

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE KING

Write What You See

Revelation 1:9-20

Mark Vroegop

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. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 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." Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 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 hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 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. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, 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. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 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 (Rev. 1:9-20, ESV).

I'd like you imagine with me that we are all on a tour in an art museum. We're gathered together in a great hall that serves as a place for us to review the map and plan out our visit. We divide into groups based upon the kind of art that we prefer. A few of the groups are:

- **Realism** – the kind of paintings that reflect the real world. The painting is designed to be realistic to what we would see with our eyes.
- **Photorealism** – the kind of painting that looks so close to real life that you have a hard time determining if it's a photograph or a painting.
- **Abstract** – the kind of painting designed to send a message with no concern for accurate representation. You might hear a child ask, "What is that?" when they look at the painting.
- **Impressionism** – the kind of painting that uses small brush strokes to build up into a larger picture. It's realistic but also a bit imaginative.

Our group decides to start with the impressionist paintings, and Claude Monet in particular. The tour guide explains that impressionist paintings are best viewed from about 10 feet away. If you get too close

to the painting, you'll notice the vivid colors and small brush strokes, but the image will be blurry and indistinct. Move too far away and your appreciation for the skill and vibrance of the picture will be lost.

In order to best see an impressionistic painting, you need to ask yourself some questions: How far away am I? What do I see? What's being communicated?

The same could be said when it comes to studying the book of Revelation. It's meant to send a message, but it doesn't deliver that message like the Apostle Paul does through the book of Romans or like David does through one of his Psalms. Paul is logical and linear. David is emotional and poetic. Revelation is apocalyptic, which means that a message is communicated through what is revealed or seen.

John is given a command in verse 11, and it serves as the title of my sermon: "Write what you see."

He's given a vision that is designed to speak to our imaginations. The book of Revelation pulls back the curtain to show us what is happening and what is going to happen. But this book is more than a textbook on the future. It is that. But it's a book that comforts and motivates Christians to endure hardship by dreaming about what is really happening and what is going to happen. It begs the question, "What do you see?" But like an impressionist painting, that question has some layers to it.

Three Key Questions

To help us understand this text (Rev. 1:9-20), I want to ask three exegetical questions that I'm going to immediately turn into applications questions. The three exegetical questions are: 1) Where is John?; 2) Who is Jesus?; and 3) What is John called to do? But I want to change them a bit to: 1) Where are you?; 2) Who is Jesus?; and 3) What's Next?

1) Where are you?

This book has a context, and it is meant to be lived within this context in every generation. In verses 9-12 we see both the background and the situation in which Revelation is recorded. There's a background here that is directly connected to the overall message of the book.

Verse 9 identifies again that the apostle John is the author of the book. We read that in verse 4 from last week, but it's different in this verse. Previously, it sounded like the book of Revelation is a letter. It is. But verse 9 shows us that John is more like a reporter writing about what he sees and experiences. He's not an academic bystander. Revelation is written on the frontlines. John is immersed in what he's writing about.

He describes himself as their brother and partner. Notice the way that John positions himself as someone who is alongside or participating with those to whom he is writing. Now that's not only important for John and the seven churches. That's important for you and me. We need to read Revelation through the lens of how this book applies and helps us as we live in our generation.

If you are a Christian, do you know that it was God's will for you to be born, trust in Jesus, be gifted by the Spirit, and live in this generation? Every Christian in every moment of history has to wrestle with this

reality. And if you are not a Christian, I trust that you know that nothing in your life happens by accident – including that you are now hearing this message. So, we need to regularly ask ourselves, “Where am I?” in the story that God is writing.

We then learn that John is a brother and a partner in “the tribulation, the kingdom, and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.” This is an important phrase, and it’s tied to the message of the entire book:

- **Tribulation** – John acknowledges the reality of suffering that he’s experiencing. In John 3:16, Jesus promised his disciples that that we would experience tribulation.
- **Kingdom** – John highlights that his life is lived for another realm or kingdom. This is the kind of mindset reflected in Jesus’ prayer “your kingdom come, your will be done” (Matt. 6:10).
- **Patient Endurance** – this is one word in the original language, and it means to bear up under something or to be steadfast. This is the goal of the book: to help Christians endure to the end (see also Rev. 2:2, 2:3, 2:19, 3:10, 13:10, 14:12).
- **In Jesus** – Don’t miss this because it encircles the previous three. Tribulation, kingdom, and endurance are all part of what it means to follow Jesus.

We come to our first of many applications of theological triage because later in the book we’ll learn about the Great Tribulation and the Millennial Kingdom. Some theologians think that tribulation and kingdom are right now. Others think those are distinct seasons in the future. Regardless, we should all agree that we experience tribulation now. We live for another kingdom now. And the call is for endurance – right now. Keep that goal in mind as we walk through this book. We need regular reminders about the value and the calling of perseverance.

Verse 9 continues with an explanation that John was on the island of Patmos “on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Historians tell us that John was temporarily exiled to the island during the reign of Domitian. It must have been a form of persecution that was starting to increase. At this time there wasn’t widespread state-sanctioned opposition. Instead, there was increasing social and regional pressure to participate in the pro-Roman imperial cult. Emperor worship as a loyalty test put Christians in increasingly challenge positions, and in some regions nearly every area of civic life – from guilds to commerce – was affected.¹ In other words, pressure around them was increasing.

According to verse ten, John was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day.” This is more than just to say that it was something supernatural. John in connecting this moment to the kind of revelation given to Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel (see Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 11:1; 43:5). Further, John hears a loud voice like a trumpet behind him, similar to what took place at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19. This is the first of many connections that we’ll find between Revelation and the other Old Testament prophets.

¹ Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 8.

The message that he hears is really important: “Write what you see... and send it to the seven churches.” We covered this last week, but just a reminder that this book was to be circulated among churches in modern-day Turkey. But it really applies to all churches. However, take note of the statement “write what you see.” The book of Revelation is about revelation, and John is told to record the drama that will unfold before his eyes. He’s going to experience (see) something incredible, and it’s meant to help him and the other churches endure.

So where are you, Christian, today? Perhaps you’ve sensed a growing tension in what it means to follow Jesus. Maybe you are feeling pressure at school or at work to affirm lifestyles or perspectives and you’re not sure where you are going to draw the line. Perhaps you’ve looked around and you feel this low-grade opposition. Or maybe you’ve wondered about a spiritual battle that seems to be raging.

Let me invite you to consider the book of Revelation not just for what is written but for what John saw. Would you dare to pray that the eyes of your heart would be enlightened? (Eph. 1:18). When you come on Sunday, I’d invite you to look around and ask yourself, “What do I see?” We need more than just learning and knowledge. More than just information and explanation. We need a vision. We need to see something.

We need to see someone! The man behind the curtain.

2) Who is Jesus?

Verses 12-16 give us our first vision of Jesus, our first series of symbols, and our first message from Revelation. You may think you know what Jesus is like based upon your reading about him in the Gospels, but we’re about to learn a lot more!

Remember that John heard a voice in verse 11. In verse 12 he turns “to see” the voice. Now this pattern of turning and seeing something surprising is central to the book of Revelation. It’s a theme that will be repeated in other places.

The first thing John sees is seven golden lampstands. There are many symbols that we’ll have to guess as to what they mean. Not this one. If you look ahead to verse 18, you’ll see clearly that they are the seven churches. But what’s stunning to John is what’s in the midst of the lampstands (or the churches).

John describes the person he sees as one “like a son of man.” Now this title doesn’t have meaning or emotional connection for us. We might know what other titles mean. Like if I said, “I walked the Commander in Chief,” you’d know what I meant. Or if I said, “I was on a walk and found a Ben Franklin.” Well, the title “Son of Man” comes out of Daniel 7, and the imagery resembles the description of “The Ancient of Days.”

As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire (Dan. 7:9).

John sees Jesus as both the messenger of the divine (son of man) and divine.² Notice the incredible descriptions of Jesus:

...like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters (Rev. 1:13-15).

This text points to Jesus' role as priest and king, entirely pure, seeing everything, authoritative, and powerful. But that's not all. John sees seven stars in his right hand, a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth, and a face shining like the sun. This is a vision inclined to action and mobilization. It's an image of a mighty conqueror and sovereign warrior.

That's important and encouraging for two reasons. First, it shows us a different vision than the world we live in. There are times when it appears that Emperors are all powerful, exile is lonely, and the devil is winning. Eugene Peterson writes:

Prior to the vision, St. John is on the prison island in isolated exile. He is cut off from his churches by a decree out of unholy Rome. Rome is the ascendant power. The gospel has proved a weak and ineffective ally against unstoppable evil. Two generations after the euphoria of Pentecost it is thoroughly discredited. Everything St. John believed and preached is, to all evidence, a disaster. And then, without a single thing having happened in Rome or in Asia – no earthquake...no revolution to change the government in Rome – St. John is on his feet. He has a message...The difference between St. John the prisoner and St. John the pastor is Christ, in vision and in reality...By virtue of the vision, the crushed exile becomes a vigorous prophet.³

John's vision of Jesus was not just descriptive; it was transformative.

But where did John see him? That's important too. Jesus was in the midst of the lampstands – the churches. We'll learn more about these churches over the next three weeks. As we do, you'll see that they're far from perfect. Some things are going really well. Other things are a mess. But he's in the midst of them. "He chooses to be in and among his perfect people who follow and serve him in imperfect ways."⁴

It shouldn't surprise you that every church has some things that are commendable and some things that deserve critique. And yet the church is the means by which God chooses to advance his kingdom in the world. You, Christian, are God's plan A. He's placed you in this generation. He brings people into your relationship sphere. He's planted our church at the corner of 96th and Towne because the long-robed,

² James M. Hamilton Jr., *Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 47.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, (New York: Harper One, 1988), 41.

⁴ Nancy Guthrie, *Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 47.

golden sashed one with brilliant white hair, blazing eyes, and a stable footing is on the move. He holds the universe in his hands, his word is powerful, and his glory is unbelievable.

That's who Jesus is so that we can be the church he wants us to be!

3) What's Next?

The introduction to Revelation concludes with a commission for John and for us. But it begins in humility.

Verse 17 says that when John saw him, he fell down like a dead man. Did he faint? Was he blown over? Did he collapse? All we know is that John went down. The vision of Jesus overwhelmed his humanity. Notice what happens next. It's beautiful!

Jesus laid his right hand on John and said:

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 (Rev. 1:17-18).

All of this is reassurance language. Jesus, like the Father, is before and after all things. The most powerful and feared aspect of our humanity – death – has no hold on him. And because of his victory on the cross and through the resurrection, Jesus holds the keys of Death and Hades (the grave). As one commentator explained, "He's in control of who gets locked up and liberated."⁵

Next John receives his commission. He's told to write (v. 19). But notice the specifics, because they really capture the structure of Revelation: "...the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this." John's role is to record this vision with a view toward the future for those who are living in the present.

That's why verse 20 follows with an explanation of the connection between the seven stars, the seven lampstands, and the seven churches. Chapters 2-3 record Jesus' message to those churches. We'll see a connection between how Jesus is described and what is said to them. In other words, the character of Jesus is connected to the character of the churches.

What's next? John's vision is meant to be worked out in the lives of real Christians who are living in hard places. In light of this, let me ask you a few questions:

Where are you? What are the unique challenges that you are facing right now? Do you sense the difficulty and hardship around you? Do you know that suffering and tribulation are a part of the Christian life? Do you know that God has placed you in this moment of history, in your family, in this city, and in this church on purpose?

⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., [*Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*](#), ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 50.

Who is Jesus? What do you need to be reminded about when it comes to Jesus? What do you see when you read this text? John's vision is of the long-robed, golden-sashed one with brilliant white hair, blazing eyes, and a stable footing is on the move. He holds the universe in his hands, his word is powerful, and his glory is unbelievable.

What's next? Consider one thing that needs to be changed in light of this text. Do you need an attitude adjustment about hardship? Do you need to refocus your heart? Are there sins that need to be repented from?

This book is here to help you make it to the end.

"Blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3).

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