book of Revelation! That should be all the encouragement we need to continue. But, as the Bible is never tired of repeating, *mere* study is not enough; we have to 'take to heart' (lit. 'keep') what is written (v.3). This is first of seven beatitudes in the book (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Blessing comes in the way of *obedience* (cf. Deut. 5:1; 33:29). Reading Scripture ought to change us; when it doesn't, and we still insist upon our holiness, great harm is done to the cause of Christ.

(v) There is a sense of *urgency* about this book of Revelation: 'the time is near' (v.3). Does this mean that the predicted events of this final book of the Bible are to take place within the span of John's lifetime, or that of his readers? Perhaps,

and if so, it will radically affect the way we understand the book. Some do interpret Revelation this way, assigning much of its contents to a description of the downfall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman Empire in the time of Nero in 70 a.d. This means, of course, that the book was written *before* this date. Others have observed that 'near' (or 'suddenly') is a relative term and could mean that when the time comes, the predicted events will take place in relatively brief time-span. This allows for a later dating of the book, and the more traditional fulfilment of the persecutions (though less intense than those under Nero) of the reign of Emperor Domitian, c. 96 a.d. This was the view attested by Irenaeus (c.130 - c.200 a.d.). Solving this issue is a matter we will have to face in the course of our study. For now, it is sufficient to note that, either way, there is a sense of urgency: the time for the fulfilment of these things has arrived. A decisive moment in time has been reached.

Behind this phrase lies the idea that a Sovereign hand is in charge of the future: that history is His-story. What happens to God's servants is not chance, but decree. God orders and fulfils His plan for His people, even in the face of terrible and terrifying events. No matter how bad it may seem, God never abdicates His rule.

Greetings

Unusual as this book is, it is still a letter with the customary three-fold opening: (i) the name of the writer ('John'); (ii) the name of the recipients ('the seven churches... of Asia'); and (iii) greetings: 'grace and peace...' (v.4).

Since there were more than seven churches in the province of Asia at the time John wrote, *the seven churches... of Asia*, identified in verse 11, seem to have been chosen for symbolic significance, seven being a number the Bible associates with wholeness and perfection (think of the Sabbath, the Sabbatical Year and the Year of jubilee which followed the seven sabbatical years).

Grace is God's undeserved love for sinners, disclosed in the coming of Jesus and His self-giving on the cross (cf. w. 5-6); *peace* is the first of several Old Testament allusions in Revelation, being a rendition in Greek of the Hebrew *shalom*, spiritual and physical well-being.

All three persons of the Trinity are mentioned as givers of the 'greeting'. The Father is expressed in terms that remind us of the revelation of the divine name as 'I AM THAT I AM' in Exodus 3:14-15. He is the One 'who is, and who was, and who is to come'. In the face of changing circumstances, God remains the same; he continues in being as the self-existent, self-sustaining, unchanging Lord. The Holy Spirit is what the 'seven spirits' (v.4) probably means. It reminds us of one of Zechariah's vision (*Zech. 4:2-10*). The Spirit is depicted 'before the throne', waiting to do the will of the Father. His ministry is one of service,

highlighting the work of the Father and of the Son.

Of Jesus Christ, three things are said: He is a 'faithful witness' (cf. 2:13; 3:14), in the sense that he is a *Prophet* who accurately relates His Father's character and plans. *Kingly* allusions lie behind the term 'firstborn from the dead', a description also found in Colossians 1:18. Its background lies in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), and signifies, not that Jesus was the first person to be raised from the dead, but the status and dignity that He had as a consequence. Thus, Moses was to tell Pharaoh that Israel as a nation is the Lord's 'firstborn' (Exod. 4:22), and God promises to appoint David 'My firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth' (Psa. 89:27). To Christ belongs all the unique honor and rank of the firstborn; of those who have died and will rise, he is the chief. To this is added yet another allusion to Psalm 89:27: He is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth'. To Christians facing tyrannical Roman Emperors, some of whom bordered on the irrational and megalomaniac, this was comforting news.

Mention of Jesus causes John to overflow with references to His work as our *Priest*. Not surprisingly, John, 'the apostle of love', mentions Jesus' love for sinners. Greater love cannot be envisaged than the love expressed at Calvary. What was it all about? The liberation of sinners from bondage to sin by sacrificial blood-shedding (v.5).

Citing and alluding as much as he does from the Old Testament, John now explains that Christians, redeemed by Christ's death and resurrection, are the true Israel of God; in Christ we become '*a kingdom and priests*' (v.6) to God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is an allusion, perhaps, to Exodus 19:6 (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5,9), and a testimony to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers so valued at the Reformation. Though the words '*to serve*' are not part of the Greek, the idea is certainly there. We are saved to serve.

The whole point of this multi-faceted reference to Jesus and His saving work is to render a doxology: '*to Him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen*'. A sight of Jesus' greatness ought to elicit worship. True worship is a focus on Christ: His person and His finished work. Perhaps John, as we can almost imagine him, was encouraging this pilgrim church of the first century to more praise of Christ. We can never praise Him too much.

Keeping the Focus on Jesus

But, as every student of Revelation knows, this book is about the second coming. The details need not concern us yet, just the fact of it. As though John could see it in his mind's eye, he can say: '*Look, He is coming with the clouds*' sounding much like the words of Jesus in the Olivet discourses (Mk. 13:26; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Lk. 21:27). The story is unfolding yet. What the Bible has been about from the start has been leading to this, to Calvary, but also to 'the day of the Lord.' An

event is before us, 'soon' (v. 1), 'near' (v. 3), that ends the unfolding time line as we now know it. God is bringing history to its culmination; He who is the Lord of time, gathers it together. Jesus comes with the 'clouds' (v. 7), where God's presence had so often been realised (Exod. 13:21; 16:10; Matt. 17:5; Acts 1:9). Again two Old Testament images weave the present scene: one in Daniel, where the prophet saw one like a son of man coming 'with the clouds of heaven' (Dan. 7:13), and another, from Zechariah, where the prophet depicts Jerusalem looking on 'one they have pierced' and who 'mourn for him' (Zech. 12:10). The mourning in view here is not that of repentance, as in Zechariah, but of remorse. When Jesus comes, it will not be possible to repent; the time for turning will be past. All that is left now is the grief of rejection: those who have rejected Christ will be themselves rejected.

Difficult as this is, we are encouraged to agree with the divine judgement and say, 'Amen.' The reason is not difficult to grasp: the verdict is pronounced by the One who calls Himself, 'the Alpha and the Omega' (v. 8). Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, Omega the last. All that lies between, the completed revelation of God, comes from Him. It is an affirmation of His sovereignty. He is 'the Almighty' and expression which will be repeated eight more times before we finish our study of this book (4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22).

It is a lesson in piety and Christian growth: the harsher the difficulties, the sweeter is God's sovereignty. 'He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak' (Isa. 40:29). God can do whatever he wills to do. It was the refuge Job came to rest in: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted' (Job 42:2). Knowledge of God's greatness produces great faith and great praise.

The Church in Trouble

Commenting upon a passage in 1 Peter, Calvin once wrote: 'The Church of Christ has been so divinely constituted from the beginning that the Cross has been the way to victory, death the way to life.' The shadow of the cross fell in deeply etched lines on the first followers of Jesus. John talks about 'the suffering' (v. 9), knowing that his readers knew full well of what he meant by it. Using the same word, Jesus, in the tense stillness of the Upper Room, had forewarned his disciples: 'In this world you will have *trouble*' (Jn. 16:33). And using the same word again, the apostles testified to an early lesson learned following the first missionary journey: 'We must go through many *hardships* to enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22).

The apostle John, according to Jerome, following the years of ministry in Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 2:9, where Paul describes him as a 'pillar' of the Jerusalem church), engaged in a lengthy ministry in Ephesus, where he was to die in old age. At some point, he was banished to 'Patmos' for a few months in the year 95

a.d., 'because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (v.9). Patmos is a small island, some 55 km off the south-west coast of Ephesus, a prison island about 12 km long and 7 km wide. It is described as having been rugged, with craggy volcanic hills. It is here, on this island, that John writes the Apocalypse. According to the testimony of Eusebius (265-340 a.d.), John was released by the Emperor Nerva, somewhere between 96 and 98 a.d. John was no stranger to trials.

Losses and crosses are part of what we should expect in following Jesus Christ. The testimony of the last book of the Bible only confirms that of the previous 65 books: the closer we follow Jesus, the more likely we are to draw the enemy's fire. In this sense, John is a '*brother and companion*' with many others in the '*suffering*' and '*kingdom*' (v.9). All this requires '*patient endurance*'. All three of these ideas: suffering – kingdom – patient endurance, will find echoes throughout this book. They are key ideas. A key thought needs explaining before we go further: 'patient endurance' (NIV) is an attempt to get at the heart of what the one word original means, sometimes rendered 'patience' (KJV), but thereby implying a passivity which this word does not intend. In truth, the word is meant to convey both the passive (*patience*) and the active (*perseverance*). The idea is that of standing firm under pressure, maintaining a trust in God and a desire to maintain spiritual disciplines. "Stickability" may get to the core of what we mean, and it is a major reason why this book was written. When the temptation abounds to cut and run, to crumple and collapse, the Apocalypse encourages backbone and bravery. How brave? "Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life' (2:10). *That brave!*

All of this is a reminder that John's exile brought him more blessing than his freedom might have done. Exiled from his friends and companions in worship, and devoid of the letters of Paul that might have comforted him, he discovers that his worship is but a faint echo of the worship of heaven. On the Lord's Day, he hears the voice of God speaking to him. And then (v.10), he hears a loud voice like a trumpet that instructs him to write down what he sees and hears.

The Lord's Day

John is '*on... Patmos*' (v.9), and, at the same time, '*in the Spirit*' (v.10), thus attesting to the truth that one can be in two realities at the same time. Surrounding him were the ethereal realities of a volcanic prison island; concurrently, he was experiencing the spiritual blessings of a day which had now begun to have special significance, '*the Lord's Day*'. Three issues are before us:

(i) For a time, the early Christians observed two holy days – the Jewish Sabbath and the Lord's Day. As time went by, the observance of the former was dropped, but not the latter. Commemorating as it did the resurrection of Christ, and with it the dissolving of the Old Covenant and the dawning of the New Covenant

administration, the Lord's Day too on the continuing principle enacted within the fourth commandment of the Decalogue: that one-day-in-seven be kept separate from the others. On this first day of the week, Christians would meet together for worship. This is the only reference to the 'Lord's Day' in the New Testament, but it is clear that it refers to the first day of the week. Clement of Alexandria (c.150 - c.215), wrote, 'A true Christian, according to the commands of the Gospel, observes the Lord's day by casting out all bad thoughts, and cherishing all goodness, honouring the resurrection of the Lord, which took place on that day.'

(ii) John implies more by '*in the Spirit*' than what we may each one expect on the Lord's Day. He refers to an ecstatic condition, much like Peter's in Acts 10:10. The experience is accompanied by '*a loud voice like a trumpet*' which urges him to '*write on a scroll what you see*' (v.11), and distribute to seven different churches in Asia Minor (the significance of which we shall look at in our study of chapters 2 & 3). The ecstatic experience is part of a revelatory process whereby God makes His will known to the church, a process which culminates in written words which edify those who read them (cf. vv. 1-3). There is something unique in this process, unique to the apostles of the New Testament. This is what marks them out as apostles (2 Cor. 12:12). So unique is this process that a fearful curse hangs on those who attempt to add to it (*Rev. 22:18-19*; cf. *Deut. 4:2*; *12:32*; *Numb 11:25*)! Anyone who modifies this revelation is condemned. We are not to tamper with the Word of God so as to suit our own desires and whims.

(iii) Evidently John had been faithful enough to the '*word of God and the testimony of Jesus*' (v.9), to warrant exclusion from Ephesus. There had been sufficient evidence in the eyes of the authorities to label him dangerous! There is a lesson there for us that may not sit well: evidence, sufficient enough to convict, is too often lacking in the testimony we disclose. John is on Patmos, not as a short-term missionary, but as a prisoner. John's Christ-centred preaching had caused a major problem.

The Exalted Christ

Turning around in the direction of the voice, John sees '*seven golden lampstands*' (v.12). These are symbolic of the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (v.20, cf. v.11). The church is meant to be a source of light in a dark world (*Matt. 5:14-15*). Whenever it fails to be a luminary, God threatens judgement (cf. 2:5).

It is not the lampstands draw John's attention so much as the vision of Christ. Recalling an expression in the book of Daniel, John describes someone '*like a son of man*' (v.13; cf. *Dan. 7:13*), whose appearance he goes on to describe in vivid detail.

No expression was more important to Jesus than the title he most frequently

used about himself, 'the Son of Man.' It is often very interesting to ask in a study such as this one, what the expression, 'son of man' might mean. Frequently, the response will be to suggest that it refers to Jesus' humanity, His solidarity with our human existence, His incarnation. Most of the early church Fathers understood it this way. But, strange as it may sound, its meaning is probably the very opposite! In the book of Daniel, for example, the expression is used of one worthy to receive 'dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion' (*Dan.* 7:14). Equally interesting is the question put to Peter at Caesarea Philippi, often regarded as a turning point in the ministry of Jesus: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (*Matt.* 16:13). The answer Peter gave did not draw attention to his humanity so much as his deity! "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," Peter said (*Matt.* 16:16). The Bible uses the title, 'Son of Man' to reflect Jesus' transcendent majesty.

What did John see? There are several features worth noting:

(i) There was one '*dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest*' (v. 13). This is High Priestly apparel (cf. *Exod.* 28:4; 29:5). His head and hair are both described as '*white as wool*', again similar to the vision of the 'Ancient of days' in Daniel (*Dan.* 7:9). It more than likely is meant to depict age and therefore, great wisdom and dignity. His eyes are said to be '*like blazing fire*' (v.14; cf. 2:18; 19:12), an image of purity and purification, and his feet '*like bronze glowing in a furnace*' (v.15; cf. 2:18). And when he speaks, it is like the sounds of '*rushing waters*' (v.15; cf.14:2; 19:6; *Ezek.* 43:2). These descriptions further enhance the magnificence of the One John sees. This is Someone to be reckoned with. It is meant, at once, to strike us with a sense of awe and wonder. In a very real sense, Jesus is altogether different from us. This is how God wants us to think about him. (cf. 1:1).

(ii) Kept safely in his right hand are '*seven stars*' (v.16), further described as '*the angels of the seven churches*' (v.20). Since 'angels' occur over sixty times in Revelation, it is important that we grasp the significance of angels in the Bible as a whole. Though much remains veiled from us, a study of the biblical account of angels would be of considerable profit. Given their preponderance in the book of Revelation, it is tempting to think that here we have an allusion to some kind of 'Guardian' angels, whose business it is to look after the needs and concerns of individual churches. But, since the Greek word for angel can mean simply 'minister,' some have thought that the reference is a more general one to the prevailing spirit of the churches. It is also tempting to think that in view here are the individual leaders of each church. What a helpful image that would be for a church leader/elder: God has His people in the palms of His hands for safe keeping (cf. *John* 10:28). Perhaps John was homesick for his own congregation, which he now sees held safely in Jesus' hand.

(iii) Out of Jesus' mouth appears '*a sharp double-edged sword*' (v.16; cf. 2:12,

16; 6:8; 19:15,21). The allusion is to the long Thracian sword, an instrument of judgement. The word of God divides and dissects us (cf. *Heb.* 4:11). In the second of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah, the Messiah is depicted this way (cf. *Isa.* 49:2). What Jesus has to say to us is not always a comforting word. Sometimes He comes to rebuke and chastise. Sometimes He comes to judge. Already in our study, the picture of a 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' is retreating into the background. This is the One who '*holds the keys of death and Hades*' (v.18). He has the power to vivify and destroy.

(iv) As if to summarise the transcendence of the One John sees, the face of Jesus is now described as '*like the sun shining in all its brilliance*' (v.16). Of course, the point is clear: we cannot look at the unmediated sun without risking permanent blindness; its rays are too strong for the naked eye. Similarly, the resplendent majesty of Christ is a thing too dazzling to see. This majesty was hidden, or veiled, in Christ's incarnation, only to be glimpsed in his works (*Jn.* 2:11), and once, in the transfiguration (*Matt.* 17:2; *Mk.* 9:3). God accommodates His majesty to us by clothing himself in human flesh.

The Fear of God

Just as the description of Jesus' majesty is of interest, so is the response of John. He '*fell at his feet as though dead*' (v.17). Twice in this book, John collapses under the strain of a glimpse of another world. In 19:10 he inappropriately falls and offers worship to an angel, and is swiftly reproofed. Here, the response is quintessentially correct; the Christ before whom he falls is the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Christ, to cite a C. S. Lewis-ism, may well be good; but, he is certainly not *safe*! What John has seen is from another world. His response is similar to that of Abraham (*Gen.* 17:3), Isaiah (*Isa.* 6:5), Ezekiel (*Ezek.* 1:29), and Peter (*Lk.* 5:8). It is the appropriate sense of awe in the presence of One wholly other from ourselves. It is what Calvin refers to as 'that dread and wonder with which Scripture commonly represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God.' Not until we have compared ourselves to God's majesty are we sufficiently aware of our lowly state.

One of the things that the book of Revelation teaches us is that there are many appropriate ways of responding to Christ, but if this isn't one of them, we have never fully responded to him. It was not inappropriate for John to fall before Jesus as though he were dead. But, what Jesus does say to John is, "Do not be afraid." These two things go together. We fall down before His exalted majesty, and we feel the reassurance of His hand upon our shoulder encouraging us not to be afraid. There is no other Jesus and there can be no other adequate response. We are awed by His majesty and drawn by His grace.

It is not difficult to see why this vision should occur here, at the every start of the

book. John is being prepared for something greater. The Christ who appears here will disclose Himself as the 'KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS' at the close of the book (19:16). Just as Paul was humbled before receiving the glimpses of heaven he could not later describe (2 Cor. 12:1-9), so John is humbled here. We are at best only 'jars of clay' (2 Cor. 4:7) in which God is pleased to deposit His glory. John could well have said with Jacob, 'How awesome is this place!' (Gen. 28:17).

How terrifying the initial realisation of a hand (v.17) touching him must have been! But, the God of majesty is also a God of mercy and compassion. The same hand which keeps safe the ministers of the church now reassures and strengthens this prostrate servant. '*Do not be afraid,*' he says (v.17). Is it ever right to be afraid of God? Of course it is, when there is every reason to be afraid. Calvin again: 'All wickedness flows from a disregard of God... Since the fear of God is the bridle by which our wickedness is held in check, its removal frees us to indulge in every kind of licentious conduct.' But John is to be spoken to with words of grace. Three things are now said to identify the one who speaks:

(i) Using an expression used by Isaiah of God, He identifies himself as 'I am the first and the last' (v.17; cf. Rev. 2:8; 22:13 Isa. 44:6; 48:12).

(ii) Alluding to his death and resurrection, He describes himself as '*the Living One*' (v.18). His existence is '*for ever more.*' The language of death to One so majestic and powerful is paradoxical. He '*Who being in very nature God... humbled Himself and became obedient to death*' (Phil. 2:6,8).

(iii) He holds '*the keys to death and Hades.*' To those facing imminent death, many by brutal means, the knowledge that Christ holds the key to what lies beyond must have been of overwhelming significance to John's first readers.

We are back where we began: John is being shown '*what must soon take place*' (v.1), '*what is now and what will take place later*' (v.19). But, before we begin to unfold this glimpse of the future, it is Christ who holds centre stage. As Alpha and Omega (v.8), First and Last (v.17), everything comes to focus on Him. This is what the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles have prepared us for: a glimpse of the majesty and glory of Christ who holds the church and the world in His hands.

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