

When approaching the Revelation of John, many Christians fall into several errors—they can hyper-sensationalize the content, they can turn the prophetic material into a series of newspaper headlines joined together by red string, or they can render John’s pastoral letter into a science fiction novel with little to no real-world application. *Vengeance Has Come* is a much-needed correction of those three errors. By grounding the Apocalypse squarely in the first century, approaching the prophecies through Old Testament lenses, and focusing heavily on application for the follower of Christ, Dave’s commentary is a welcomed breath of fresh air for any student of the Scriptures, whether it be a layperson or a pastor.

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David Forsythe’s commentary on Revelation is an excellent bridge between the academic and the pastoral. The commentary is obviously aware of current scholarship on the Apocalypse but is aimed at the reader who wishes to see through the popular hype regarding the end times. As he makes clear, Revelation must be understood on its first century terms before it is to be applied to the present. His very helpful introduction clearly lays out the various approaches to both eschatology and the Book of Revelation. Its relative brevity makes it extremely helpful as a preaching and teaching guide within the local church or to recommend to any serious reader.

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Finally, an honest approach to the importance of scriptural context in understanding the book of Revelation. The oracle of judgment from Jesus in Matthew 23 is given its place of importance as the last prophecy concerning Israel and for which the early church waited and anticipated to be fulfilled in a generation of time. Most Christians do not know the significance of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70 let alone its place in biblical prophecy. *Vengeance Has Come* clearly portrays God’s judgment on the covenant unfaithful Jews as key to interpreting the book of Revelation.

Vengeance Has Come is a verse-by-verse analysis of the book of Revelation following the footsteps of the Reformed and Puritan forefathers while seeking to remain true to the inspiration of Scriptures as a unified message that ties the text to the first century recipients. *Vengeance Has Come* helps us to focus rightly on Jesus as the true revelation and builds trust in the sovereign rulership of King Jesus over the kingdom of man. The Messianic mission of Jesus will not fail. This message encourages us in our hope of eternal life, gives strength to our faith to live daily in perseverance, and ignites our love for God and others even as the circumstances that surround our lives get hectic similar to the days surrounding Jerusalem in the 1st century. We can draw great comfort and courage knowing that God is in absolute control of all things throughout history.

David does something which most authors of commentaries do not do, and that is he identifies his theological presupposition up front so that the reader does not have to guess where he is coming from. I for one appreciate this. Whether or not you agree with his position, David gives an honest presentation that is consistent with his beliefs. This is a view that deserves the attention of serious students of the Bible. If nothing else, this commentary will force you to think critically about the different schools regarding the interpretation of the Revelation. I highly recommend this commentary on Revelation as a must have book for every pastor and serious Christian who wants to know and understand God's word.

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I want to thank my good friend David Forsythe for taking the time to write this commentary on Revelation. While I do not agree with all that he has written in this book, I have found it to be of benefit to read an exegesis of Revelation through a Preterist-Postmillennial lens. He has helped me to understand Revelation and challenged my own Idealist-Amillennial perspective. David goes through the book of Revelation verse by verse providing insights into the text for the contemporary reader. I recommend this book to those who are leaning toward Postmillennialism or for any others who are not afraid to have their own views challenged.

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VENGEANCE
HAS
COME

DAVID A. FORSYTHE

VENGEANCE
HAS
COME

*A Puritan-Minded Exposition of the Apocalypse
for the Modern Church*



Vengeance Has Come

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Dedications

*To my four wonderful children, whom the Lord has given me—
Judah, Malachi, Evangeline and Ezra.
May you passionately build culture around the gospel
and teach your children to do the same!*

~ & ~

*To my beautiful wife, Alyssa, the treasure of my heart, second
only to the Lord Jesus. May we continue to be a united gospel
force in the lives of our children to this most noble end!*

Acknowledgments

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to several valuable voices in my life who have helped me greatly in producing this work of penmanship. First, I must express my gratitude to my beloved wife, Alyssa, for all her hard work in proofreading my manuscript. This has helped greatly in readability. Second, I would like to extend deep appreciation to my adopted uncle, Dr. Geoffrey Hale, for his close examination of internal and external consistency in my argumentation. This has resulted in resolving several contradictions that were unapparent to me in the beginning. In addition, I'd like to extend my thanks to my brother-in-arms, Cpl. Philippe Loyer, for his recommendations for readability and overall encouragement throughout the process of bringing this work to publication. Furthermore, I would like to sincerely thank Fred Boekee for his necessary insights in consistency of application flowing from my exegesis. Lastly, I must extend heartfelt gratitude to my dear friend, Pastor John Greenidge, for his many insights, both technical and practical. These have aided me greatly in presenting my thoughts well for an audience who likely is unfamiliar with the convictions to which I hold. May the Lord bounteously bless each of these His servants for their contributions to this work! More importantly, may His name be lifted up and more greatly honored as a result of their efforts! Soli Deo Gloria. Amen.

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Preface

I can hear it now. “Why would someone take it upon himself to write an exposition of *the* biblical book that has been the center of so much controversy?” Indeed, why would such a historically minded Christian as myself find it necessary to enter the fray, as it were, even to bring a view into the heart of it that is considered irrelevant, at best, by many today? There is one overriding answer to this question, an answer requiring an explanation.

The response is, in fact, one word: *worldview*. Working to form a consistent, biblically derived foundation on which to live before God, not only in the private sphere but also in every nook and cranny of the public sphere, has become an intense passion of mine. In seeking to be consistent in pushing my theological convictions into the public square—whether it be in terms of art or music, banking or economics, education or public discourse—I’ve been challenged to reconsider some deeply held convictions in light of Scripture and the theological views of those who have come before. Through the process of re-examination, I’ve come to largely embrace both the theology and the systematic, big-picture mindset expressed in the Second London Baptist Confession (1689). This puts me squarely in the seventeenth-century English Puritan tradition, along with confessional Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Furthermore, in building on this robust, consistent reading of Scripture, I’ve been led to examine every issue of life from a foundational, worldview perspective. The more I have engaged with other believers from this angle, the more I have come to realize how much we, as the body of Christ in the West, assume a biblical world-and-life-view

under the surface and thus focus primarily, if not exclusively, on teaching and reinforcing broadly accepted doctrine and tradition. The problem with assuming, rather than actively building, a consistent worldview as arising from the Word of God is that unbelieving worldviews are allowed to creep in unchallenged and unaddressed and leave the local church unable to adequately respond with the law and the gospel, not only in the home and the congregation but also in the public square. Indeed, when the prevailing world-and-life-view of the masses has successfully reshaped culture on *its* faith principles, and that culture becomes totalitarian about enforcing conformity to its faith commitments from the top down, followers of Christ end up with three problems: we haven't the categories by which to make sense of what we're up against, nor do we have the ability to offer a consistent response, nor do we have a consistent faith to pass on the next generations. Since the book of Revelation brings up many of these foundational issues and it seems clear that the Lord is moving the church in the West into a period of suffering and persecution, now seems to be a fitting time for a fresh commentary with application to the present time.

This work is not the first attempt in church history to present an in-depth, consistent reading of Christ's revelation to John, the apostle, nor will it be the last. For this reason, wherever shared interpretations exist, within the scope of being faithful to the text itself, I have sought to highlight those commonalities among orthodox commentators. To this end, in my studies, I have consulted commentators from historic and modern viewpoints. Although I find myself in largest agreement with Douglas Wilson, as a fellow preterist postmillennial, I also sought insights from others such as John Gill (historicist premillennial, eighteenth century), G. K. Beale (idealist amillennial, twentieth century), Steve Wilmshurst (idealist premillennial, twentieth and twenty-first centuries), Matthew Henry (historicist postmillennial, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and Daniel Akin (futurist premillennial, twentieth and twenty-first centuries).

With regard to the interpretation of the Apocalypse, there are four main schools: preterist, historicist, idealist, and futurist. These interpretative approaches tend to have a far greater impact on the interpreter's exegetical conclusions than his millennial position. The only exception to this generality is a futurist premillennial approach, which absolutely depends on their millennial view. In terms of approach and conclusions, preterism and idealism head off in a similar direction, while historicism and futurism

have much in common. Preterism comes from the Latin word *praeteritus*, which means “past.” In this understanding, the majority of New Testament prophecy was future from the biblical authors’ perspective but has already been fulfilled in our past. Therefore, the preterist reads the Apocalypse in this light. This is the view of which I have become convinced from the text of Scripture since it is the only reading that allows consistency of interpretation while keeping John’s original audience in view. The historicist interprets the Revelation as progressively rolling out throughout history from Christ’s first advent straight through to His second. The idealist views this final book of the New Testament as symbolically portraying the time period from Christ’s first coming to His second from various and sundry vantage points. Finally, the futurist understands the Revelation, sometimes save the first three chapters, as wholly in our future and outlining the last events of human history. Those of a dispensational premillennial persuasion not only interpret the Apocalypse through a futurist lens but also through their own hermeneutical grid. Through seeking a consistent, exegetically faithful understanding of the book as a whole, I have found the most unanimity outside my own view with the idealist interpretation, especially that of both Hendriksen and Beale.

Before getting into general structural issues concerning the Apocalypse, I would like to address two common misconceptions. These are important for properly understanding the angle from which I approach the book of Revelation. The first concerns the actual beliefs of postmillennialism. Postmillennialism does indeed teach that, through the Christianization of the nations, the world is getting better and better until, one day, there will be a “golden age” on earth. However, this is most often misunderstood to mean an imposition of Christianity on the world by believers and a kind of social betterment, as if sin and trials *will not* continue until Christ’s second coming. The charge is usually summarized as an “over-realized eschatology.” While it is beyond the scope of this work to fully defend the postmillennial hope, I would like to offer a brief explanation of what we, as evangelical postmillennialists, actually believe.¹

Simply put, postmillennialism teaches that the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:18–20) will be entirely fulfilled within human history; that is, all the nations will actually be discipled, baptized, and taught to obey all

1 For a full-length treatise on the subject, see Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 3rd ed., (Draper: Apologetics Group Media, 2009).

that Jesus commands prior to the Last Day when He returns to judge all the living and the dead. As Jesus Himself promised, He will be with us to the very end to ensure our success, lest His universal authority be blasphemed among the nations. This necessarily means that Christ's kingdom will be victorious within history; that is, He will actually rule over all the nations as His own possession, as was promised to Him in Psalm 2. On this point, postmillennialism may rightly be thought of as a highly optimistic amillennialism.

The real difference between amillennialism and postmillennialism is on the point of societal transformation as a result of the Great Commission being successful in the hearts and lives of the nations. While amillennialists insist that Messiah's kingdom-rule was inaugurated at His first advent, but will not be consummated until His second advent, they want to take all the passages concerning the *effects* of His rule in the world and place them in the eternal state, thereby interpreting those passages in solely spiritual terms. Postmillennialists would heartily agreeing on the first premise but would part ways on the second, insisting that the effects of Messiah's rule in the earth cannot be separated from His kingdom-rule and that those effects must be interpreted in equally earthy terms as the prophets present them. This means that the effects of His kingdom-rule are equally as "now but not yet" as the kingdom itself. Thus, postmillennialists hold that the success of Christ's pre-ascension mission given to His church necessarily means that the cultural (dominion) mandate of Genesis 1:26–30, later repeated in Genesis 9:1–7, will likewise be fulfilled before the return of our Lord. All of this will be accomplished by the Lord Jesus working through His people because it is *He*, not us, who has been given "all authority in heaven *and* on earth" in His exaltation. *He* is the one who is reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:19–20). Paul summarized these truths well when he taught, quoting Psalm 110:1, "For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:25–26). In this context, death will be destroyed on the Last Day when Jesus bodily resurrects all the living and the dead. As Jesus taught, the sure transformation of the whole world through the power of the gospel takes place gradually, not all at once (see Matt. 13:31–33). This is the primary means by which He is putting all His enemies under His feet. This will result in a lengthy period of global righteousness, peace, and

prosperity until our Lord's second advent (see Isa. 65:17–25). It should be noted that, after taking into consideration the whole counsel of Scripture, *none* of these things mean that sin and death, or trials and temptations, will be erased prior to the end. Nor do these things mean there will not be a consummate new heavens and new earth brought in as part of the final resurrection. Postmillennialism insists that all these elements are true and ought to be taken seriously in harmony with one another, since they are a part of divine revelation.

The result of holding all this together—that is, Scripture's consistent witness to the gradual realization of Messiah's kingdom victory within human history—is the hope-filled pursuit of “cultivating a uniquely Christian society . . . ‘a city on a hill.’”² This is the mindset with which the New England Puritans sought to colonize the New World, and which they had inherited from the vast majority of English Puritans, which they in turn had inherited from Knox and Calvin before them. “The Puritans did not conceive of the end times only in abstract theological terms but saw themselves moving through history toward its final consummation.”³ Those, like myself, who hold to this view of history and the future are following hard in the footsteps of our Reformed and Puritan forefathers, the theological shoulders on whom we stand. As has been well put, our mindset can accurately be summarized as “all of Christ for all of life for all the world!”⁴

Secondly, there's a common misunderstanding concerning the issue of the preterist view of New Testament prophecy. Just as many synergists mistakenly hear hyper-Calvinism when an orthodox Calvinist begins discussing God's sovereignty in salvation, the same problem exists with preterism. This is to say that, when preterists begin explaining their views, many non-preterists mistake them for hyper-preterists. Hyper-preterism, or full preterism, teaches that *all* biblical prophecies, including the Messiah's second coming and the resurrection of the dead, were fulfilled by the end of AD 70. The reason this doctrine has historically been rejected as heretical is that it necessitates turning both the second advent and the general

2 Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 773.

3 Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*.

4 This is the pithy slogan of Christ Church, Moscow, ID, and its printing press, Canon Press. This slogan succinctly encapsulates the teaching of the New Testament. See <https://www.christkirk.com> and <https://canonpress.com>.

resurrection into solely spiritual events. It also involves accepting the time period since AD 70 as the eternal state, though it continues to be ravaged by the effects of the fall. This all is contrary to the plain witness of God's Word, which teaches us that the effects in the world of Christ's bodily resurrection are far greater and more powerful than the effects of the fall, such that even death itself will finally be destroyed on the Last Day!

On the other hand, orthodox preterists (partial preterists) wholeheartedly reject hyper-preterism as heretical, affirm the Apostles', Athanasian, and Nicene creeds, and seek to be faithful to Scripture as a whole, rather than selectively reading certain portions and then ignoring others. This breed of preterism has long been accepted as being within the "pale of orthodoxy" amongst Bible-believing, gospel-preaching theologians and commentators. For example, along with many preterist theologians, I would maintain that Matthew 24:1–44, Mark 13:1–37, and Luke 21:5–36 are parallel passages and should be interpreted in light of one another. In addition, Matthew 24:1–44 is the final part of a whole section in Matthew's gospel concerning God's coming judgment on apostate Israel—namely, 21:12 through to 24:44. Therefore, the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 must be interpreted within that context. With these two hermeneutical principles in mind, the natural reading of the Olivet Discourse points to an AD 70 fulfillment of Jesus' predictions therein, since it deals exclusively with the events surrounding the destruction of the Jewish temple.

Now that I've dealt with these two points of concern, I will turn to the general structure of the book of Revelation. This includes the letter's author, recipients, dating, purpose, occasion, and main theme, among other overarching issues.

AUTHORSHIP:

There is debate among scholars as to which John is properly the author of the Apocalypse (Rev. 1:1). The apostle John seems to be the best fit for two main reasons. First, the entire tenor of the book is very Jewish, being saturated with Old Testament allusions, references, and imagery. Secondly, the parallels in language to both John's gospel and his epistles are obvious. This is particularly true in the way the Revelation frequently presents the Messiah as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

RECIPIENTS:

It is clear from chapter 1 to whom John writes. Verse 4 says that John is writing “to the seven churches that are in Asia,” and then in verse 11, Jesus provides the identity of these seven congregations: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These were contemporary believers to John in his day, all of whom lived in Asia Minor.

DATING:

Many theologians have dated the Revelation after AD 70, perhaps as late as 96 during the reign of Domitian. The basis for this is a passing comment in one of Irenaeus’s letters. Because Irenaeus was a church father during the second century, as well as a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of John the apostle, his comment concerning the dating of Revelation is considered to be a strong piece of external evidence. “Undoubtedly, Irenaeus’s observation is the strongest weapon in the late-date arsenal.”⁵ However, even if this interpretation of his words is correct, which is itself legitimately debatable, the internal evidence to the contrary far outweighs the external evidence presented. Internal evidence for an early dating can be found in passages such as 1:1–3, 11:1–2, 17:10, etc. Thus, a date shortly before AD 70, likely 65 or 66, seems to fit much better.⁶ This would place the writing of Revelation during the reign of Caesar Nero.

Conservative textual scholars agree that proper textual analysis ought to weigh the relevant internal evidence much heavier than any external evidence. This approach presupposes that Scripture is entirely God-breathed, inerrant, and unified in all that it is.⁷ Scholarship that favors the opposite is normally scholarship that devalues the divine origin and inerrancy of Scripture, which results in methods that massacre the unity of the text and, consequently, its validity. Such methods include the documentary hypothesis (JEPD), Markan priority among the synoptic gospels, and the Jesus Seminar’s colored-bead approach in search of the

5 Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Chesnee: Victorious Hope, 2010), Kindle Location 1883.

6 See Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, Kindle Location 482.

7 See 1689 *London Baptist Confession*, Chapter 1, <https://www.arbca.com/1689-chapter1>; *The Savoy Declaration [1658]*, Chapter 1, https://www.the-highway.com/savoy_declaration.html#1; *The 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, <https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/chapter-1>.

“historical Jesus.” As one fully committed to the inspiration, inerrancy, and unity of the Word of God, I have come to my conclusions regarding the dating of Revelation by following the methodology of textual scholars who presuppose the same. Indeed, “the internal witness must be given the highest priority.”⁸

NATURE OF THE LETTER:

We are explicitly told at the outset of the book about its nature. It’s a revelation *from* God the Father given *to* Jesus the Messiah who made it known *to* John the apostle *via* an angel (1:1–2). An *apokalupsis* (unveiling, revelation) is a highly symbolic visionary message that is *intended* to be understood by its recipients. We’re explicitly told who these first-century recipients were in Revelation 1:11.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of the Apocalypse is clearly presented at the outset “to show [God’s bondservants] the things that must soon take place” (Rev. 1:1). His “bondservants” are those who truly belong to God in Christ. “The things that must . . . take place” are certain acts of the Messiah in history that are sure to take place. Finally, those events “must soon take place,” meaning the imminency of those events in relation to the apostle receiving this revelation, scribing it, and then sending it to the seven congregations in Asia Minor.

OCCASION:

John writes as a prisoner for the gospel on the Isle of Patmos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea just off the coast from the port city of Miletus. The apostle describes himself as a fellow “brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9).

The “tribulation” they mutually faced was that all peoples of the Roman Empire, both citizens and those conquered, were required by law to confess, “*Kaisar Kurios*” (“Caesar is Lord”). Usually this was done through offering a pinch of incense on a small altar to signify loyalty to Caesar as the chief deity among all others represented in the Empire. As devout Trinitarian monotheists, first-century believers refused to become disloyal

8 Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, Kindle Location 1463.

to the only true Lord and Savior, and so confessed “*Yesus Kurios*” (“Jesus is Lord”) instead.

This resulted in persecutions that were relational, economic, and eventually physical. Roman persecution only served to compound the severe abuse Christians were already experiencing at the hands of their foremost antagonist, the Jewish community. This was due to their loyalty to Jesus as the long-expected Messiah.

Concerning the “kingdom,” John explains in chapter 1, verses 5–6, that Jesus the faithful Witness has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” All true believers comprise a kingdom of priests by virtue of belonging to Jesus’s dominion over all things. The only way into this Messianic kingdom is through being united to Him by the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration (see John 3:1–8).

John also counts himself as a brother with those to whom he writes in the “patient endurance.” This means they must persevere through these tribulations with long-suffering, knowing that they were united to the one who is the Ruler of the ends of the earth, and that “he must reign *until* he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25, emphasis mine).

MAIN THEME:

The primary theme, which undergirds all others in this letter, is clearly expressed in John’s prologue: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Rev. 1:7). The living, exalted Lord Jesus would come in judgment on the covenant-breakers of Israel, those of that generation who lived while He was on earth. This would come about exactly as He had promised them at the temple in Jerusalem and then at the Mount of Olives (cf. Matt. 23:34ff.)

MAIN MESSAGE:

Believers must look to King Jesus through their tribulation since He comes to conquer old Jerusalem and bring in new Jerusalem. Old Jerusalem stands for both that ancient city and the nation of Israel to which she belonged, being plagued with all her hypocrisy and spiritual adultery. New Jerusalem

represents the church, the true Israel of God with the same faith as Abraham, who are clothed in the perfect, seamless obedience of her Husband, Savior, and Lord.

Beloved student of the Word of God, as you now enter into this wonderful and fantastic biblical book with me, I pray that your love for the Messiah and His most holy rule in the world will increase significantly and that you will find Him to be the greatest treasure that He truly is! I also pray that your confidence in the Lord Jesus will grow greatly as we see in this book that He really is accomplishing all of His Messianic purposes in His world. May studying the Revelation through this commentary aid you in approaching all of life from a foundational, worldview perspective. Finally, I pray that the lessons learned in studying this God-breathed book would cause you to find greater comfort in our Good Shepherd through various and sundry trials that we all must face in faithfully following Him. To God alone be all the glory! Amen and amen.

John's Prologue (1:1–20)

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1, verses 1–3 form a short introduction leading into the letter's prologue. Verse 1, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place." John tells his readers that the *apokalupsis* is "of Jesus Christ," the sense being that it is "concerning Jesus Christ." The letter itself *is* the revelation—that is, that which has been unveiled. The focus of the letter is Jesus, *not* the Evil One or the tribulations. When many twenty-first-century folk, both believers and unbelievers, speak of the Revelation, the primary topic on their lips is great and catastrophic evils befalling the world sometime in our future. Yet our attention must align itself with these opening words of John. *He* says that the entire focus of his letter is the rule of King Jesus, and therefore, it must be ours also.

Verses 1b–2: "He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw." Through the agency of an angel, God gave this highly symbolic visionary message to John, who had a certain quality; namely, he "bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ." This is to say that he was faithful to preach the gospel of the Messiah's kingdom. The Lord did this for a specific purpose—"to show to his [bondservants] the things that must soon take place" (verse 1).

He must "show" these things since its message is intended to be understood by its recipients. Many in the last hundred years have treated the Apocalypse as a book full of complicated riddles and hidden messages

that are nearly impossible to decipher. The takeaway is that since there are so many differing and contradictory interpretations (several being quite fanciful at that), what's the point of trying to understand this portion of Scripture? However, contrary to this popular view, we must not be afraid of this God-breathed letter. Why? Because *apokalupsis* means “a revelation,” “a manifestation,” or “a revealing”¹—it was meant to be understood by its original recipients in its very Jewish context.

Those who are being shown these things are His “bondservants,” those who truly belong to God in Christ. They are being shown the “things that must . . . take place,” which are those certain acts of the Messiah in history that are sure to take place. This is cause to celebrate with greater confidence in our Messianic King, rather than to fear! Why? Because He sovereignly orchestrates all events in history so that He keeps His promises right on schedule. Therefore, He can be trusted at every point along the way!

These are the things that “must soon take place.” In relation to the apostle receiving the revelation, scribing it, and then sending it to the seven churches, these events are truly imminent, even right at the door, as it were.² Futurist theologians have interpreted the majority of Revelation as taking place in our future, and have thus created the doctrine of the imminent second advent of Christ. The problem with this view is that it has been more than two thousand years since John penned his letter in the first century, a time period that cannot possibly fit within the semantic domain of “imminent,” “soon,” or “near.” We must understand the events written in this letter as being close at hand from the standpoint of John and the seven congregations in Asia Minor to whom he writes in order to properly respect what “soon” means.

Verse 3: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.” The original recipients are promised to be blessed if they both read the whole letter out loud and hear what is written therein and then live by it. Why? The text answers, “for the time is near”; that is, the events referred to in verse 1 are close at hand for them. Even though many of these events are in our past today, the divinely given blessing still remains for the

1 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Apokalupsis*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/apokalupsis.html>.

2 See Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Chesnee, SC: Victorious Hope, 2021) 437–438.

Christian who hears what is written in the Apocalypse and then lives in light of the truths revealed therein.

These introductory remarks must be kept in mind throughout this study of the book of Revelation. To continue without taking strict heed to these words will inevitably lead to forcing the apostle to mean things he never intended to communicate to his original audience.

SALUTATION

Verses 4–8 present John's prologue to the rest of his letter to the seven local churches. It is within this prologue that he indicates the main theme to his readers in verse 7, a theme that runs straight through the various and sundry visions he is shown and binds them all together.

Verse 4a: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace." First, the apostle John identifies himself as the writer and "the seven churches that are in Asia" as those to whom he writes. He greets them in a way similar to how Paul begins many of his letters—with the words, "Grace to you and peace."³ At this point, John begins to answer the question, "From whom does this grace and peace come?" He does this by mentioning all three persons of the Godhead—it is from these three divine persons that grace and peace come.

Verse 4b: "from him who is and who was and who is to come." Firstly, this grace and peace come from the God who is from everlasting to everlasting. This is another way of saying what was said to Moses in Exodus 3:13–15 when God revealed His name as *YHWH* (Yahweh)—He is the Self-Existent One, who is covenantal by nature.⁴ This is the same God who now gives this revelation to John via an angel.

Verse 4c: "from the seven spirits who are before his throne." Secondly, this grace and peace come from the Spirit of God, who is perfect and complete in every way, as represented here by the number seven.⁵ The third person of the Godhead is just as equally and completely Yahweh as the Father with regard to being, yet He remains truly distinct from the Father

3 See Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; etc.

4 See G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, (Grand Rapids Baker Academic, 2007), 1089.

5 Beale and McDonough, "Revelation," 1089.

with regard to personhood. The trinitarian formulation of this greeting ought to cause us to see how the unified work of the Father, Son, and Spirit is not only central to properly understanding redemptive history, but without it there would be no eternal *pactum salutis* (covenant of redemption),⁶ nor its gradual historical outworking in the *foedus gratis* (covenant of grace).⁷ Put another way, no one in all of history would be saved from their sins through the one Redeemer and King without this perfect unity in the Godhead.

Verse 5a: “from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” Jesus is God’s Anointed One, first named in Hebrew as *Meshiakh* (Messiah), and then translated into Greek as *Khristos* (Christ). But who is He really? Here John draws from Psalm 89:27 and 37, which psalm as a whole emphasizes the “anointed” king.⁸

Jesus is the “faithful witness.” He is the “true light” who has come into the world, the Word who “became flesh and [tabernacled] among us, and we have seen his glory,” the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the one who shows us the Father (John 1:9, 14; 14:6–9). He is the “eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us” so that we may have fellowship “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:2–3). We can trust in the Lord our God because, instead of giving up on us when we became His enemies in Adam, He has entered into our midst in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He has done this to faithfully show us the Father’s glory and make a way for us to permanently experience His presence!

The Messiah is also the “firstborn of the dead.” He is “the resurrection and the life” who is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” so that “in Christ shall all be made alive . . . at his coming. . . . He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (John 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:20–23; Col. 1:18). Without the Lord Jesus’s resurrection, nothing would ever be rescued from sin’s corruption, neither rebel-sinners nor creation itself, first progressively in the inter-advental

6 The Reformed doctrine of *the covenant of redemption* is not meant to suggest that each Person of the Godhead somehow has His own center of decision-making—for the Being of Yahweh has eternally existed in the three divine Persons, which Being is simple, not composite. Rather, it’s meant to defend the eternally unified and covenantal nature of Yahweh in those three divine Persons, specifically as it relates to the salvation of the elect.

7 *Pactum* and *foedus* can be used as synonyms in Latin, as they are in this context.

8 See Beale and McDonough, “Revelation,” 1089.

period and then in glorified, consummate form on the Last Day. Why? As the firstfruits of the final resurrection, Jesus's resurrection guaranteed that everything He fully accomplished in His humiliation would surely come to pass in His exaltation. His resurrection guaranteed all other resurrections in the universe! For this reason, we can fully trust that Jesus will indeed eternally rescue all for whom He died because His resurrection guarantees success!

Finally, John declares that God's Anointed One is the "ruler of kings on earth." While the word *ge* usually refers to "a tract of land" or "a country," it can occasionally be used to mean "the inhabited earth as a whole."⁹ The latter usage is intended here as Jesus is described as the ultimate Ruler over all earthy authorities everywhere. Indeed, He is the greater Son of David whose "kingdom has been made sure forever before Yahweh, and his throne has been established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16)¹⁰; He is Yahweh's Anointed King, who has asked and "the nations have been made his heritage, and the ends of the earth his possession in order to break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:7–9); He has "sat down at his Father's right hand, until he makes his enemies his footstool" (Ps. 110:1); His "government and peace will increase without end, who sits on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7); He "will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law" (Isa. 42:4); His dominion is like a "stone that . . . becomes a great mountain that fills the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35); He taught us to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10); He said, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28); He sent us out to make disciples of all the nations since He has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18); He is "destroying every rule and every authority and power because he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet, and the last enemy to be destroyed will be death" (1 Cor. 15:24–26). This means we can fully trust our Messianic King through our trials and suffering in this life because He is progressively dealing with all the evil

9 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Genesis*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/genesis-5.html>.

10 Passages in this paragraph are paraphrased, based on the ESV.

in the world as we speak and, on the Last Day, He will judge all the living and the dead once and for all. This also means we can be actively engaged in obeying Jesus as His salt and light in the earth with confidence since our King is actually being victorious in history and will indeed get all the nations as He's been promised!

Verses 5b–6: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” In response to these incredible truths about the Godhead, John breaks out in joy-filled worship. He directs his praise to the Son, the one of whom he's just finished speaking, by using active, participial forms of the verbs *agapa'ō* and *eluthero'ō*¹¹—giving the sense of “the one loving” and “the one freeing.” Just as John has described the Lord Jesus with three attributes, he now exalts Him for three ways in which He has blessed His people.

The Lord “loves us” with a peculiar love. He came to do the Father's will for our benefit—the Father gave us to Him, those who come to Him as the Bread of Life, so that He would be sure to lose none of us who were given to Him, but that all of us would be raised up on the Last Day (cf. John 6:35–44). He gave us the example *par excellence* of abiding in His love by He Himself abiding in His Father's love through keeping His Father's commandments. In imitating His perfect example, our joy in Him will be made full (cf. John 15:9–11). He prayed that we would be united together in Him, just as He and His Father have enjoyed everlasting perfect unity (cf. John 17:20–23). He always intercedes for us as our High Priest, which is to say that He now effectually prays into the reality of our day-to-day lives everything that He fully accomplished for us in His death on the cross (cf. Hebrews 7:25)—this is an aspect of how “his enemies [are being] made a footstool for his feet” (Hebrews 10:12–13). For this reason the Heidelberg Catechism begins with this question and answer: “Q. What is your only comfort in life and death? A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my

11 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Agapao* and *Eleutheroo*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/agapao.html>, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/eleutheroo.html>.

head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him."¹²

He who loves us "has freed us from our sins by his blood." This is the ultimate way that God has loved us in His Son. This sentiment is expressed elsewhere: "For God loved the world by giving his only Son, so that all those believing in him will not perish but will have eternal life," which is to say, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (John 3:16, personal translation; Rom. 5:8). By the power of His shed blood, we have been set free from slavery to sin to become the sons of Abraham and disciples of the one in whom Abraham was ultimately trusting, and so was counted as righteous by God (see John 8:31–41; Rom. 4:13–25). Because of having "redemption through his blood, [we have] the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7). This is fantastic news, for without the Almighty's mercy toward particular rebel-sinners, we all would remain under His wrath and be eternally without hope!

He who loves us has "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father." These words echo 1 Peter 2:9–10, which in turn echo Yahweh's words at Mount Sinai right after He had rescued Israel out of Egypt (see Ex. 19:5–6).¹³ Both Peter's and John's words show that the physical nation of Israel under the old covenant was really a shadow pointing forward to spiritual Israel in Christ under His new covenant. This means that we have been made to enter into His holy rule and live thereunder. This also means that each and every one of us in Christ has been given the indwelling presence of His Spirit, and thus are permanently in the presence of Yahweh and permanently have the Anointing who "teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie" (1 John 2:27)—it is the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth. This is what the Lord Jesus has done for all those for whom He died in making the new covenant with them in His blood. There is no reason in and of ourselves that we deserve this—it is simply God's free grace toward poor, wretched sinners such as us!

Unto *this* Lord Jesus, "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." This echoes Paul's words of praise in concluding his teaching to the

12 Zacharias Ursinus, *The Heidelberg Catechism* [1563, 1619], Q. 1, <https://www.apuritans-mind.com/creeds-and-confessions/the-heidelberg-catechism-by-zacharias-ursinus>.

13 See Beale and McDonough, "Revelation," 1090.

Roman church about the grace of God in the gospel (see Rom. 11:33–36). This also echoes Paul’s teaching to the congregation in Colossae concerning the excellencies of Christ (see Col. 1:15–20). Truly, this is the only proper response to having received such amazing grace—heartfelt gratitude and praise unto Yahweh! Reflecting deeply on the truths of the gospel of the kingdom ought to result in worship unto the triune God of Holy Scripture. Theology must lead to doxology because the purpose for which we’ve been created is “to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”¹⁴

Verse 7: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.” At this juncture in his prologue, John announces the baseline theme undergirding the rest of his letter. Thus, it is crucial for the student of God’s Word to pay close attention to what is precisely said in this verse.

The theme verse begins, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds.” This is almost identical language to that found in Matthew 24:30, which appears in the context of judging national Israel through the destruction of the temple. Jesus prophesied, “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see *the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*” (Matt. 24:30, emphasis mine). Luke 21:27 is parallel to this verse and has similar wording. At this point in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus picks up the prophecy of Daniel 7:13–14 and applies it to Himself—the prophecy concerns the Messiah’s inter-advental rule from the heavenly Davidic throne, *not* His consummate reign in the eternal state. This is given as an encouragement to His disciples that, even though the situation around Jerusalem would soon become hectic, this judgment would be a part of His rule over all the nations. This means His Messianic mission would not fail. John intends for his audience to understand these words here in verse 7 with the same background in mind.

Verse 7 continues, “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.” This is a quotation from Zechariah 12:10, which Jesus picks up in Matthew 24:30 in speaking about the coming destruction of the temple and its beloved city, Jerusalem.¹⁵ This necessitates that there be at least some

14 Benjamin Keach, *The Baptist Catechism* [1677], Q. 2, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/keachs-catechism-of-1677.pdf>.

15 See Beale and McDonough, “Revelation,” 1090.

individuals still alive out of those who crucified Him to witness “the Son of Man coming on the clouds.” This is in keeping with what the apostle has already twice said—namely, that the Apocalypse was given to show “the things that must *soon* take place” and that those who keep what is written therein are blessed, “for the time is *near*” (verses 1 and 3, author’s emphasis).¹⁶ “And all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him.” This is the response of all those who see Him at His coming. These “tribes of the earth” are better understood as “tribes of the land.” As mentioned earlier, the Greek term *ge* most naturally denotes “a tract of land” or “a country,”¹⁷ which is how it is predominantly used throughout the Apocalypse. It is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *eretz*. Thus, the land spoken of here is the Promised Land, first-century Palestine.¹⁸ In addition, this phrase does not distinguish between those who may be mourning out of fear of Him as their Judge and those who may be mourning out of repentance over their transgressions against Him. The latter is the Psalm 51 kind of mourning to which all men must come in order to be saved, which can only come about by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in a sinner’s heart (see Acts 5:31; 8:22).

The theme verse ends with these words: “Even so. Amen.” With this forceful affirmation, John concludes this kind of prophetic doxology.

Since the Olivet Discourse is so central to understanding the Apocalypse, it is vital we deal with the main concerns of that most important sermon. Firstly, we must recognize that the sermon does not stand alone and isolated, but its context begins back in Matthew 23, where Jesus brings seven woes against the Jewish religious leaders for their hypocrisy. As a conclusion to this massive indictment, He says, “Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (23:34–36). As He leaves the temple mount and the city of Jerusalem, Jesus turns around and

16 See Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion*, 440.

17 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Genesis*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/genesis-5.html>.

18 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Genesis*, 440–441.

weeps over the city and its apostate leadership, saying, “See, your house is left to you desolate” (23:38). Not only does the Messiah assure the scribes and Pharisees that divine retribution would befall *their* generation, but He likewise promises the destruction of the temple, meaning the end of the old covenant economy as a whole. In fact, He explicitly prophesies to His disciples, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (24:2).

The disciples understood this and were immediately shocked. So, while the buildings of the temple were still in their line of vision, they asked their Lord, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). What were the “these things” they inquired about? The destruction of the temple. Likewise, which “age” was about to come to an abrupt end? The old covenant age. Again, for which “coming” of the Messiah did they request to know the signs? His coming in judgment against Jerusalem and her apostate leadership in order to avenge all the righteous blood of the prophets throughout history up until their day. This “coming” was already promised “upon this generation”—that is, the first-century generation to whom Jesus was speaking. This is repeated for emphasis toward the conclusion of the sermon at 24:34. It was to these specific concerns that our Lord was responding.

For many Christians, what has been explained above will immediately raise questions on three points: (1) the great tribulation in 24:15ff, (2) the cosmic deconstruction language in 24:29, and (3) the coming of the Son of Man in 24:30. On the first, Jesus interprets Daniel’s prophecy for His disciples. He instructs, “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” In writing to a Jewish audience, Matthew expects his readers to understand to what Jesus here refers. However, for us, removed by time and Jewish training in the *Tanakh* (the Jewish Old Testament), it is difficult for us to surmise. Yet the Holy Spirit has not left us empty-handed, for Luke records the same sermon, except in writing to Gentiles rather than Jews. At this precise point in the Olivet Discourse, he records Jesus as saying, “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains . . .” (Luke 21:20ff). The “abomination that brings desolation” spoken of in Daniel 9:27 is interpreted by Jesus Himself as the Roman armies surrounding the holy city

to destroy it and its temple. The ones instructed to flee when they begin witnessing this very thing are first-century Christians living within the city. Therefore, the great tribulation predicted here is the period in *that* generation wherein these historic events took place, specifically AD 70, just as Jesus predicted. This means the great tribulation was in the disciples' future at the time of the Olivet Discourse, but was fulfilled long ago in our past.

Secondly, in Matthew 24:29 Jesus says, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Here our Lord is quoting this language of cosmic deconstruction from Isaiah 13:10. In that context, the prophet spoke of Yahweh's coming judgment on Babylon through the armies of the Medes and Persians. Did Yahweh come in judgment on the Babylonian Empire? Most definitely. Did He literally deconstruct the universe in order to do so? Obviously not! Thus, just as Isaiah used this kind of prophetic hyperbole to describe how dramatic God's judgment would be, so also Jesus picks up the exact same language to describe His coming in judgment on apostate Israel and her temple. This means there is nothing here indicating the end of the world, as many have supposed.

Finally, in the following verse Messiah promises, "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24:30). As noted above, this is another quotation, one directly out of Daniel 7:13-14. There, Messiah ascends to the Ancient of Days on the clouds of heaven in order to be seated at His right hand and be given "dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." Which direction is He coming on the clouds? Up! This is describing Jesus's bodily ascension forty days after being raised from the dead as part of His exaltation to glory. Thus, the dominion and kingdom rule given Him is current, not merely when human history comes to an end. Thus, in quoting from Daniel 7, Jesus is indicating that His coming in judgment against Jerusalem, her leaders, and her temple is "Exhibit A," as it were, of His Messianic rule from His Father's right hand over all the nations. This means His coming in judgment here is metaphorical in nature rather than physical, just as was the case with Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and many others.

This most famous yet oft misinterpreted sermon not only stands behind Revelation 1:7, but also much of the judgments coming forth from Messiah's scroll. Thus, getting this piece interpreted correctly is key to unlocking the rest.

Verse 8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." *Alpha* (α) and *omega* (ω) are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. By ascribing to Himself these opposite extremes, the Lord is saying that He came before all things and will continue after all things. Therefore, He is in absolute control of all things in between the beginning and the end of time. This understanding is confirmed by how the Lord God follows this up: "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." This agrees with the entire testimony of Scripture, especially the Old Testament. God's self-disclosed name, *YHWH* (Yahweh), means "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14), which can be understood as the "Self-Existent One," while *Adonai* means "Lord, Sovereign." Taken together, this relates directly to the doctrine of omnipresence, as well as omnipotence, since the emphasis here is on God's absolute control of all things throughout history. Many a well-intentioned person has misunderstood this definitional teaching to mean that God is everywhere all at the same time, as if God were bound by time just as we are as His creatures. This understanding is one step away from pantheism, the Eastern concept that the divine is integrated into all elements of creation (e.g., hugging a tree equals hugging the divine). Yet the biblical, historical understanding of omnipresence is that God, as the sole eternal Being, not bound by time and space as we are, is actively involved in carrying out His wise purposes in each and every circumstance at each and every point of history simultaneously. This should be a great comfort to God's people through various and sundry trials experienced in faithfully following Him. Why? Because their suffering is entirely within the counsel of His eternal will! This means it has an intended purpose, even if they cannot see or understand it in the moment. God really is working all things together for the good of His saints and, ultimately, for the glorification of His own name! What a wonderful encouragement this is to the Lord's people!

The apostle concludes his prologue by repeating the description of the Father given in verse 4: "who is and who was and who is to come." This repetition serves to once again emphasize the eternity of God the Father. As was noted at verse 4, whatever is true of the Father as to His essence is

also true of the Son and the Spirit since the three persons of the Godhead have fully and eternally shared the same Being.

THE FIRST VISION

Verses 9–20 bring to us John's first visionary encounter with the Son of Man. This takes place within the context of Christ's lordship over and amongst the seven churches to which he writes.

Verse 9: "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." John identifies himself with those seven congregations to whom he writes as their "brother and partner" in three things.

Firstly, the apostle is a brother and partner with them "in the tribulation." John was exiled "on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." He was suffering persecution within the Roman Empire. In his day, the emperor required that everyone in the Empire give honor to him as the highest god by burning incense to him and declaring, "*Kaisar Kurios*" ("Caesar is Lord"). Nero was emperor at the time, and he hated Christians because they refused to do this. In response, he did terrible things to them, such as using them as torches to light up his garden parties, as well as tying them to poles in the Coliseum, dressing up as a wild beast, and then attacking their genitals to their utter agony. In addition, Messiah-rejecting Jews passionately hated first-century followers of Jesus and tried to eliminate them in any way they could, even collaborating with the Roman government to do so. These Jews had apostatized from their national covenant with Yahweh in three main ways. First of all, they treated the *Mishnah* (oral at this point in history) as more authoritative than the *Tanakh* (what Jesus calls "the Law and the Prophets"—see Matt. 15:1–9). Next, they strove for external obedience to the neglect of internal obedience (see Matt. 5:17–48; 15:10–20; 23:1–36). Lastly, and most importantly, they rejected Messiah's release in favor of Barabbas the Zealot's. Not only this, but they traded in Yahweh's Anointed King for Caesar as their ultimate authority (see Matt. 27:15–23; John 19:12–16).

Secondly, John and the seven congregations in Asia were brothers together in “the kingdom.” They were brothers and partners together because they had seen and entered into Christ’s kingdom, not because of their own ability, but rather due to the Spirit seeing fit to grant them the new birth (see John 3:1–8). Thus, they had equal access to the same Father through the same Holy Spirit, who was building them up together as the temple of God (see Eph. 2:18–22).

Finally, they were partners together in “the patient endurance that [is] in Jesus.” They were encouraged to keep on persevering through their hardships, “[laying] aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, [running] with endurance the race that [was] set before [them], looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of [their] faith” (Heb. 12:1–2). They must wait just a little longer until Jesus would come to vindicate the blood of the saints who had been killed on account of Him.¹⁹ In contrast to Christ’s judgment on Jerusalem, we are not guaranteed any specific time frame concerning Jesus’s physical second coming. Yet believers today can have utmost confidence that Jesus is firmly seated on David’s throne right now. He is actively working to right wrongs done everywhere, even driving out the darkness of sin’s corruption throughout the whole world with His glorious light (Isa. 9:1–7)! On the Last Day, He will sit in judgment over each and every one, exacting perfect cosmic justice across the board.²⁰

Verse 10: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.” It was the Lord’s Day when John received this revelation concerning Jesus Christ. This was the day of rest set apart unto worship since the creation of the world, recapitulated in light of Christ’s resurrection under His new covenant.²¹ For this reason, John was busy keeping the Sabbath on the Lord’s Day, not using his exile as an excuse to do otherwise.

As he was enthralled with the beauty and majesty of his Lord and Savior, the Spirit somehow transported him to a realm where he would receive these visions. This is akin to how the Spirit transported David into the

19 See 6:10–11; 18:20; 18:24; 19:1–2.

20 See notes at 20:12.

21 See Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15; Heb. 4:9–10. For an excellent treatment of the perpetuity of the Sabbath, see Richard C. Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right: Adam’s Work and God’s Rest in Light of Christ* (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2017).

heavenly realm to overhear the divine counsel in session (the content of both Psalm 22 and Psalm 110), as well as how He transported the apostle Paul into the third heaven, which he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12:1–6. As with David's and Paul's experiences, John didn't know if he was in his body or out of his body. It could be that he was experiencing what today would be called an "out-of-body experience" (OBE).

If so, there are three radical differences between the OBEs of these regenerate men of God and those of modern new-age practitioners. To begin with, the experience of the apostle John was Spirit-induced rather than being created through the use of means to open a channel to the other side. John clearly was not seeking after these experiences since the text indicates he was about the business of keeping the Sabbath holy to the Lord. In addition, the heavenly messengers with whom he met directed his attention to the triune God, in full agreement with what He had already revealed, rather than being directed to the secret knowledge of others on the other side, whether they be living or deceased humans or spiritual beings. These heavenly messengers were holy, truthful, and faithful to their Creator rather than being malevolent, deceptive, and abusive in various and sundry ways. We can see that throughout this lengthy letter to the seven congregations. Lastly, upon entrance into that spiritual realm, he "heard behind [him] a loud voice like a trumpet." Trumpets were used in ancient Israel for two purposes: for the making of official announcements and for public worship in the congregation. Since what John received was an unveiling concerning Jesus the Messiah, this indicates that the "loud voice like a trumpet" was a messenger given to prelude an official announcement from heaven. This is very much unlike the type of messages people have reported receiving from their contacts on the other side while astral projecting.²² Thus, John's experiences in receiving these visions "in the Spirit," whether in or out of his body, stand in stark contrast to those of modern-day new-age practitioners.

Verse 11: "saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.'" The plain reading of the text indicates that upon completing this epistle, John was meant to literally and temporally send a copy of it to each of these literal, temporal

22 Steven Bancarz and Josh Peck, *The Second Coming of the New Age: The Hidden Dangers of Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America and Its Churches* (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2018). Steven was saved out of the new age, having been one of the world's leading new-age experts and practitioners.

congregations in his day. All seven of these congregations were located in Asia Minor, which is present-day Turkey. This is what the heavenly messenger told him to write. The number seven here is used, as in other places in Revelation, to symbolize completion. Each of these churches, though very flawed, confessed true and complete union to Christ in His death and resurrection. Five of the seven were confirmed as being true visible, local expressions of the universal, invisible body of Christ, while two were on the verge of being rejected as impostors. Those true congregations were indeed in the process of becoming what they already were as new creations in Him.²³

Verse 12a: “Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me.” This is the first occurrence of this particular form that continues throughout the book—John *hears* the angel describe one thing, but when he turns to look at what has been described, he *sees* something completely different (e.g., 5:5–6; 7:4–10). That which he heard from the messenger a moment ago and what he now sees are starkly different vantage points describing the very same thing. Having been caught up in the Spirit, the apostle now begins beholding the visions.

Verse 12b: “on turning I saw seven golden lampstands.” The Son of Man later tells John that these “seven golden lampstands” are, in fact, symbolic representations of the seven congregations mentioned in verse 11 (see v. 20).

Verse 13: “and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.” The title “Son of Man” refers back to Daniel 7:13–14, which it specifically describes the Messiah’s enthronement at His Father’s right hand and everlasting dominion over all the nations.²⁴ The image presented here of the Son of Man “clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest” also speaks to His rule as King. Thus, the enthroned Messiah is shown here as actively ruling in the midst of His congregations.

Verse 14: “The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire.” The Son of Man’s pure white hair symbolizes His absolute purity in all He does as the Messianic King. His eyes like fire refers to His nature as the “consuming fire” (Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). He is absolute purity and consumes all that is impure.

23 See Rom. 6:1–14; 2 Cor. 5:16–19; Eph. 2:1–10; Col. 3:1–17.

24 See Beale and McDonough, “Revelation,” 1092.

Verse 15: “his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.” In Daniel 2, Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of a multi-sectional statue. Its middle and thighs were of bronze and represented the third kingdom to come, progressing from the then-Babylonian kingdom until the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom (Dan. 2:32, 39). Unlike this third kingdom, the foundations of the Messiah’s kingdom are sure, such that it will never be destroyed! The actual image here is drawn from Ezekiel 1:24–25,²⁵ in tandem with Daniel 7:13–14, where the Son of Man is coronated to sit at His Father’s right hand to rule over all the nations. Taken together, the message is that when the Son of Man speaks, His word is completely overpowering and nothing can resist it. To those united to the Lord Jesus by faith, this is a great comfort since, by His most powerful word, He has raised us from death in sin unto new life in Him! Yet to those still living under His wrath, this truth ought to incite great fear and trembling at the impending judgment about to befall them, which they rightly deserve.

Verse 16: “In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.” The Son of Man is holding secure in His ruling hand the seven stars (cf. John 10:25–30). He explains later that they are the seven angels of the seven congregations—that is, messengers or elder-pastors (see v. 20). His right hand is the hand with which He holds His royal scepter. This means that, as believers, we have no reason to fear God’s wrath because He keeps us securely as His beloved children. Thus, when the Father disciplines us, He does so as our Father, not as our Judge, and when the Son rebukes us, He does so as our elder Brother.

Not only this, but when Jesus speaks, His words are penetrating and effect exactly what they are intended to—none of His purposes can be thwarted (see Job 42:1–2; Dan. 4:34–35)! As for His face shining like the sun in full strength, this portrays His radiant glory and majesty, that He dwells in unapproachable light, which compares to none, into which no man can enter in his naturally impure and sinful state (1 Tim. 6:16). Entering in is only possible if a man comes unto the Lord with an empty hand of faith to receive His full acceptance only on the basis of the Son’s perfect, meritorious obedience freely imputed unto him. Only through this justification can a man be joined to the Messiah and enter into

25 See Beale and McDonough, “Revelation,” 1092.

Yahweh's most glorious presence safely and there fellowship with Him (Rom. 5:18–19; 1 John 1:1–4).

Verse 17a: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me.” This is the same reaction Isaiah had when seeing the majesty of Yahweh as He sat on His throne—the prophet was completely undone (Isa. 6:1–7; see also Ezek. 1:28). Nevertheless, unlike the angel who came unto Isaiah with a fiery coal, here it is the Messianic King coming to John to touch him with His right hand—this hand holds His royal scepter with which He rules over the nations (cf. Gen. 49:10). Falling prostrate in worship before the Lord is appropriate since we have been commanded to worship Yahweh “with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28–29). In imitation of Isaiah and Ezekiel, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, this prostration is an expression of being undone, as it were, when coming face to face with the immense majesty and holiness of the Lord. This practice must never be confused with mere emotionalism or euphoria, as is sometimes the case in charismatic circles.

Verses 17b–18: “saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’” The Son of Man encourages John to not be afraid. This is the same as what happened to Peter, James, and John upon seeing His glory and hearing the voice of His Father from heaven—the disciples were afraid and so Jesus reassured them (Matt. 17:1–8, esp. verses 7–8). Jesus here gives John His own character as the rationale for following this exhortation.

Jesus first identifies Himself as the “first and the last.” He is eternal, just as His Father is eternal, which is expressed in verse 18. He is indeed the “living one.”

Secondly, He declares Himself to be the one who “died, and behold [is] alive forevermore.” Truly, He is the one who has accomplished the complete defeat of all His enemies in His death, and now, in His resurrection, He is making those things a reality in space and time. Due to a strong emphasis upon the work of Jesus in His death, over against His work in His resurrected glory, many Bible-believing Christians view our Lord as being on a kind of extended hiatus until He ushers in His kingdom at His second advent. Yet the message conveyed here is that our Messiah is just as active in bringing His redemptive purposes to pass in His current exaltation in

heaven as He was in accomplishing them in His humiliation on earth. Such is the gospel of the *kingdom*.

Lastly, the Lord describes Himself as having “the keys of Death and Hades.” He alone controls how long Death and Hades will continue since, on the Last Day, He will throw them into the lake of fire (cf. 20:14). Just as there is an intermediate state for the regenerate upon death, that is, Abraham’s Bosom, so also there is an intermediate state for those who die unrepentant, namely, Hades (cf. Luke 16:19–31; even if this is a parable, it must be based in reality, just the same as every other parable). The difference between Hades and hell (referred to as the “lake of fire” in Rev. 20:14–15) is not one of permanency of judgment for the wicked, but rather one of nature. The former is a metaphysical prison for the ungodly upon death in this life. The latter is the permanent, eternal, and physical place where all God’s wrath will be poured out in judgment on the same. Both of these are compartments within Sheol, which is the place of the dead mentioned in the Old Testament. The reason Death and Hades will not be cast into Gehenna (hell) prior to the Last Day is that it doesn’t yet exist, in the same way the consummate new heavens and new earth won’t exist until the Lord resurrects this physical universe on the day of His return. Knowing these things ought to help set our expectations for the course of history, as well as for when those around us die.

Verse 19: “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.” The reason for the writing of this unveiling of the “things that must soon take place” (1:1) is the person and work of the risen Lord Jesus, the Messiah ruling in the midst of His congregations. Again, He says, “those that are to take place after this,” denoting immediacy to John’s readers in his day.

Verse 20: “As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” It is clear from Jesus’s own interpretation that since the seven lampstands represent the seven local congregations mentioned in verse 11, the seven stars likewise represent the elder-pastors of those congregations. The Lord Jesus is the head of each and every one of His local assemblies and the true Shepherd over them all. This should radically impact the way we think about how Jesus wants us to organize ourselves under Him as His visible

body. For example, this means that elder-pastors, while truly a set-apart office of the local congregation, are *a part* of the membership, *not* a separate class above it. Thus, they are equally subject to loving correction back to glad submission under our one true Master.