

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Seven Churches in Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>2</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Revelation 1:1-20</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>August 23, 2020 (a.m.)</b>		

### HOLY TERROR

The most recent issue of *Table Talk* had this very helpful observation on the book of Revelation: “Every book of the Bible was written for a specific reason and audience, features that we need to discern in order to understand the book’s message. Revelation is an apocalypse, the purpose of which is to reveal the spiritual powers at work beyond what our physical eyes can see. So, John wrote Revelation because God wants us to know His work behind the scenes (Rev. 1:1). Yet, there is more. Revelation 1:3 tells us that we will be blessed if we read and obey the book of Revelation. The Lord wants to bless His people – indeed, He even rejoices over us (Zeph. 3:17) – and one way we can receive His blessing is by heeding the teaching of Revelation. Promises that those who conquer by remaining faithful to the gospel as well as references to suffering and martyrdom indicate that at least some of the original audience of Revelation was suffering persecution (e.g., Rev. 2-3; 6:9-11; 7:14; 17:6). For this reason and others, most scholars believe that John wrote Revelation during the mid-90s AD, when Emperor Domitian instituted the first official persecution of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. A significant minority opinion holds that John wrote Revelation during the mid-60s AD, when Emperor Nero killed Christians in the city of Rome. Those who believe Revelation was written during Nero’s reign tend to see much of the book referencing historical events that occurred before AD 70, and that Revelation has much to say about the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in that same year. Interpreters who believe the work was written later tend to see Revelation as largely but not exclusively referencing post-AD 70 events. We will tentatively assume the later date while noting in our studies the places where a different date might affect our interpretation significantly. Revelation is an apocalypse, but biblical apocalypse is actually related to prophecy, for several of the Old Testament prophetic books include apocalyptic sections – notably Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. Thus, it is no surprise that John calls Revelation a work of prophecy (Rev. 1:3). Significantly, biblical prophets take past revelation from God and apply it to their day, and this is exactly what John does. His work is steeped in the Old Testament. While there are no direct quotations of the Old Testament in Revelation, scholars estimate that as much as 70 percent of the book consists of allusions to the Old Testament. Any faithful reading of Revelation must lean heavily on Genesis through Malachi.”<sup>1</sup>

The well-known hymn “In the Garden” is not one of my favorites -- and that's an understatement! In addition to dripping with excessive sentimentalism and an unbiblical mysticism, it gives an equally unbiblical impression of the Person of Christ. Simply compare the lines of this hymn to the first chapter of Revelation. The English essayist and literary critic Charles Lamb once said to the poet Robert Browning: “If Shakespeare was to come into this room, we should all rise to meet him, but if Christ was

to come into it, we should all fall down and try to kiss the hem of His garment.” Lamb's comments are reflective of John's response to seeing the glorified Lord.

**I. THE REVELATOR AND THE RECIPIENT.** John's response is one of holy terror. “I fell at his feet as though dead” (cf. Daniel 10:7-9). He was completely overwhelmed by what he saw. Why was John so overpowered?

**A. Christ's Holiness.** Like Isaiah 6:1-8, John's sight of the holiness of Christ causes him to see his own sinfulness. This is always the response of people when they are confronted with the presence of God (cf. Exodus 3:5,6; Ezekiel 3:22-23; 43:2-3; Luke 5:9).

**B. Christ's Glory.** When the disciples (this included John) beheld Christ's glory on the Mount of transfiguration, they shook with fear (Matthew 17:6). The reverential fear of God will always accompany any true vision of Christ's glory. (I therefore dismiss without hesitation all the bogus reports of those who claim to have been transported to heaven and carry on casual conversation with Jesus!)<sup>2</sup> Fearing God, although presently out of vogue with many people, including an alarming number of Evangelicals (who prefer a user-friendly model for God), is the beginning of a true knowledge of God (cf. Proverbs 1:7; Ecclesiastes 12:13). Irenaeus, the great early church father, wrote: “Neither Moses nor Elijah nor Ezekiel, who all had many celestial visions, saw God. Rather, what they did see were likenesses of the splendor of the Lord and prophecies of things to come. It is evident that the Father is indeed invisible, of whom also the Lord said, *No man has seen God at any time*. But his Word, as he himself willed it, and for the benefit of those who beheld, did show the Father's brightness and explained his purposes, as also the Lord said, *The only begotten God, which is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared [him]*. John also, the Lord's disciple, when seeing the priestly and glorious advent of his kingdom, says in the Apocalypse: *I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And, being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks, and in their midst One like the Son of man, clothed with a garment reaching to the feet, and wrapped around the chest with a golden girdle. His head and his hair were white, as white as wool, and as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like fine brass, as if they were forged in a furnace. His voice [was] like the sound of waters. He had in his right hand seven stars. Out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. He looked like the sun shining at full strength*. For in these words he sets forth something of the glory [which he has received] from his Father, as the head. He sets forth something of the priestly office, as in the case of the long garment reaching to the feet. And this was the reason why Moses vested the high priest after this fashion. Something also alludes to the end [of all things], as [where he speaks of] the fine brass being forged in the fire, which denotes the power of faith, and constant prayer, because of the consuming fire which is to come at the end of time.”<sup>3</sup>

**C. Christ's Reassurance.** The glorified Christ gives John three reasons not to be afraid: (1) He identifies Himself as the Living One, the first and the last (cf. Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). “It is the expression,” notes Trench, “of absolute Godhead . . . He is from eternity to eternity, so that there is no room for any other.”<sup>4</sup> (2) He was dead and became alive again -- no mere man could conquer death, only Christ Jesus, the incarnate Son of God could. (3) He has the keys of death and Hades; He is the Sovereign One, and the destinies of all humanity rest in His jurisdiction.

**D. John's Commission.** The revelation given to the Apostle is to be given in turn to the Seven Churches. He is to write: *What you see* (the vision of the Glorified Christ), *What is* (the state of the Seven Churches), *What is to take place* (the consummation of human history and eternal state).

## II. ***THE SYMBOLS: STARS, ANGELS, LAMPSTANDS.*** What do these three symbols represent?

- A. *The Lampstands.*** These are identified as being the churches. They are seven in number.<sup>5</sup> They are golden, and they bear light. They do not create light, they simply are a medium for the light. Thus, the lampstands are a symbolism of the function and character of the churches.
- B. *The Stars.*** These are identified as the angels of the churches. How is this to be understood? Three possible interpretations have been put forth.

1. **Literal Angels.** The Greek word *aggelos* literally means messenger. It is used over seventy times in the book, and in every other place it refers to a celestial angel. But this position is unsatisfactory for these reasons: (a) the analogy with the human, earthly lampstand breaks down; (b) How could the churches have known anything about their particular angel? They could not see him. To what degree is he responsible for the condition of the church? If he is in any way to be censured for the sin mentioned, then he is not an angel, but a demon! (c) It would be strange that Christ would have John write a letter to a heavenly being (cf. 1 Peter 1:12).
2. **Pastors or Bishops.** This is the most common position, but it has difficulties. No single person is singled out by name in these letters as bearing the burden or praise. The word *aggelos* does not favor its application to earthly being.
3. **The Churches Themselves.** The word angel is being used in a collective sense of the ministry of the church as a whole. The angels are called stars. Why? As stars refer to the function of the ministry of each church, so angels refer to the spiritual authority under Christ in each church. This best explains why the angels could be blamed or praised by Christ, the Head of the Church. "Inasmuch as they bear the title angel, meaning sent or commissioned from heaven, we are instructed that spiritual authority in the Church is real, abiding, heavenly in its origin, neither to be taken up nor to be set aside by mere human whim or fancy or conjecture."<sup>6</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** The vision of the glorified Christ is the proper introduction to the last book of the Bible. He is the Lord of the Church. He was then and He still is today. Christ is still in the midst of His Church. He knows our true condition. Let us fall down and worship Him and hear Him.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Table Talk* (Sept. 2020), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> See my *Pastor's Perspective* No. 4, June 1994, "Going to Heaven with the Devil."

<sup>3</sup> "Against Heresies" (4-20-11), as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Revelation*, ed. W. C. Weinrich (IVP, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> R.C. Trench, *The Seven Churches* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> The number seven occurs frequently in Apocalyptic books of the Bible. M.S. Terry believes that since it is the sum of three and four, "suggests the idea of some mystical relation between God and man the number of a sacred covenant." *Biblical Apocalyptic: A Study of the Most Notable Revelations of God and of Christ* (rpt. Baker, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Murphy, *The Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1895), p. 118.