God’s Final Word
Understanding Revelation

by

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with

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Contents

Chapter 1  Behind the Scenes of History  
Revelation 1  

Chapter 2  Seven Letters to Seven Churches  
Overview: Revelation 1:19, chapters 2 and 3  

Chapter 3  The Church That Lost Its Love  
Revelation 2:1-7  

Chapter 4  A Church under Pressure  
Revelation 2:8-11  

Chapter 5  The Church That Compromised  
Revelation 2:12-17  

Chapter 6  The Worldly Church  
Revelation 2:18-29  

Chapter 7  The Church of the Zombies  
Revelation 3:1-6  

Chapter 8  The Little Church That Tried  
Revelation 3:7-13  

Chapter 9  The Rich/Poor Church  
Revelation 3:14-22  

Chapter 10  Supreme Headquarters  
111  
Revelation 4  

Chapter 11  The Great Breakthrough  
Revelation 5  

Chapter 12  The Riders of Judgment  
139
Revelation 6

Chapter 13  To Jew and Gentile  155
Revelation 7

Chapter 14  Angels of Doom  169
Revelation 8

Chapter 15  All Hell Breaks Loose  185
Revelation 9

Chapter 16  The End of Mystery  199
Revelation 10

Chapter 17  The Last Warning  211
Revelation 11

Chapter 18  The Woman and the Serpent  229
Revelation 12

Chapter 19  When Men Become Beasts  243
Revelation 13

Chapter 20  The Time of Harvest  259
Revelation 14

Chapter 21  Earth’s Last Trial  271
Revelation 15 and 16

Chapter 22  The Dragon Lady  287
Revelation 17:1-19:5

Chapter 23  The Rider on the White Horse  305
Revelation 19:6-21

Chapter 24  One Thousand Years of Peace  317
Revelation 20

Chapter 25  The City of Glory  333
Revelation 21 and 22

Notes  353
Chapter One

Behind the Scenes of History

Revelation 1

The book of Revelation is the scariest book in the Bible. Yet it is also one of the most comforting, reassuring, and exhilarating books in the Bible.

Why is it scary? Well, just imagine having your home shaken and broken to splinters by a devastating 8.0 earthquake. Then imagine huddling in a shelter as bombs rain down upon your city with deafening explosions, lung-searing smoke, and blistering fire. Imagine the horror of being surrounded by plague, of watching friends and family falling sick, moaning, dying. Imagine the eerie sight of strange creatures descending from the sky, settling over the whole earth, killing people by the hundreds and thousands.

Now imagine experiencing not just one but all of these horrors at the same time. That is just part of the terrifying, electrifying, awe-inspiring swirl of events that make up the book of Revelation.

And yet, as I said, the book of Revelation is also one of the most comforting and exhilarating books in the Bible. It pictures a time when there will be a glorious new heaven and a new earth, a time when God will dwell with human beings, when there will be universal peace and an end to all sorrow. Jesus will wipe every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more death, nor mourning, nor crying, nor pain.

As we attempt to place ourselves amid this dizzying vortex of terrors, miracles, and wonders that are prophesied for the end of this age in the
Perhaps the most striking and profound aspect of this book is its relevance and importance to our lives in these closing days of the twentieth century. The book of Revelation is not just a musty piece of parchment from a bygone age, nor is it merely a collection of mysterious, symbolic images for some future age. The book of Revelation is vibrant, alive, and profoundly applicable to the times in which you and I live.

The “Bookends” of the Bible

It is no accident that the book of Revelation appears as the last book of the Bible. Revelation gathers all the threads of theme and historic events contained in the rest of the Bible, weaving them into a seamless whole. The entire scope of human history—and of eternity itself—comes into brilliant focus in the book of Revelation.

Someone has rightly observed that the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation are like two bookends that hold the entire Bible together. In Genesis we have the story of the origin of human sin; in Revelation we have the complete and final victory over sin. Genesis presents the beginning of human history and civilization; Revelation presents the end of both. In Genesis we learn the beginnings of God’s judgment and His grace toward mankind; in Revelation we see the awesome result of His judgment and the triumph of His grace. The great themes of these two books are intricately intertwined.

Have you ever been to a major airport and watched the people get off the planes? You may see a crowd of people wearing shorts and flowered shirts, with leis around their necks. Aha, you think, these people just arrived from Hawaii. You may see another crowd of people lugging raincoats and umbrellas, with faces wreathed in gloom like an overcast day. They are just off the plane from Seattle.

In much the same way, as you work your way through the book of Revelation, you recognize the identifying features of the great themes of the Bible, and it is easy to tell in which Old Testament books those themes originated. Here we catch an echo of Daniel, there an aroma of Joel, and elsewhere we find nuggets from Isaiah and Ezekiel. In Revelation, we see very clearly the organic unity of the Word of God.

A “Significant” Book

The first three verses of Revelation form a prologue or preface which tells us the purpose of the book, the importance of the book, and the spirit or attitude in which it is to be read:

_Book of Revelation_, we have to agree with Dr. Earl Palmer, who observed, “This remarkable book is both hard to understand fully and impossible to forget.”

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1:1–3 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.

There are two words in this paragraph that reveal to us the special nature of this book: it is called a revelation and a prophecy. The Greek word which is translated “revelation” is apokalupsis, which literally means “an unveiling.” A revelation removes the veil which obscures our understanding, it unravels the mystery, it makes the meaning plain.

Accordingly, as we move through the book of Revelation, we will find many mysteries made clear. We will learn why evil persists on the earth, and what the ultimate fate of evil will be. The mystery of godliness will also be explained, so that we can discover how to live a godly, righteous life in the midst of a broken, evil world. Many other mysteries will be unveiled in this book of apokalupsis, of revelation.

And then there is the other word used to describe the book of Revelation: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy.” This is a book that deals in predictions. It deals with people and events which lie in the future. Powerful personalities are waiting to make their entrance on the stage of human events. Extraordinary circumstances are waiting to unfold as the juggernaut of history rumbles toward its fateful consummation. We will meet these personalities and witness these events in the book of Revelation.

The book is called the “revelation of Jesus Christ,” and John says that Jesus Himself “made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.” The English phrase “made it known” actually has a deeper meaning in the original Greek, where instead of three words there is just one Greek word, semaino. This word should be translated “signified”—or, if you want to really get the true sense of this word, pronounce it aloud: “sign-i-fied.” In other words, Jesus made His revelation known to John by signs or symbols. Once you grasp the symbolic “sign-ificance” of this book, you can begin to understand and apply the book of Revelation.

Revelation is a book of symbols, and these symbols are important. Symbols help to simplify difficult concepts and to clarify things which are baffling or murky. I once heard of a boy who tried to explain to his little brother what radio was like. He said, “You know that a telegraph is a long wire that runs between two cities. It’s like having a big dog with his tail in Los Angeles and his head in San Francisco. If you step on his tail
in Los Angeles, he barks in San Francisco. Now a radio is the same thing—only you don’t have no dog!” This boy tried his best to clarify an idea with the use of symbols—though I doubt his brother was any more enlightened as a result.

The book of Revelation, however, uses symbols with great precision and clarity. The weird beasts and strange persons of Revelation are all symbols of things which are real and literal. As we journey together through the pages of this book, I think you will be surprised to see how many seemingly difficult images and events in the book of Revelation become clear.

The key to understanding the symbols of Revelation is recognizing that almost all of these symbols have been given to us elsewhere in the Bible. If you try to read Revelation without any understanding of the rest of the Bible, you are doomed to confusion. But if you use the rest of the Bible as a guide and interpreter of the symbols of Revelation, most of these symbols immediately become understandable.

A Book from the Mind of God

Who is the author of the book of Revelation?

At first glance, the answer might seem to be John. But look again. John writes that this book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him,” and which Jesus in turn made known to John. The author of Revelation is God Himself! John was certainly involved in the process of producing this book, but it truly had its origin not in the mind of John, but within the Godhead, in the mind of God the Father. The Father revealed it to the Son, who in turn made it known to a human being named John.

Why did God the Father have to give this revelation to Jesus the Son? Remember that in Matthew 24:36 Jesus said that though He understood many of the events of the last days of the age, He did not know the time when these events would happen. This knowledge, He said, belonged only to the Father. Now, of course, since Jesus is risen and glorified, He knows all that the Father knows, but while on earth the timing of these events was unknown even to Jesus Himself.

So God the Father gave this revelation to Jesus, who in turn entrusted it to John by means of an angel. Thus, while all Scripture is inspired by God, the book of Revelation occupies a unique place in the Bible, because no other book of the Bible has been given to us in this way. John’s role in the writing of this book is virtually that of a secretary taking dictation John is the writer, but God is the Author of the book of Revelation.
5

Revelation 1:1–3

But who is this man John, whose pen has preserved for us this awesome and powerful vision of the future? In verse 4 he simply identifies himself as “John.” By comparing Revelation with other Scriptures and by examining the traditions of the early church, we can be reasonably sure that the author is John the apostle, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee, the beloved friend of Jesus, author of the gospel and three letters that bear his name. Certainly, there are Bible scholars who disagree, but when we compare the style, content, and structure of Revelation with that of the other writings of the apostle John, it is difficult to come to any other conclusion.

John probably wrote this book near the end of his life, at around A.D. 94 to 96. He was an old man, likely in his eighties, when this vision was given to him. The book is addressed to seven selected churches located in the Roman province of Asia, which today is part of the nation of Turkey.

As we begin our journey through the vision God gave to John, notice the inspiring promise we find at the outset: “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.” God has promised all the readers of this book—including you and me—a special blessing if we read, hear, and take to heart the words of this prophecy.

What kind of blessing? I believe the Lord is promising that we will find comfort, guidance, and assurance, even through such times of upheaval and fear as described in Revelation. The 1990s are troubled, confused times, filled with temptations, pressures, and anti-Christian philosophies—and the days will grow darker as we near the conclusion of history. But the person who understands the book of Revelation will have a faithful guide through the tumult and confusion of this dying age.

The Key Number of Revelation

Once, during a trip to England, the renowned Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan was visited at his hotel by the English mathematician J. E. Littlewood. As the two men settled into their chairs to share tea together, Littlewood remarked, “You know, on the way over here, I happened to notice the number of the taxicab was 1729. I thought to myself, ‘That is certainly a dull number.’ I hope it’s not an unfavorable omen for our visit.”

“Oh, but you’re quite mistaken, my friend,” said Ramanujan. “In fact, 1729 is quite an interesting number! It is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways!”
Numbers which would escape the notice of you and me hold a strange fascination for mathematicians. Similarly, we find there are certain numbers which hold a fascinating significance in the book of Revelation.

1:4-8 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.”

Note, first of all, the greeting, “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” These words describe God the Father as the Lord of all time and all eternity. His name in Hebrew, Yahweh, means “I Am.” In English, “I Am” sounds like a statement in the present tense, but in Hebrew it contains all the tenses used in Revelation 1:4—in effect, “I am he who is, and he who was, and he who is to come.”

Next we come to the key number of Revelation, the first of a series of sevens: “and from the seven spirits before his throne.” Why is the number seven significant in Revelation? Because, whenever you encounter seven of anything in this book, it is a symbol of completeness and perfection.

Who is signified by the “seven spirits before his throne”? Here we find the first of many echoes from Old Testament prophecy. In Isaiah 11:2, the prophet speaks of the Spirit of God coming upon the Messiah:

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. . . .

In this passage the Spirit of God is described in a sevenfold way. He is (1) the Spirit of the Lord, (2) the Spirit of wisdom, (3) the Spirit of
understanding, (4) the Spirit of counsel, (5) the Spirit of power, (6) the Spirit of knowledge, and (7) the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. So the “seven spirits” of Revelation 1:4 are a symbol of the Holy Spirit in His sevenfold completion, perfection, and fullness.

This greeting of grace and peace comes from God the Father, the eternal “I Am”; from the Holy Spirit; and from Jesus Christ, the central figure of Revelation, who is introduced in threefold fashion as (1) the faithful witness, (2) the firstborn from the dead, and (3) the ruler of the kings of the earth.

He is called “the faithful witness” because what He says is true and reliable. When He speaks, He utters absolute, trustworthy reality. In a confusing, chaotic, dying world, Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the truth-teller.

He is called “the firstborn from the dead” because of the resurrection. Though there were others (such as Lazarus, whom Jesus called forth from the tomb at Bethany) who died and were raised again, they were merely raised to the same earthly life they had before. Eventually, they died again and were buried. Only Jesus was raised to eternal, incorruptible glory. It is this same eternal, incorruptible life that Jesus gives to those who believe in Him. He is the life-giver.

He is called “the ruler of the kings of the earth” because He has ultimate sovereignty over the whole world. There are many rulers and leaders who claim to be sovereign in their own countries, but Jesus exercises ultimate authority over them all. He is the great law-maker, the king of kings.

So, in this passage, Jesus is introduced in threefold fashion as the truth-teller, the life-giver, and the law-maker.

The First Doxology

This introduction is followed in verses 5 and 6 by a threefold doxology to (1) “him who loves us,” (2) who “has freed us from our sins by his blood,” and (3) who “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” This is the first doxology of the book of Revelation, a paean of praise to God, which concludes, “to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” This is a powerful declaration, and its three essential themes deserve closer examination.

First theme: He loves us. This is a statement in the present tense. It’s an amazing fact. Despite all our foolishness, waywardness, selfishness, and sin, the Lord Jesus loves us. He is always on our side.

Years ago, while I was traveling in the state of Virginia with Dr. H. A. Ironside, we met a man who was rector of an Episcopal church. This
man told us the story of his conversion to Christ. I’ve never forgotten that story.

He was a student at England’s Cambridge University when D. L. Moody was invited to speak to the students. He and a number of other students were furious that such a distinguished institution as Cambridge would invite Moody—an unschooled American preacher—to give a lecture. Moody murdered the king’s English so badly that he is said to have pronounced the word “Jerusalem” in only one syllable!

The night of Moody’s appearance, the group of rebellious students sat in the very front row, waiting for just the right time to humiliate Moody with jeers and mocking. Just before Moody was to speak, the great gospel singer and composer Ira B. Sankey stood and sang. As he sang, the restless audience grew quiet and respectful. Immediately after the song and without introduction, Moody stepped up on the platform, pointed his finger at the young men in the front row, and said, “Young gentlemen, don’t ever think God don’t love you, for He do!”

It was perhaps the most ungrammatical sentence ever uttered on the Cambridge University grounds. Yet there was such power in Moody’s face, in his voice, and in his straightforward declaration of God’s love that the young men in the front row dared not jeer and mock as they had planned. Moody went on to speak of the love of Jesus for a lost human race—a love that compelled Jesus to go to the cross and die an agonizing death in our place. In the course of his talk, he repeated those ungrammatical but awesomely powerful words, “Young gentlemen, don’t ever think God don’t love you, for He do!”

Concluding his reminiscence of that meeting, the Episcopal rector looked first at Dr. Ironside, then at me, and he said, “In those moments, I saw myself in a different light. By the end of that meeting, I gave my heart to Jesus Christ.”

That is how John wants us to see ourselves in relationship to Jesus Christ: *He loves us*, in the present tense, despite our rebellion and sin. When the truth of this statement begins to seep into our hearts, then our lives—like the life of this Episcopal rector—can be transformed.

Second theme: *He has freed us from our sins by His blood.* Jesus breaks the shackles of sin and destructive habits in our lives. He sets us free from the addictions and dependencies which harass us, enslave us, and chain us down. It is true that many Christians continue to struggle with evil habits even after coming into a relationship with Christ. Some struggle with drug or alcohol dependency, some with selfish attitudes or sexual temptations, some with an angry temper or a malicious tongue. But the blood of Christ gives us the power to break the chains of sin—if
we will but turn the control of our lives over to Him. As in the words of the old hymn,

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me!

Third theme: *He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father*. We are all sinners, estranged from a holy and just God because of our sin. The role of a priest is to bridge the alienation between the people and God, to bring the people near to God again. In the Old Testament, priests explained the meaning of sacrifices, called the people to repentance, and thus brought the people near to God.

Today, *all* believers are called to perform the function of a priest. Do you ever think of yourself as a priest? It’s a high and holy calling, given to us by Jesus Himself.

We are to reach out to others in their pain and lostness. We are to explain to them the sacrifice that Jesus has made on their behalf. We are to share with them the fact that God loves them and longs to draw them to Himself, to heal their loneliness and alienation. For this reason, Jesus has made all believers, including you and me, to be a kingdom of priests.

**The Splendor of His Coming**

Some years ago, I was visiting with a number of rabbis in Southern California. The subject of our discussion was the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

“You know,” one rabbi said to me, “when the Messiah comes, we Jews will say, ‘Welcome!’ But you Christians will say, ‘Welcome back!’”

“And what will the Messiah say?” I asked.

“I think,” the rabbi replied without missing a beat, “He will say, ‘No comment.’”

In Revelation 1:7, the Lord is introduced to us not only in terms of who He is, His attributes and His glory, but also in terms of what He will do in the future: “Look, he is coming with the clouds.” This is the focal point of human history, the single event toward which all human events—and heavenly events as well—are moving. One day Jesus Himself will break through the skies, and He will appear again in glory, just as when He left the earth. His coming will have planet-wide impact, for, as Revelation 1:7 says, “every eye will see him.”
This account of Jesus' return accords with that of Matthew 24:30. There, Jesus said, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.”

No one will miss this spectacular event, not even those without televisions. He will appear everywhere, and He will be visible to everyone in the world at once. In 2 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul calls this event “the splendor of his coming,” or, more literally, “the outshining of his parousia” (parousia is the Greek word which describes the future presence of Jesus on earth).

Jesus’ appearance will be so unmistakable that even the Jews will recognize Him. John tells us, “even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” This is a reference to the prophecy in Zechariah 12:10–13:6, where we are told that when the Messiah appears, those who pierced Him shall look upon Him and mourn greatly. The Jews shall ask Him, “What are these wounds on your body?” and He will say, “The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.”

From these passages, I have to conclude that my rabbi friend was mistaken when he said the Jews would say, “Welcome!” when Messiah comes. I am convinced that even they will say, “Welcome back!” because they will see Him, they will know Him, and they—along with all the peoples of the earth—will mourn, knowing that the Messiah has visited this planet once before, that He was despised, rejected, and crucified.

One of the great puzzles of history is the fact that the Jewish people have so resolutely turned their backs on the evidence that Jesus is their promised Messiah. At the beginning, of course, the early church was almost entirely Jewish, but over time, increasingly more non-Jewish converts came into the church, while the number of Jewish converts dwindled to a trickle. Why? Because the Jewish people are “blinded” (as Paul so convincingly argues in Romans 9 through 11) by long-standing unbelief.

But Jewish unbelief will not last forever. The day will come when the Jewish people will recognize—and mourn—their Messiah. They will mourn, just as all the peoples of the earth will mourn, because of the tragic and terrible way they have treated Jesus and His work for all mankind upon the cross.

The Alpha and the Omega

The nineteenth-century English clergyman William Lisle Bowles was a prolific and much-admired poet. He was often asked to autograph copies of his poetry collections. On one occasion, while visiting in the
home of his friend Tom Moore, he presented a Bible to Mrs. Moore as a gift. She was so pleased with the gift that she asked Bowles to inscribe it, which he did. After the poet left the house, Mrs. Moore opened the Bible to the flyleaf and was surprised to discover that he had absentmindedly written, “To Mrs. Moore, with cordial wishes, from the Author.”

In these opening verses—the “flyleaf” of the book of Revelation—God takes the pen in His own hand and signs the book with His own signature: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God,” using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to symbolize the beginning and end of all things. He continues, describing Himself in this inscription as the One “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

In no other book of the Bible do we find this wonderful imprimatur of God. When we read these words, we are reading a copy autographed by the Author Himself!

The Prisoner of Patmos

The first chapter of Revelation concludes with John’s explanation of how and where he received this prophecy from God.

Revelation 1:9–20

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.”

Here, even in the first chapter of Revelation, we discover truth imparted in the form of symbols. Jesus is described in a way that is not intended to convey His actual physical appearance but various aspects of His character, His attributes, and His role.

The setting for the vision John received is a tiny island in the Aegean Sea. This island, called Patmos, is only about four miles wide and six miles long, located just off the coast of Turkey. It was a dreary little place in John’s day, containing a stone quarry, some mining excavations, and very little else. John had apparently been banished to Patmos by the Romans in order to silence his preaching—hence his statement that he was there “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” John was a prisoner on Patmos.

On one Sunday morning (or “the Lord’s Day,” as John calls it), John was “in the Spirit.” This does not mean that John was in some state of religious ecstasy, but rather that he was worshiping God and meditating on God’s greatness and majesty. It is the state of mind and spirit that Jesus described in John 4:24 when He said, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

While John was in this worshipful attitude, a voice like a trumpet said, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches.” Upon hearing this voice, John did what you or I would have done: he turned to find the source of this powerful, trumpetlike voice. What he saw was the Lord Himself, standing among seven golden lampstands, holding seven stars in His hands. Note the significance of the number seven again, the number of completeness.

John’s Encounter with the Lord

Now let’s look at each of the symbols which characterize John’s vision of the Lord Jesus:

1. Jesus is dressed in a long robe, bound across the chest by a golden sash, a priestly garment symbolizing His role as the Great High Priest. In Scripture, gold symbolizes deity. This robe with its golden sash speaks of the fact that Jesus is a priest who is Himself God. He is the Lord, sovereign over all of history, healing the breach between God and man.

2. His head and His hair are white. These are symbols used in the book of Daniel to denote wisdom and purity.
3. His eyes are like blazing fire, from which nothing can be hid. Fire speaks of judgment.

4. His feet are like bronze, glowing in a furnace. Again, the image of furnace-hot fires of judgment.

5. His voice is like the sound of rushing waters, like the roar of the surf as it dashes against the rocks. The sound of His voice is the sound of power, inspiring our awe.

6. The sword which comes out of the mouth of Jesus is clearly the Word of God, by which Jesus reveals truth to us.

7. His face is like the sun shining in its strength. The brilliance of the sun symbolizes the burning intensity of truth.

Perhaps as John looked upon the brilliant face of the risen Lord, he recalled a time during the Lord’s earthly ministry, when John, Peter, and James stood together with Jesus on a high mountain in northern Israel. There, as they prayed together, the face and garments of the Lord suddenly shone with a whiteness like nothing ever seen on the earth. This is the event which theologians call the transfiguration of Jesus. In 2 Peter 1:16–18, Peter recalled the transfiguration and said that it was a preview of the future coming of Jesus.

Perhaps this vision of Jesus in Revelation 1 explains an interesting episode at the end of the gospel of John. In John 21, Jesus commissioned Peter with the words, “Feed my sheep,” then prophesied that Peter would one day die a martyr’s death. At this point, Peter indicted John, and said, “Lord, what about him?” Peter wanted to know what sort of death was prophesied for John. And Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” Because of a misunderstanding of this conversation between Peter and the Lord, word went out among the disciples that John would never die until the Lord returned.

Here, in Revelation 1, is the explanation: John did remain alive to see the coming of the Lord. He foresaw the Lord’s coming as an event in history, but he saw it in the form of a vision from God. Though historical tradition holds that John died at the age of ninety and was buried in Ephesus, he did live to see the coming of the Lord. He saw the Lord’s coming in symbols of priestly garments, of brilliant light, of blazing fire, of thunderous sound, of supreme power, purity, wisdom, and holiness.

Throughout the remainder of Revelation, we will see other symbolism employed to describe various aspects of Jesus’ character, power, and position. In chapter 5, He will appear as a lamb—and also as a lion. In chapter 19, He will appear as a rider on a great white horse. He is a bridegroom coming for His bride in chapter 21. But it is the image of...
Jesus which John describes in chapter 1 that is the most startling and graphic of all.

Before such an awesome sight, what could John do, what could any human being do, but fall at the feet of Jesus as though dead? Who could remain standing before such a vision? This, indeed, is the reaction of every human who experiences the kind of profound encounter with the living God that John experiences in Revelation 1. John’s reaction is identical to that of Isaiah when he sees the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, with the long train of His robe filling the temple. John’s reaction is the same as that of Job when he is awed and humbled in the presence of God.

And as John lay prostrate before the feet of Jesus, the Lord did something that was completely typical and characteristic of Him: He reached down and touched John! He placed His right hand on the trembling shoulder of the beloved disciple.

As you read through the gospels, you see that Jesus was always touching people. When He healed a leper, He touched him. When He restored sight to the blind, He put His hands upon their eyes. Now, in Revelation 1, Jesus touches His friend John and reassures him with the words, “Do not be afraid.” He is saying to John, in effect, “I am your friend, not your enemy. I am the First and the Last. I set the boundaries of time and history. All people and all events are enclosed within the limits that I have determined in my sovereignty. I hold the keys of death and hell, the keys of both physical death and spiritual death. I am sovereign over all that is, so you have nothing to fear, my friend.”

“Write!”

Having reassured John, Jesus then commissions him. “Write, therefore,” says the Lord, “what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.” Notice that Jesus gives him a three-part writing assignment. First, John is to write what he has seen, which is that vision we have just examined, recorded in Revelation 1.

Second, John is to write “what is now.” That is, he is to write seven letters to seven churches about existing conditions in those churches. These letters comprise Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

Third, John is to write “what will take place later.” This is the prophetic vision of the future contained in Revelation chapters 4 through 22. These are the three divisions of the book of Revelation, as given to us by the Lord Himself. If we will follow these divisions carefully, we will be able to understand God’s message to us in this challenging, rewarding,
symbol-laden book. That, of course, is our goal as we keep before us God’s promise from verse 3, “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.”

The point of the first chapter of Revelation is to focus our attention on Jesus. He is the central figure of Revelation, just as He is the central figure of all history. Our lives can never be lived realistically, triumphantly, and joyously without reference to Him. We, as Christians, are called to live as though we see Him who is invisible. He is the One we must take to work with us each day. He is the One who will be beside us as we drive our cars, as we go to sleep, as we face our trials, as we experience our joys. He is the source of our courage, our peace, our wisdom, our forgiveness when we sin, our help in time of need.

In this first chapter of Revelation, John takes up the commission given him by Jesus and performs it with dramatic force: he elevates our hearts and focuses our attention upon Jesus, upon who He is and what He is doing in human history. The Lord, through His servant John, has lifted the veil from the obscured face of the future. He invites us to look behind the scenes of history and see the great and awesome things He is doing—and is about to do!—upon the earth, and within each individual life.

So come with me. Let’s venture a step closer and look upon the face of Tomorrow.