



# LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE COMMENTARY





**LIFE**  
**APPLICATION<sup>®</sup>**  
**Bible Commentary**

***REVELATION***

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*Life Application Bible Commentary: Revelation*

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# ***FOREWORD***

The Life Application Bible Commentary series provides verse-by-verse explanation, background, and application for every verse in the New Testament. In addition, it gives personal help, teaching notes, and sermon ideas that will address needs, answer questions, and provide insight for applying the Word of God to life today. The content is highlighted so that particular verses and phrases are easy to find.

Each volume contains three sections: introduction, commentary, and reference. The introduction includes an overview of the book, the book's historical context, a time line, cultural background information, major themes, an overview map, and an explanation about the author and audience.

The commentary section includes running commentary on the Bible text with reference to several modern versions, especially the New International Version, the New Revised Standard Version, and the New Living Translation, accompanied by life applications interspersed throughout. Additional elements include charts, diagrams, maps, and illustrations. There are also insightful quotes from church leaders and theologians such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and A. W. Tozer. These features are designed to help you quickly grasp the biblical information and be prepared to communicate it to others. The reference section includes an index and a bibliography.

# INTRODUCTION

Hollywood studios produce spectacular displays for movie-theater entertainment. With computer-generated images and other high-tech tricks, movies present special effects that seem almost beyond comprehension. Aliens and dinosaurs come to life; explorers travel faster than light; animals and trees dance, sing, and talk. Viewers marvel at the show, then return to reality as the credits roll.

That's great entertainment. But we know it's not real. Now flip to the back of your Bible, to the last book—Revelation. As you read, you soon will become immersed in a fantastic display of sights, sounds, colors, and images. If you feel overwhelmed and amazed, think of what the original witness to these events, John, must have felt as vision after vision assaulted his senses. No adjectives can adequately describe *this* multimedia show. Trumpets, thrones, lightning, thunder, lampstands, awful creatures, millions of majestic angels, a mighty chorus, fiery horses, plagues, terrible bowls . . . one scene follows another, moving steadily and decisively toward the ultimate finale.

This is a story of martyrs and battles, of demons and angels, of things to come. Revelation reveals God and his plan for the future. And it's true.

## AUTHOR

John the apostle, son of Zebedee and Salome and younger brother of James.

In a book filled with obscure images and vague allusions, one thing comes through loud and clear: the name of the author. At the very beginning, Revelation identifies its source: "This is a revelation from Jesus Christ . . . sent to God's servant John" (1:1 NLT). The statement asserts that Jesus Christ himself gave this revelation to a man named John.

The early church fathers—including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus—uniformly identified this John as the apostle of the same name, the one who abandoned his father's fishing nets to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:21-22). It is clear from the Gospels that the apostle John was very close to Jesus. Jesus singled out

Peter, James, and John to accompany him to Jairus's home to witness the resurrection of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37-43). Then, on two separate occasions, Jesus asked the three men to go away with him to a secluded place to spend time in prayer. At the first of these occasions, John witnessed the dazzling transfiguration of Jesus as he was joined by two heavenly guests, Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:28-31). The second occasion came during that agonizing night Jesus spent in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest (Matthew 26:36-38). John also helped make preparations for the Last Supper (Luke 22:8). What a great privilege to have been such a close confidant of the Lord Jesus himself!

Apparently, John's proximity to the Master made him quite bold. He didn't shrink from asking Jesus if he could sit in a place of honor in the coming kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). John even offered to call down fire from heaven to wipe out a Samaritan village that had rejected Jesus (Luke 9:54-55). In each case, Jesus reined in the misplaced enthusiasm of this "Son of Thunder" (see Mark 3:17). Yet John's clear loyalty to his Lord and Savior should be admired. His love for Jesus motivated him to stay close in the darkest hour. On the day of Jesus' crucifixion, John stood at the foot of the cross, where Jesus entrusted him with the care of Jesus' earthly mother (John 19:26-27). No wonder John humbly described himself as the disciple Jesus loved (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20-24).

It is certainly understandable, therefore, that Jesus would appear to this beloved apostle at a later date, to entrust him with a very special message for the church (Revelation 1:9-19). So, near the end of his life, John received a vision from Christ, which he recorded for the benefit of the seven churches in Asia and for Christians everywhere, throughout history.

Although much evidence affirms the apostle John as Revelation's author, a few scholars aren't convinced. Dionysius, a fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, was the first known doubter of this apostle's authorship of Revelation. Dionysius pointed out the following:

- Revelation has a completely different structure than John's other writings—including the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John.
- None of John's writings allude to Revelation.
- The rough and inaccurate Greek of Revelation sharply contrasts with the polished and faultless Greek of John's Gospel and letters.

Dionysius cautiously suggested that a prophet named John, who lived in Ephesus in the first century, had written this book.

The differences in Greek style between Revelation and John's writings are real but can be easily explained. The primary difference comes from the fact that John was writing apocalyptic literature—that is, he was recording the images he saw while he was seeing them. This style of writing, if left uncorrected, would account for its poor grammar and awkward syntax. The subject matter of Revelation also accounts for the difference in style. John's other writings are instructional or historical, while Revelation is the record of an extraordinary vision—a vision that couldn't be expressed with the precise syntax of the Greek language.

Although Bible scholars cannot assert with certainty that the "John" of Revelation is the apostle John, no other viable alternative has been offered. The evidence for Dionysius's "John of Ephesus" is slim. Thus, we have no substantial reasons to doubt that the apostle John was the one who witnessed the remarkable visions recorded in this book, appropriately titled "Revelation."

For more on John the apostle, see the "Introduction" in the *Life Application Bible Commentary* on the Gospel of John.

## DATE AND SETTING

Written around A.D. 90–95 from the island of Patmos.

Readers don't have to guess or research where Revelation was written. The text clearly names the location as the island of Patmos: "I am John, your brother. In Jesus we are partners in suffering and in the Kingdom and in patient endurance. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and speaking about Jesus" (1:9 NLT). Patmos, with its rugged volcanic hills, lies about fifty-five kilometers off the southwest coast of Asia Minor and is only twelve kilometers long and seven kilometers wide.

John had been sent to that barren and rocky island off the coast of present-day Turkey because he had fearlessly proclaimed the gospel. John had been banished to Patmos as the Roman authorities continued moving against the church. Threatened by John's powerful ministry, they viewed John as a dangerous leader of the Christian sect. During this exile, while John was separated from his Christian brothers and sisters, the risen Jesus appeared to him in a spectacular vision.

Although the place of John's vision is identified in the text, the exact time is not. Most of the evidence seems to point to Emperor Domitian's reign, around A.D. 90–95. The early church father Irenaeus made this case. Modern scholars agree with Irenaeus, believing that after writing Revelation, John was released from Patmos, whereupon he returned to Ephesus, where he had been ministering before his exile. Then, several years later, around

A.D. 100, John died. This progression of events fits well with the evidence in Revelation itself.

The writer described himself as a brother and companion of the believers in Ephesus and nearby cities (1:9-11)—an appropriate statement for a leader of the Ephesian church.

The letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in 2–3 speak of a spiritual decline—something that certainly could have occurred during the forty or so years after their foundings. The church of Laodicea is described as rich in 3:17. Since the city was completely destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60–61, it would have been difficult to say this of Laodicea much before A.D. 90.

Some believe that Revelation was written during Nero's reign, between the years A.D. 54 and 68, the time of Nero's greatest persecution of the Christians. The best argument for this date is that the apostle John may have written the description of the New Jerusalem (21:1-27) before the destruction of the old city in A.D. 70. Another explanation for an early date is that the number 666 works as a possible cryptic reference to Nero. When the words "Nero Caesar" are transcribed into Hebrew, the numeric value of the Hebrew letters can be calculated as 666. Another argument is that the persecution that Nero instigated against Christians could be coincidental with the persecution in the book of Revelation.

In the last analysis, however, the evidence seems to support the early church tradition that the apostle John wrote Revelation on the island of Patmos around A.D. 90–95.

## AUDIENCE

The churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea and believers everywhere.

Although Revelation touches on all of human history, it is specifically addressed to seven churches located in what today is southwestern Turkey. Reliable historical sources from the second century A.D. describe the apostle John as ministering in Ephesus around A.D. 70–100, so he would have been intimately familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the churches he was addressing.

Before John worked in Ephesus, Paul had labored there. Paul had founded the Ephesian church on his second missionary journey. At that time Paul had been on his way to Jerusalem, so he had left mature Christians—Aquila and Priscilla—to carry on the work (Acts 18:19-21, 24-26). On his third missionary journey, Paul stayed in Ephesus for three full years, making it a center for evangelistic activity for the present-day region of Turkey. The city was ideally suited for this strategic purpose because

it was located at the intersection of two major overland routes: the coastal road running north to Troas and the western road that headed toward Laodicea. In addition, Ephesus sat on the Cayster River and, therefore, had easy access to the shipping traffic in the Aegean Sea. Because of this central and strategic location, Ephesus had become a commercial and cultural hub of the region. Another attraction in Ephesus was a great temple to Artemis, the fertility goddess. Visitors flocked to this temple every year (Acts 19:23-27). Paul envisioned Ephesus as the center of Christianity, rather than paganism, in the region.

In the lecture hall of Tyrannus, Paul organized an evangelism school to train teachers and preachers in the gospel message (Acts 19:9-10). For three years Paul stayed in Ephesus. (The “two years” of Acts 19:10 only account for part of Paul’s stay there.) Most likely, during this time all the churches addressed in Revelation were founded. These churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—were located on a circular postal route in southwestern Asia Minor (present-day Turkey).

## PURPOSE

To reveal the full identity of Christ and to give warning and hope to believers.

Because of the description in Revelation of Christian martyrs and a beast who demands worship (13:1-8), many readers of Revelation have assumed that the cities to which the apostle John wrote were being severely persecuted. Indeed, these communities were experiencing *some* persecution. John himself had been exiled to Patmos for preaching the gospel (1:9), and Antipas in Pergamum had been put to death for his adherence to Christ (2:13). Nero was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians. Yet his persecution of Christians was local and not Empire-wide. Nero blamed the Christians in Rome for the devastating fire that had destroyed much of the city.

It wasn’t until the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81–96) that refusing to worship the Roman emperor became a punishable offense throughout the Empire. Before that time, emperor worship had been spreading throughout the Roman Empire but hadn’t been enforced. But even with the decree that all should worship him as “God and Lord,” there isn’t much evidence from Domitian’s reign of widespread persecution of Christians. Most of the persecution of Christians in the first century consisted of local challenges to specific groups of believers. Out of the seven churches addressed in Revelation, John encouraged only three (Smyrna, Pergamum, and Philadelphia) to endure suffering and persecution.

This book seems to be more concerned about false teaching,

sexual immorality, divisions within congregations, lack of love for God and others, and complacency toward the things of God. The greatest threat to these churches was internal, not external—the spread of false teaching and spiritual compromise (2:14-16, 20-22; 3:4, 15-17). So Revelation wasn't necessarily addressed to a persecuted minority. Instead, it was a wake-up call to a complacent, compromising church.

Revelation highlights the unseen realities that these congregations were ignoring. Vivid and terrifying visions illustrate a furious battle between good and evil—a battle of which the eventual outcome has been already determined. Ultimately, God will win! The only question was whether the members of these churches would be on God's side or on Satan's side. The answer to this question was a matter of life and death.

## INTERPRETATION

**Understanding Apocalyptic Literature.** To understand Revelation, we must recognize that John, the author, wrote in a specific genre—apocalyptic literature. From 200 B.C. to A.D. 100, certain groups of Jews and Christians used this writing style to describe the end of the world and God's judgment. Apocalyptic literature uses fantastic imagery to remind readers of the invisible, supernatural battle occurring behind the events of human history. Within the Bible, in addition to Revelation, the clearest examples of apocalyptic literature are Daniel 10–12 and Mark 13. Outside of Scripture, there are *The Assumption of Moses*, *The Apocalypses of Ezra*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and *Baruch*. Non-canonical apocalypses usually name no author but are written as though prominent Old Testament figures, such as Moses or Ezra, were seeing the future. There are three key characteristics of apocalyptic literature.

1. All apocalyptic literature claims to be a revelation from God. The Greek word for “apocalypse” (*apokalupsis*) actually means “revelation.” Thus, in the book of Revelation, God gives a glimpse into the future. Revelation consists of four visions, each introduced by an invitation to see what the future holds (1:11; 4:1; 17:1; 21:9). In these visions world history is portrayed as a great war between God and Satan. In the end God defeats Satan and emerges as the winner of this great struggle. As you read Revelation, keep in mind the big picture—the cosmic warfare between good and evil.
2. Apocalypses are symbolic. Mysterious imagery, numerology, cosmic journeys, supernatural beings, and strange beasts

fill the pages of apocalyptic works. This type of literature attempts to describe invisible, supernatural events in human terms. By their very nature, these images go beyond what is known, as apocalyptic writers point to supernatural realities through striking symbols. At this point it is important to note that in order to understand the symbols in Revelation, we must consider their meaning to the *first-century* readers and not impose contemporary events and people on the text. Apocalyptic writers never intended for the symbols to be interpreted as literal photographs of the future. Instead, they wanted their graphic and disturbing images to symbolize events, beings, or traits in the supernatural realm. For example, 1:16 describes Christ as having a sharp, double-edged sword in his mouth. By comparing this image to Hebrews 4:12-13 (which describes the Word of God as a double-edged sword that penetrates the soul and judges every thought), it becomes clear that this sword is a symbol for Christ's words. Christ's words are so full of truth that they can cleanly separate good from evil, truth from falsehood. Christ with his words of truth will be the ultimate Judge of all people.

3. Apocalyptic literature highlights God's supernatural intervention in history—the times when God decisively acts in ways that transcend natural laws. Revelation doesn't try to encourage people to discover God's workings within the natural laws that people take for granted. Instead, the visions in this book picture God acting purposefully to end the way things have always been. Revelation describes God defeating evil in this world once and for all and establishing peace and justice forever. In the end God will interrupt the natural world so dramatically that the earth and sky will flee from his presence (20:11). God will replace the old world with a radically new one (21:1). On the new earth, for example, neither sun nor moon will be needed (21:23).

Though most of this book is apocalyptic, not all of it is. Revelation also contains straightforward prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19) and seven letters of admonition from Jesus Christ (1:4-3:22). As prophecy, it focuses on believers' responsibilities in this world and their relationships to an eternal future spent with God. As an epistle to seven churches, it gives advice and encouragement to believers in seven separate churches. This is the only book in the Bible that promises a blessing to those who listen to its words and do what it says (1:3).

Revelation is a hybrid of apocalypse and prophecy written within the framework of an ancient Greek letter. The purpose

of this letter was to inspire believers to overcome all obstacles by steadfastly holding on to their faith (2:7, 17, 25-26; 3:5, 11-12, 21). Despite the many strange images and mysterious symbols, the central message of Revelation is clear: God controls all of history, and Christ will return to earth to judge it and to reward those who have joined his side in the fight against evil and who have remained faithful to him (22:7, 12-13, 20).

**Interpreting Revelation.** Revelation is a book of symbols. Every symbol in this book was understandable by people in the first century. This was a first-century book, written to the believers of the first-century church; yet it also has significance for Christians two thousand years later. The questions to ask when reading the book are, What was God saying to John's original readers? What would they have understood from John's words? Why did God use a particular symbol to get across his message?

Revelation is a book about the future and about the present. It offers future hope to all believers, especially those who have suffered for their faith, by proclaiming Christ's total triumph over evil and the reality of eternal life with him. It also gives present guidance as it teaches us about Jesus Christ and how we should live for him now. Through graphic pictures, we learn that Jesus Christ is coming again, that evil will be judged, and that the dead will be raised to judgment, resulting in eternal life or eternal destruction.

Revelation is one of the most mysterious books of the Bible. For centuries people have debated various aspects of the book—for example, the timing of the rapture of the church, the nature of the millennial reign of Christ, and the timing of Christ's return (before, in the middle of, or after the Great Tribulation). And debates have raged over the identity of the Beast, the number 666, and the Great Prostitute. Unfortunately, these debates have fueled such great controversy that Christians have been divided, and churches have even split over these issues.

Every Christian who approaches this book must realize that if these questions have been debated over centuries, then God probably made them not clear on purpose. Churches and seminaries have made their interpretations of these debated issues part of their doctrinal statements. But they must understand that other Christians who disagree with their positions are doing only that—disagreeing. The positions regarding postmillennialism versus premillennialism do not make a difference as to whether one is a believer or not. The cardinal doctrine is whether a person believes that Christ, the Savior and King, will indeed one day return for his people and whether one has trusted in him as personal Savior. From there, the timing of Christ's return or when

the church will be raptured are merely issues for discussion—not fundamental doctrines that affect a person’s salvation.

Believers should study Revelation carefully, always realizing that whatever position they eventually take will meet with disagreement from other sincere Christians. Believers must have respect for those who, on the basis of the biblical evidence and their own studies, accept a different position. We must recognize and condemn heresy, teaching that directly contradicts Scripture, such as someone giving a date for Christ’s return when Christ has clearly said no one can know the date. But when Scripture is not clear on certain issues, and especially when those issues have been debated throughout church history without agreement, then believers should lovingly accept people who disagree.

Historically, Christians have taken four main approaches to interpret Revelation.

1. One approach is to understand the book as describing the events immediately preceding and following Christ’s second coming. Christians who interpret Revelation this way are called “futurists.” These believers insist that the judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls (see 5:1–16:21) are future events that will occur at the end of history.

Typically, futurists insist that the key to interpreting Revelation can be found in the description of the sealed scroll, which only the Lamb, Jesus, is worthy to open (5:1-14). Each time the Lamb opens one of the scroll’s seven seals, the earth experiences a cataclysmic event. Thus, futurists believe that the descriptions of famine, war, and devastation in the central chapters of Revelation depict the final days of human history. According to this view, the Beast of Revelation 13 is the Antichrist, who will appear in the end times to deceive people.

2. Many of the Reformers—Luther, Calvin, and others—interpreted Revelation much differently. They understood this mysterious book as a prophetic survey of church history. Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) was the first person to interpret Revelation this way; he considered that the book prophesies the events of Western history from the early church until his own time. In this approach, called the “historicist” view, each one of the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 represents a certain stage of church history, from the early church to the church of the Middle Ages to, perhaps, even the modern-day church. According to this view, therefore, the Beast of Revelation would represent a specific person or institution in history. The historicist view doesn’t enjoy much favor today because there hasn’t been any agreement on the specific historical events that Revelation describes.

3. Other scholars believe that Revelation simply describes events confined to the apostle John's day. This is called the "preterist" view ("preterist" means "past action"). According to this perspective, for example, the Beast in Revelation 13 represents the Roman Empire because Revelation's original readers would have readily identified the Roman Empire as the primary opponent of the church.
4. Another group of interpreters understands Revelation as being primarily "symbolic." They believe that through symbols Revelation presents timeless truths that were relevant to the original readers and are relevant to readers today. According to the symbolic view, Revelation essentially describes a battle between good and evil that occurs throughout world history. Proponents of the symbolic perspective assert that Revelation's fundamental message can be understood by everyone—a person born in the Roman Empire in the first century, someone living in New Zealand in the nineteenth century, or someone living in America today. An extreme symbolic approach would spiritualize the entire book, asserting that Revelation predicts no specific historical events. The Beast, according to the symbolic view, would represent the power of all those who oppose Christ and who have opposed him throughout all of world history.

Whenever you hear someone talking about his or her view of Revelation, remember these four basic interpretative approaches. Some preachers and Bible teachers use more than one.

This commentary often presents several interpretations of a specific passage. Yet the basic approach of this commentary is to treat Revelation as a prophetic book, as the book itself claims to be (1:3; 22:7-21). Thus, this commentary will attempt to show how Revelation unveils the future and the end of human history. This commentary, however, will also describe what Revelation would have meant to its original readers in ancient Asia Minor.

In the final analysis, the central idea, on which all four basic interpretations agree, is that Christ will return some time in the future. This return will be a welcome sight to his people, for at that time Christ will defeat evil, judge evildoers, and reward the righteous. As you read Revelation, look beyond the symbols and interpretations to your sovereign God and to your Savior, Jesus Christ. And take hope—his victory is sure!

### *A QUICK JOURNEY THROUGH REVELATION*

Revelation is a complex book that has baffled interpreters for centuries. We can avoid a great deal of confusion by understanding

the literary structure of this book. This approach will allow us to understand the individual scenes within the overall structure of Revelation and keep us from getting unnecessarily bogged down in the details of each vision. John gives hints throughout the book to indicate a change of scene, a change of subject, or a flashback to an earlier scene.

John begins by relating the circumstances that led to the writing of this book (1:1-20), then relates special messages given him by Jesus for the seven churches of Asia Minor (2:1-3:22).

Suddenly caught up into heaven, John sees a vision of God Almighty on his throne. All of Christ's followers and the heavenly angels are worshiping God (4:1-11). John watches as God gives a scroll with seven seals to the worthy Lamb, Jesus Christ (5:1-14). The Lamb begins to open the seals one by one. As each seal is opened, a new vision appears.

As the first four seals are opened, riders appear on horses of various colors; war, famine, disease, and death are in their paths (6:1-8). As the fifth seal is opened, John sees those in heaven who have been martyred for their faith in Christ (6:9-11).

A set of contrasting images appears at the opening of the sixth seal. On one side, there is a huge earthquake, stars fall from the sky, and the sky rolls up like a scroll (6:12-17). On the other side, multitudes are before the great throne, worshiping and praising God and the Lamb (7:1-17).

Next, the seventh seal is opened (8:1-5), unveiling a series of God's judgments announced by seven angels with seven trumpets. The first four angels bring hail, fire, a burning mountain, and a falling star, and the sun and the moon are darkened (8:6-13). The fifth trumpet announces the coming of locusts with the power to sting (9:1-12). The sixth trumpet heralds the coming of an army of warriors on horses (9:13-21). In 10:1-11, John is given a little scroll to eat. Following this, John is commanded to measure the temple of God (11:1-2). He sees two witnesses, who proclaim God's judgment on the earth for three and a half years (11:3-14).

Finally, the seventh trumpet sounds, calling the rival forces of good and evil to a decisive battle. On one side is Satan and his forces; on the other side stands Jesus Christ with his forces (11:15-14:5). During this battle God reveals the absolute futility of Satan, who knows his time is short (12:12) and who, though he desires power and wants to rule, can only parody God and Christ. For example, the fatal wound that heals (13:3, 12) is an imitation of the Resurrection, and the mark of the Beast (13:16-18) imitates God's seal (7:3-4). In the midst of this call to battle, John sees three angels announcing the final judgment (14:6-13). Two angels begin to reap this harvest of judgment on the earth (14:14-20). Following

on the heels of these two angels are seven more angels, who pour out God's judgment on the earth from seven bowls (15:1–16:21). One of these seven angels reveals to John a vision of a great prostitute called Babylon riding a scarlet beast (17:1-18). After the defeat of Babylon (18:1-24), a great multitude in heaven shouts praise to God for his mighty victory (19:1-10).

The last three and a half chapters of Revelation catalogue the events that complete Christ's victory over the enemy: the judgment of the rebellious nations, the Beast, and the false prophet (19:11-21); Satan's one-thousand-year imprisonment (20:1-10); the final judgment (20:11-15); and the creation of a new earth and a new Jerusalem (21:1–22:6). An angel then gives concluding instructions concerning the visions John has seen and what to do once he has written them all down (22:7-11).

Revelation concludes with the promise of Christ's return, an offer to drink of the water of life that flows through the great street of the new Jerusalem, and a warning to those who read the book (22:12-21). John finishes by praying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20).

This book, and thus the whole Bible, ends with a message of warning and hope for men and women of every generation. Christ is victorious, and all evil has been conquered. As you read Revelation, marvel at God's grace in the salvation of the saints and his power over the evil forces of Satan, and take hope in the reality of his ultimate victory.

## MESSAGE

God's Sovereignty, Christ's Return, God's Faithful People, Judgment, Hope.

**God's Sovereignty (5:1-14; 11:15-18; 20:1–22:21).** The sovereignty of God is a foundational theological truth. It asserts that God totally controls what happens in the world, the universe, and human life. Nothing occurs outside of God's direct or permissive will. Although this truth permeates all of Scripture, it is most clear in Revelation, where the culmination of history, the final judgment of all people, and the vindication of the righteous are vividly pictured. God is sovereign, greater than any power in the universe. God is incomparable, far above and beyond any religion, government, or leader, including Satan. God controls history for the purpose of uniting true believers in loving fellowship with him.

*Importance for today.* Assaulted with negative news from across the world and in our own communities, we can feel power-

less and hopeless. Often it seems as though the forces of evil control life and will triumph. Revelation teaches the opposite. Though Satan's power may temporarily increase, we must not be led astray. God is all-powerful. He is in control and will bring his true family safely into eternal life. Because God cares for us, we can trust him with every aspect of our lives.

**Christ's Return (19:11-16; 20:4-6; 21:1-7; 22:6-21).** When Christ came to earth as a man, he came as a perfect "Lamb," without blemish or spot, fulfilling God's requirement of a perfect sacrifice for sin. When Christ returns, he will come as the triumphant "Lion," the rightful ruler and conqueror. Christ will defeat Satan, settle accounts with all those who have rejected him, and usher his faithful followers into eternity. Because finite humans are limited by time and space, it can seem as though Christ will never return—twenty centuries have passed since his first coming. Yet to God those years are but a flicker as his plan unfolds in his eternal present. The clear message of Revelation is that Christ's coming is sure—he *will* return. And he could come at any moment. What a triumphant and glorious day that will be!

*Importance for today.* For centuries struggling and suffering Christians have been given hope and strength to endure in the knowledge that their Savior could return at any time. We know that God's timing is perfect. Thus, Christ will return at just the right moment (Ephesians 1:10). At that time, he will come as King and Judge. Since no one knows when Christ will appear (Matthew 24:36), we must always be ready. This means keeping our faith strong and living as God wants us to live.

**God's Faithful People (14:1-5; 20:4-6; 21:3-4).** Soon after Revelation was written, the church came under tremendous pressure from without and from within. Believers were pressured by the government, with threats of violent persecution, to renounce their faith in Christ and to worship the emperor. At the same time, a number of heresies threatened to negatively influence believers and divide the church. John wrote to encourage believers to resist the demands to worship the Roman emperor and to be devoted only to Christ. Revelation identifies the faithful people and explains how they should live until Christ returns.

*Importance for today.* Christians today still face pressures to compromise or reject their faith. In many countries persecution is as violent as it was in ancient Rome. In more affluent and civilized areas, believers face more subtle pressure to worship "Caesar." And heresies have never been in short supply. God's message in Revelation is clear: stay focused on Christ and his

Word; stay faithful and true to your calling. Regardless of the sources and strength of pressure and persecution, we must be faithful. Victory is sure for those who resist temptation and who make loyalty to Christ their top priority.

**Judgment (6:10-17; 11:15-19; 15:1-16:21; 18:1-20:15; 22:10-15).** As first-century believers looked at their world, they must have wondered at the seeming triumph of evil. The church was being persecuted, the government was corrupt, and pagan morality was the norm. Revelation clearly shows that God is just; eventually all evildoers will be punished. One day God's anger toward sin will be fully and completely unleashed. At that time Satan will be defeated with all of his agents, and false religion will be destroyed. God will reward the faithful with eternal life, and all who refuse to believe in him will face eternal punishment.

*Importance for today.* Because human nature is still sinful and because Satan still lives and works in the world, evil and injustice are prevalent. Living as a distinct minority in faith and morality, Christians can become discouraged and feel defeated. But the strong message of Revelation is that evil and injustice will not prevail forever; God's final judgment will put an end to them. We can take hope in this sure promise from God. But we also should spread this truth to others: no one who rejects Christ will escape God's punishment.

**Hope (1:3, 7-8; 2:7, 11, 17, 26-29; 3:8-13, 20-22; 4:1-11; 7:9-17; 14:13; 19:1-10; 20:4-6; 21:1-22:7; 22:17-21).** Surrounded by enemies, overwhelmed by pain and grief, or confronted by seemingly insurmountable obstacles, a person can lose hope. The first-century believers must have struggled with maintaining a hopeful perspective during those dark days of persecution and deprivation. In contrast, Revelation presents the promise that one day God will create a new heaven and a new earth. All believers will live with him forever in perfect peace and security. Regardless of their present troubles, believers can look ahead with hope, trusting in their loving God.

*Importance for today.* Today people still struggle with discouragement, doubt, and defeat. Depression has become epidemic as men and women feel that they are trapped in hopeless circumstances. Even Christians can lose hope in the midst of trials. But the message of Revelation still rings hope through the night. We know that what God has promised will come true. And each day the Lord's appearing is one day closer. When we have confidence in this truth and in our ultimate destination, we can follow Christ with unwavering dedication, no matter what we must face.

## VITAL STATISTICS

**Purpose:** To reveal the full identity of Christ and to give warning and hope to believers

**Author:** The apostle John

**To Whom Written:** The seven churches in Asia and all believers everywhere

**Date Written:** Approximately A.D. 95, from Patmos

**Setting:** Most scholars believe that the seven churches of Asia to whom John writes were experiencing the persecution that took place under Emperor Domitian (A.D. 90–95). It seems that the Roman authorities had exiled John to the island of Patmos (off the coast of Asia). John, who had been an eyewitness of the incarnate Christ, had a vision of the glorified, risen Christ. God also revealed to John what would take place in the future—judgment and the ultimate triumph of God over evil.

**Key Verse:** “God blesses the one who reads this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to it and obey what it says. For the time is near when these things will happen” (1:3 NLT).

**Special Features:** Revelation is written in “apocalyptic” form—a type of Jewish literature that uses symbolic imagery to communicate hope (in the ultimate triumph of God) to those in the midst of persecution. The events are ordered according to literary, rather than strictly chronological, patterns.

## OUTLINE

A. Letters to the Churches (1:1–3:22)

B. Message for the Church (4:1–22:21)

1. Worshiping God in heaven
2. Opening the seven seals
3. Sounding the seven trumpets
4. Observing the great conflict
5. Pouring out the seven plagues
6. Seizing the final victory
7. Making all things new

# Revelation 1

## INTRODUCTION / 1:1-3

The book of Revelation unveils Christ's full identity and God's plan for the end of the world, and it focuses on Jesus Christ, his second coming, his victory over evil, and the establishment of his kingdom. As you read and study Revelation, don't focus so much on the timetable of the events or the details of John's imagery that you miss the main message—the infinite love, power, and justice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**1:1 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.**<sup>NIV</sup> The word “revelation” is the Greek word *apokalupsis*, from which the word “apocalypse” is derived. A “revelation” exposes what was formerly hidden or secret. The revelation recorded in this book will show God's servants (the believers) *what must soon take place*. That information had been formerly veiled but would now be disclosed.

A particular style of ancient literature was called “apocalyptic.” Many Jewish apocalyptic works existed at the time Revelation was written. Written to describe the end of the world and God's final victory over evil, these works usually featured spectacular and mysterious imagery as well as hidden secrets that would be revealed. These Jewish works were largely pessimistic, for there was not much hope for the present. Such literature was often written under the name of an ancient hero.

The book of Revelation is apocalyptic but is different in several ways:

- It names John as the author rather than an ancient hero.
- It denounces evil and exhorts people to high Christian standards.
- It offers hope rather than gloom.

John was not a psychic attempting to predict the future; he was a prophet of God describing what God had shown him (this

book is called “the prophecy,” 1:3). Specifically, the apocalyptic literature in Scripture (Daniel 10–12; Mark 13; and the book of Revelation) includes fantastic imagery to remind the readers of their constant supernatural battle with evil.

Readers need to understand some characteristics of apocalyptic literature in the Bible. First, the Bible’s apocalyptic sections are revelations from God. Revelation is God’s giving his people a peek into the future. Second, apocalyptic literature emphasizes God’s supernatural acts. Revelation highlights God’s power by focusing on the end times, when God will interrupt human history and defeat evil once and for all. Third, apocalyptic literature is symbolic. It attempts to describe supernatural actions with graphic symbols of real events, things, or traits. For example, Christ is described in Revelation 5:6 as having “seven horns and seven eyes.” The number seven represents perfection. A horn symbolizes power. So “seven horns” speak of Jesus’ extraordinary power, and “seven eyes” speak of his ability to see all things.

This book is the revelation *of* (mediated by) *Jesus Christ*. God gave the revelation of his plan to Jesus Christ (see also John 1:18; 5:19–23; 12:49; 17:8). Jesus Christ, in turn, sent his *angel*, who revealed it *to his servant John* (see also 22:16). The angel will explain various scenes to John, acting as a guide. Angels are referred to sixty-seven times in Revelation. They are highly significant in this book; we see them worshiping God, revealing his Word, and carrying out his judgments. (For more on angels, see the commentary on 5:11–12.)

John, the servant, then passed the message along to the churches—God’s *servants*. God’s people are described as “servants” in Revelation (see, for example, 2:20; 7:3; 22:3). The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe believers.

The phrase “what must soon take place” means imminence—it would happen “soon.” This seems odd to today’s readers because 1,900 years have passed since the time this was proclaimed. We must remember that in apocalyptic literature the future is imminent, without concern for intervening time. Recall the words of 2 Peter 3:8, “A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day” (NLT). God is timeless. In God’s eyes the future is just around the corner, even though it may seem far away to us. No one knows when these events will happen, so believers should live at all times as though Christ will come in the next moment.

According to tradition, John, the author, was the only one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples who was still alive at this

time (that is, if the date of A.D. 90–95 is accepted; see the Introduction). John wrote the Gospel of John and the letters of 1, 2, and 3 John. John’s Gospel and letters show the great God of love, while the thunder of God’s justice bursts from the pages of Revelation. John wrote Revelation in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, sent there by the Romans as punishment for his witness about Jesus Christ.

Jesus gave his message to John in a vision, allowing him to see and record certain future events so that they could be an encouragement to all believers. The vision includes many signs and symbols that convey the essence of what is to happen. What John saw, in most cases, was indescribable, so he used illustrations to show what it was like. Readers of this symbolic language don’t have to understand every detail—John himself didn’t. Instead, we must realize that John’s imagery reveals that Christ is indeed the glorious and victorious Lord of all. Some of Revelation’s original readers were being severely persecuted because of their faith. The awesome and sometimes frightening pictures of Jesus’ ultimate victory over evil were intended to encourage them to persevere.

Jesus is the ruler of the universe! He will come to this earth in victory. For believers, this is Good News. For unbelievers, it’s a sober call to repent of their evil ways and prepare for Christ’s return. The same God who controlled the past, and who will be in control in the future, still controls the present—even if it seems as though evil is winning. This world is an illusion; the real world is the spiritual world. God is allowing evil to triumph for a time, but evil is ultimately doomed. The primary point of the book of Revelation is that God is sovereign. He has already determined the end of history. The secondary point is that Satan’s rebellion is futile. Although Satan is the ultimate foe of God and God’s people, he has already lost.

For information on the four main ways to interpret Revelation, see the Introduction, “Understanding Apocalyptic Literature.”

**1:2 John faithfully reported the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ—everything he saw.**<sup>NLT</sup> John saw the vision and then *faithfully reported . . . everything he saw*. He saw *the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ*. Revelation, according to John, is God’s Word—not simply John’s narration of what he saw. It is an eternal message. The testimony “of” Jesus Christ could also be translated “from” Jesus Christ. The words of this book describe the promises and actions of God that have come true through Jesus. Revelation, as difficult as it may be to understand, should not be neglected. It should be read and studied, for

it is the Word of God and the testimony of Christ to all believers, from the first century to today.

**1:3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.**<sup>NRSV</sup> “Blessed” means “God blesses those who” or “God’s blessing is upon.” This promise sets John’s writing apart from other Jewish apocalyptic literature and points out that these words were inspired by God. This is the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation (see also 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). See the chart at 14:13.

Who is blessed? *The one who reads aloud the words* of the prophecy. The public reading of Scripture was common in Jewish heritage (see, for example, Nehemiah 8:2-3; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:15). Christians also read Scripture aloud in public because copies of the Gospels and the letters of the apostles were not available to every believer. Someone—usually a scribe or someone trained in writing and reading texts—would be chosen to read aloud portions of the text. Later, the office of “reader” became a position in the church.

Scripture reading was an important event. In addition to the reader, *blessed also are those who hear and who keep what is written*. This echoes Jesus’ words in Luke 11:28: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (NKJV). “Hear” and “keep” are important terms and major themes of the book. Used together, they mean “to persevere in faithful obedience.” The blessed ones are those who come to church to hear God’s Word and then keep (obey) it so that it changes their lives (Ephesians 4:13).

Revelation is a book of *prophecy* that is both prediction (foretelling future events) and proclamation (preaching about who God is and what he will do). Prophecy is more than telling the future. Behind the predictions are important principles about God’s character and promises. These words will bless the hearers because through them they can get to know God better and be able to trust him more completely. The words are more than just predictions of the future; they include moral instruction that the listeners were to “hear” and “keep.”

The phrase “the time is near” is like the phrase “what must soon take place” in 1:1 and refers to imminence. Believers must be ready for Christ’s second coming. The Last Judgment and the establishment of God’s kingdom are certainly near. No one knows when these events will occur, so all believers must be prepared. They will happen quickly, with no second chance to change minds or sides.



## INSPIRING WORDS

The typical news reports—filled with violence, scandal, and political haggling—are depressing, and we may wonder where the world is heading. God's plan for the future, however, provides inspiration and encouragement because we know he will intervene in history to conquer evil. John encourages churches to read this book aloud so everyone can hear it, apply it ("keep what is written in it"), and be assured of the fact that God will triumph.

### JOHN'S GREETINGS AND PRAISE TO GOD / 1:4-8

John began to address the recipients of this letter, a letter that would be sent along the roads through the various cities with the churches to whom John was writing. After this brief greeting comes a doxology of praise to God.

**1:4-5a** **This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace and peace from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold Spirit before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the commander of all the rulers of the world.**<sup>NLT</sup> Jesus told *John* to write to *seven churches* that knew and trusted John and had read his earlier letters (see 1:9, 11). These were literal churches in literal cities. The letter was addressed so that it could be read and passed on in a systematic fashion, following the main Roman road clockwise around *the province of Asia* (now called Turkey).

These were not the only churches in Asia at the time. For example, Troas (Acts 20:5ff), Colosse (Colossians 1:2), and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13) also had churches. Why did the Lord direct John to write to these seven in particular? It is possible that the number seven, as with the other sevens in the book, signifies completeness. While the seven churches were actual churches, they also represented all churches throughout the ages.

*Grace and peace* were standard greetings in the ancient world. "Grace" was the Greek greeting (*charis*); "peace" was the Hebrew greeting (*shalom*). The early church took these two greetings and used them together as a way of declaring that God had given these realities to his people.

The Trinity—the Father (*the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come*), the Holy Spirit (*the sevenfold Spirit*), and the Son (*Jesus Christ*)—is the source of all truth (John 14:6-17; 1 John 2:27; Revelation 19:11).

All of time is encompassed in the Father—he is, was, and will be. This title is used only in Revelation (see also 11:17; 16:5). God is eternally present and therefore able to help his people in any age, in any situation. Note that the present tense is first, stressing that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the future is still in control of the present, even though it doesn't seem like it. The pressures and stresses that the early Christians faced made the truth of God's control over all history that much more meaningful.

The “sevenfold Spirit” has been identified by some to mean the seven angelic beings or messengers for the churches (see a further discussion at 1:20). Others have interpreted this to refer to those angels that accompany Christ at his return (Luke 9:26; 1 Timothy 5:21). But the reference to the Trinity here gives more weight to the interpretation that the sevenfold Spirit is the Holy Spirit. The “sevenfold Spirit” refers to the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The number seven is used throughout Revelation to symbolize completeness and perfection (see also 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). This also pictures the sevenfold ministry of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Isaiah 11:2 and the seven lamps in Zechariah, which also describe the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4:1-10).

Jesus is seen in all his sovereignty. He is the *faithful witness* of the truth from God, who sent him to earth to die for sins. Both Jesus and the believers are called “witnesses.” The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word for witness. Jesus was a “witness” as the first to die. This would have comforted believers who were suffering for their faith. Those who would die for their faith in Christ, the martyrs, would “witness” through their deaths. Jesus Christ is the preeminent “faithful witness” because he died and because he was *the first to rise from the dead* (see also Colossians 1:18). Christ's resurrection assures the same for all the believers. He shows us all how to stand firm for the faith even when faced with persecution. Others had risen from the dead—people whom the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles had brought back to life during their ministries—but later those people had died again. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead in an imperishable body (1 Corinthians 15:20), never to die again. He is the firstborn from the dead.

Jesus is also portrayed as *the commander of all the rulers of the world*—an all-powerful King, victorious in battle, glorious in peace. Satan had tried to tempt Jesus with an offer of ruling all the nations of the world if Jesus would bow and worship him (Matthew 4:8-9). Jesus refused and, through obedience to God through death on the cross, gained ultimate leadership. Psalm 89:27 says, “I will make him my firstborn son, the mightiest king

on earth” (NLT). Jesus was not just a humble earthly teacher; he is the glorious God. When he returns, he will be recognized for who he really is. Then, “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11 NLT).



#### WORDS OF TRUTH

We live in a day of conflicting claims for various religions (they can't all be true), and the desire to be tolerant of all others (if it's true for you, it's true). Yet how do we as Christians determine what we believe? We regard Jesus Christ as our faithful witness (1:4-5). He is the only religious leader who has risen from the dead.

So when you read John's description of the vision, keep in mind that his words are not just good advice; they are truth from the King of kings. Don't just read his words for their interesting and amazing portrayal of the future. Let the truth about Christ penetrate your life, deepen your faith in him, and strengthen your commitment to follow him—no matter what the cost.

**1:5b-6 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.**<sup>NIV</sup> This doxology concludes the prologue to this book. John was writing to believers experiencing persecution; yet he assured them that Jesus not only continuously cared for and loved them but also had set them free, no matter how they might feel. Jesus had set them free from their sins *by his blood*, that is, through his death on the cross. Through that blood, he had made his people *to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father*. Israel had been called to be “a kingdom of priests, [a] holy nation” (Exodus 19:6 NLT). This saying describes the Christians as the continuation of the Old Testament people of God—his kingdom and priests (see also Hebrews 13:15; 1 Peter 2:5, 9). Together believers make up a kingdom of which Christ is their King; individually they are priests because each has direct access to God because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Their whole purpose, of course, is to serve God.

The doxology ends with words of praise: *to him be glory and power for ever and ever!* “Amen” means “let it be so.”

**1:7 Look! He comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him—even those who pierced him. And all the nations of the earth will weep because of him. Yes! Amen!**<sup>NLT</sup> Jesus will indeed have “glory and power for ever and ever” (1:6 NIV)—the

book of Revelation describes that day when he will return to earth. That Jesus will come *with the clouds of heaven* summarizes the message of Revelation. When Jesus ascended into heaven, “he was taken up into the sky . . . and he disappeared into a cloud” (Acts 1:9 NLT; see also Luke 24:50-51). An angel had told the astonished disciples, “Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return” (Acts 1:11 NLT). The imagery of coming in the clouds is probably a military picture, alluding to the clouds of dust kicked up by the war chariots, the ultimate war machines in ancient times. When Christ is pictured this way, he is coming as the ultimate Victor and conquering King (see also Daniel 7:13).



#### STAR WITNESS

Many hesitate to witness about their faith in Christ because they don't think the change in their lives has been spectacular enough. But you qualify as a witness for Jesus because of what he has done for you, not because of what you have done for him. Christ is seen through the whole book of Revelation as the Lamb who was slain. He demonstrated his great love by setting his people free from their sins through his death on the cross (“freed us from our sins by his blood”), guaranteeing them a place in his kingdom, and making them priests to administer God's love to others. The fact that the all-powerful God has offered eternal life to you is nothing short of spectacular. Testify about his wonderful gift!

Jesus' second coming will be visible and victorious. *Everyone will see him* arrive (Mark 13:26), and they will know it is Jesus. When Christ returns, he will conquer evil and will judge all people according to their deeds (Revelation 20:11-15).

*Even those who pierced him* will see him. “Those who pierced him” could refer to the Roman soldiers who pierced Jesus' side as he hung on the cross, but it probably refers to the Jews who were responsible for his death (see Acts 2:22-23; 3:14-15). John saw Jesus' death with his own eyes, and he never forgot the horror of it (see John 19:34-35). Zechariah had written, “Then I will pour out a spirit of grace and prayer on the family of David and on all the people of Jerusalem. They will look on me whom they have pierced and mourn for him as for an only son. They will grieve bitterly for him as for a firstborn son who has died” (Zechariah 12:10 NLT). In Zechariah the twelve tribes mourned because of their sin. Here, however, all people across the ages who have rejected Christ have themselves “pierced” him through their indifference to his sacrifice on their behalf. *All the nations of the earth*—both Jews and Gentiles—*will weep because of him*. They

will mourn because they know they will be facing God and his judgment and will be destroyed.

**1:8** **“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”**<sup>NIV</sup> *Alpha* and *Omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The Lord God is the beginning and the end. God the Father is the eternal Lord and Ruler of the past, present, and future (see also 4:8; Isaiah 44:6; 48:12-15). God is sovereign over history and is in control of everything.

The one *who is, and who was, and who is to come* is also described in 1:4, the *Lord God*, who controls present, past, and future.

The phrase “the Almighty” comes out of the Old Testament and conveys military imagery, referring to God as a mighty warrior. The military imagery helped the people in the churches to whom this book was written understand that they had the ultimate Warrior fighting on their side. God rules over all.

God is an infinite circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

*Augustine of Hippo*

## THE VISION OF CHRIST / 1:9-20

John again gave his name as the author of the letter and described his whereabouts and why he was there. Next he explained his commissioning to write this letter to the churches. Then he described his vision of the exalted Christ, leaving no mistake as to Christ’s true identity. The vision has much in common with Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1.

**1:9** **I am John, your brother. In Jesus we are partners in suffering and in the Kingdom and in patient endurance. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and speaking about Jesus.**<sup>NLT</sup> John had been one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. (For more on John, see commentary on 1:1 above.) Although John was an apostle and an elder of the church, he described himself as their *brother* in Christ because he and the persecuted believers were *partners in suffering*, partners in God’s coming *Kingdom*, and partners in *patient endurance* of their suffering. They were partners in suffering for Christ, as persecution against believers began to escalate at the end of the century. They shared in God’s kingdom because, as believers, they were already its citizens. As believers faced persecution, they were awaiting the arrival of God’s coming kingdom.

The Christian church was facing severe persecution. Almost all believers were socially, politically, or economically suffering

because of this Empire-wide persecution, and some were even being killed for their faith. The word “Kingdom” is surrounded by “suffering” and “patient endurance.” Although the North American churches are not facing the kind of oppression John referred to here, two-thirds of all Christians in the world face persecution today.

John had paid for his faithfulness to the message of Jesus by being *exiled to the island of Patmos*, a small rocky island about ten miles long and six miles wide in the Aegean Sea, about fifty miles offshore from the city of Ephesus on the Asia Minor sea-coast (see map). The Romans used Patmos for banishing political prisoners. John, like Paul, was caught in a time when Rome turned against Christianity. There are two possible dates for Revelation. One is under the reign of Nero in the mid-60s, toward the time when Paul and Peter were both martyred. The other date is the mid-90s, when John was at the end of his life and the ruler was Domitian, a man who was far more anti-Christian than even Nero. Domitian issued an edict (under threat of death) demanding that all peoples in the Empire worship the reigning emperor. The date of the 90s is more likely. Eusebius wrote that John was exiled to the island by the emperor Domitian in A.D. 95 and released about eighteen months later.

John was exiled for *preaching the word of God and speaking about Jesus*. Although John was away from the churches and unable to travel, his exile did not stop what God would do through John, nor did it stop God’s message from getting to his churches.



#### HE WHO HESITATES

John described himself as a partner in suffering (1:9). Early Christians faced imprisonment, economic injustice, slanderous accusations by Jews, and attacks from government soldiers or mobs. We may not face persecution for our faith as the early Christians did, but even with our freedom, few of us have the courage to share God’s Word with others. If we hesitate to share our faith during easy times, how will we do it during times of persecution?

**1:10-11** **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.”**<sup>NIV</sup> *On the Lord’s Day* (Sunday), John was in the Spirit, which refers to a visionary experience given to John by the Holy Spirit. There are four “in-the-Spirit” passages in Revelation,

which probably refer to the actual visions John received (see 4:2; 17:3; 21:10; see also Ezekiel 3:12, 14; 37:1; Acts 10:10; 11:5; 22:17). This is the first.

In this vision John *heard . . . a loud voice like a trumpet*. The trumpet heralds the return of Christ (1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4). The voice commands John to *write on a scroll* everything he would see in the visions. John's record then became this book, which he would *send* to the *seven churches*. The names of these churches are presented, as noted earlier, in a circular fashion, following the Roman road from one church to the next—starting at the church in the port city of Ephesus. Presumably, this letter was taken from John on Patmos by a messenger who crossed the water and landed at Ephesus, where he began his route. The contents of specific messages to these churches are in chapters 2 and 3.

**1:12-14** **When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were bright like flames of fire.**<sup>NLT</sup> The *seven gold lampstands* are the seven churches in Asia to whom this letter is addressed (Revelation 1:11, 20). (See also Zechariah 4:1-10 for his vision of seven lamps.) Jesus, *the Son of Man*, stands among them. No matter what the churches face, Jesus is in control and protects them with his all-encompassing love and reassuring power. Through his Spirit, Jesus is still among the churches today. When a church faces persecution, it should remember Christ's deep love and compassion. When a church is wracked by internal strife and conflict, it should remember Christ's concern for purity and his intolerance of sin. Jesus is sovereign over the church.

The title "Son of Man" occurs many times in the New Testament in reference to Jesus as the Messiah. John recognized Jesus because he had lived with him for three years and had seen him both as the Galilean preacher and as the glorified Son of God at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8). Here Jesus appears as the mighty Son of Man.

The *long robe* pictures Jesus as a leader. The *gold sash across his chest* reveals him as the high priest who goes into God's presence to obtain forgiveness of sin for those who have believed in him. In the first century, wearing a sash, especially across the chest, indicated leadership and authority. Hebrews 2:17 identifies Jesus as the final high priest. His glowing white hair indicates his wisdom and divine nature (see also Daniel 7:9). His blazing eyes

symbolize judgment of all evil (see Daniel 10:6) and deep insight, not only over the churches and the believers but over the entire course of history (see also 2:18; 19:12).

**1:15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.**<sup>NIV</sup> The *feet like bronze* picture an exalted person with great power (also from Daniel). Bronze usually symbolized the might of Rome—bronze shields and breastplates were used by the Roman army. In addition, the altar of burnt offering was covered with bronze (Exodus 38:1-7). Again, this is a picture of an all-powerful Victor. The description of *glowing* metal used to describe this Son of Man is also found in Ezekiel 1:13, 27; 8:2; and Daniel 10:6.

The *voice like rushing waters* (see also 19:6) evokes the image of a huge waterfall roaring over a high cliff. Thus, the voice is powerful and awesome. When this man speaks with authority, nothing else can be heard.



#### TO SEE JESUS

Revelation will probably challenge and change your mental picture of Jesus Christ. That is its purpose—to reveal Jesus Christ. What forms your impression of Jesus right now—famous paintings, movies, Sunday school art? To what degree do you picture Jesus with gold sash and snow white, woolly hair? Do his eyes flash fire and his feet glow like bronze? When you imagine Jesus speaking to you, does his voice sound like a trumpet or rushing waters? Reevaluate the way you think of Jesus as you read and study Revelation. Allow his awesome presence to transform your life.

**1:16 He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was as bright as the sun in all its brilliance.**<sup>NLT</sup> In his *right hand*, Christ holds *seven stars*, explained in 1:20 as “the angels of the seven churches,” referring to the seven churches, listed in 1:11, to whom this letter is addressed. That Christ is holding the stars implies his protection of these churches as he walks among them.

There are two swords in Revelation. Chapter 19 has the “great sword.” The sword here is the *sharp two-edged sword*. This type of sword, invented by the Romans, represents invincible might. Only two to two and a half feet long, these swords were quite possibly the greatest military invention of the ancient world. Previously, swords were about three feet long and made of an inferior metal. They could not be sharp on both edges because the metal wasn’t strong enough. The double-edged sword was lighter

and sharp on both edges. With the older swords, fighting was done by drawing back and hacking, but when the Romans used their double-edged swords, they could slice and cut both ways. These swords gave such a great advantage in hand-to-hand combat that the Roman army was called “the short swords.” It made them virtually invincible.

This sharp two-edged sword is coming *from Jesus’ mouth*, symbolizing the power and force of his message. Jesus’ words of judgment are as sharp as swords; he is completely invincible (2:16; 19:15, 21; Isaiah 49:2; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12).

*His face was as bright as the sun in all its brilliance.* This shining brilliance probably describes Christ’s entire being. The same sort of picture is described in the Transfiguration, an event that John himself had witnessed (10:1; Matthew 17:2).

**1:17-18** **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.”**<sup>NIV</sup> John’s response to the awesome sight of the glorious Son of Man was to fall *at his feet as though dead*. Most likely this was not a trance; rather, it was in response to having seen a spectacular vision. (Other such responses are recorded in Joshua 5:14; Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 8:17; 10:8-9; Matthew 17:6; and Acts 26:14.)

The message given by this glorious figure—Christ—is the same one that had been given to the women at the tomb (Matthew 28:5): “*Do not be afraid.*” Jesus had also told his followers not to be afraid when he had walked over to them across the water (Matthew 14:27) and when the three who had witnessed his Transfiguration had fallen terrified to the ground (Matthew 17:7). For those who believe, there is no need to fear. This Christ is *the First and the Last*—essentially the same as the Alpha and the Omega in 1:8. In Isaiah 44:6, God says, “I am the First and the Last; there is no other God” (NLT). Christ is *the Living One*—not a dead idol but alive and always with his people, every moment, in control of all things. He is the same one who was resurrected. He *was dead*; that is, he experienced physical death on the cross. But now he is *alive for ever and ever*. Because Jesus rose from the dead, he can promise the same for his people.

Jesus holds the *keys of death and Hades*, which give him complete control over that domain. Keys open doors, thus revealing what is behind them. In ancient days the key holders had high status in the community. Christ alone has absolute authority over people’s lives and deaths—and even when they are raised from

the dead. He alone can free people from the ultimate enemy, death. He alone can say who will die and who will live, because he has the keys. The word “Hades” is the Greek word for the underworld, the realm of the dead; a different word describes “hell,” the place of torment. Hades is the word used in the New Testament for “Sheol”—the Old Testament word describing the place of the dead. The word “Hades” occurs here, in 20:13-14, and in Matthew 16:18. Believers need not fear death and Hades, because Christ holds the keys to both (see Luke 16:23).



#### NO FEAR

Jesus told John not to be afraid (1:17). As the Roman government stepped up its persecution of Christians, John must have wondered if the church could survive and stand against the fearful opposition. But Jesus appeared in glory and splendor, touched John with his right hand as if commissioning him, and reassured him that he and his fellow believers had access to God's strength to face these trials. Believers and churches of any age who face difficult problems should remember that the power available to John and the early church is also available to them (see 1 John 4:4). Because Christ has such wonderful power, we need not fear death or judgment.

- 1:19** **“Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen later.”**<sup>NLT</sup> The command to *write down* what John had seen is repeated (see also 1:11). The phrase “what you have seen” is a general statement referring to *both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen later*. The vision that will unfold in the following chapters will include present and future events intertwined—events that both are and will be. Every future revelation has relevance for the present—the churches to whom this letter was written. The revelation also applies to churches and believers even today, two thousand years later.
- 1:20** **“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.”**<sup>NIV</sup> Christ first reveals to John *the mystery of the seven stars* that he was holding in his *right hand* (1:16). In the New Testament, the word “mystery” describes something formerly hidden but now revealed. Christ explains that *the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches*. But just who are the “angels of the seven churches”? Because the Greek word *angeloi* can mean angels or messengers, some believe that they are angels designated to guard the churches;

others believe that they are elders or pastors of the churches. The case for angels as the correct interpretation comes from the fact that every other use of “angels” in Revelation refers to heavenly beings. However, because the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 contain reprimands against the messengers, and angels are not ever considered to be heads of churches, it is doubtful that these angels are heavenly messengers. If these are earthly leaders or messengers, they are accountable to God for the churches they represent.

The *seven golden lampstands* among which Christ had been standing (1:13) represent *the seven churches* to whom this letter would be circulated (1:11). The churches may have been facing difficulties and persecution, but they must never forget that Christ was standing among them, totally in control.

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