

WHEN THE MAN COMES AROUND

A COMMENTARY ON
THE BOOK OF
REVELATION



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INTRODUCTION



Now some might say that only a madman would attempt to write a commentary on the book of Revelation. But, having gotten this far, the only thing that remains is to try to brazen it out.

On eschatological subjects, my debts to various writers are too great and numerous, and are spread over too many years, for me to express my gratitude either adequately or accurately. But I would be remiss if I did not mention my obligations to Ken Gentry and Gary DeMar, whose writings on eschatological subjects have been a great help to me over the years.

A different kind of commentary by another writer/editor deserves special mention. Steve Gregg put together a parallel commentary called *Revelation/Four Views*. This

was an enormous help to me. There are four basic schools of thought when it comes to interpreting Revelation, and Gregg did the remarkable work of summarizing the views of representatives of all four schools in four parallel columns, all the way through the book of Revelation, passage by passage.

Those four views are historicist, preterist, futurist, and spiritual. The outlook represented in this commentary is the preterist, but I was greatly encouraged by how much I learned *from the text* from representatives of all four views. While not sharing the final conclusions of the three other schools, it was a great blessing to still be learning from the same inspired text together.

And I would like to pay this blessing forward. Even if you, the reader, do not come to share my interpretive grid as we work through this vision together, my hope is that we would be able, despite the disagreement, to love the Lord's appearing together. May it not be said of us that the millennium is a thousand years of peace that Christians love to fight about.

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CHAPTER 1



THE SIZE OF HAILSTONES

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. (Rev. 1:1-3)

Throughout the book of Revelation, the earth has many plagues that rain down upon it. Over the last two thousand

years, Revelation has itself been treated to nearly the same number of interpretations, some of them the size of hailstones. In the course of this study, we will endeavor not to do any of that ourselves, at least not on purpose.

The first thing to note is that the book of Revelation is a revelation, an *unveiling*. It is intended to make things manifest, and so any scheme of interpretation that serves to obscure is an interpretation that should be suspect. This is a *revelation*. Secondly, it is a revelation of Jesus Christ, of and by Him, meaning that any interpretation that leaves Him out of it should also be suspect.

God gave this revelation to Jesus Christ, who in turn signified its truths by His angel, who was sent as a messenger to John, who in his turn showed what was given to the Lord's servants. John gives his account of the Word of God, he testifies to Jesus Christ, and he also narrates for us what he saw. The things he saw are described as things that must *shortly* come to pass (*taxos*—speedily, quickly, swiftly). This means that Revelation is largely concerned with events of the first century. These events were upon them, which John tells us twice. These things must *shortly* take place, and the *time is at hand*. Believing this to be a revelation, and not an obscuring, we should expect the fulfillment of the vast majority of this book to occur within a few years of the time it was given. The operative word is *soon*. With this assumption, many details within the book swim into focus.

John ends his preamble with a blessing. The blessing promised is for those who *read*, those who *hear*, and those who *keep*.

KINGS AND PRIESTS WITH HIM

John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:4–6)

John is writing to the seven churches of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and these churches are subsequently named in chapters two and three of Revelation. They are the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. More will be said about each of them in turn.

The standard Christian blessing at the beginning of a New Testament letter is “grace and peace.” That greeting is used again here—grace to you, John says, and also peace. Usually, in the other epistles of the New Testament, the grace and peace are said to be from the Father and the Son, causing some to wonder why the Holy Spirit is unmentioned. Jonathan Edwards suggests, and I think he is correct, that the Spirit is not usually mentioned by name because the Spirit—proceeding from the Father and the Son as the Nicene Creed says—*is* the grace and peace.

Now if that is the case, this expression of it is a significant variation. The grace and peace are cited as being from three sources here, not just two. The first is presumably the Father, the one who “is, and was, and who is to come.” Second, there are seven Spirits who are said to be before the Father’s throne. The seven may indicate fullness or perfection, or it may be a way of communicating that the grace and peace to the seven churches are from the seven Spirits, that is, the Holy Spirit. And then third, the grace and peace proceed from Jesus Christ, who is identified in three ways. He is the faithful witness (*martyr*), He is the firstborn from the dead, and He is the prince (*archon*) of the kings of the earth.

In pondering the meaning of the seven Spirits, it is worth remembering what Isaiah says. “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and might, The spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1–2).

The Messiah will come, and the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him (one). The Spirit of wisdom and understanding (two more). The Spirit of counsel and might (two more). And then we have the Spirit of the knowledge and of the fear of the Lord (two more). Seven in all.

A doxological blessing is then declared concerning Jesus Christ. “Unto Him who loved us . . .” He is the one who loved us and He is the one who washed us from our sins in His own blood. The verb for *washing* here is striking and clear. The image used by hymn writers—that of being

washed in the blood of Christ—is therefore a biblical image. This is the same one who, after that cleansing, made us kings and priests together with Him. He is the one who should consequently receive glory and dominion forever. And an *Amen* is added to it.

THE CORONATION OF CHRIST

Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. (Rev. 1:7–8).

This is a good place to note that Revelation is simply saturated with citations from the Old Testament. This short passage takes material from at least two places, and those places help throw light on what John is talking about here. “Coming on the clouds” is from Daniel 7:13, and looking on Him whom “they have pierced” is from Zechariah 12:10.

In Daniel, the coming on clouds is not the Second Coming, but is rather the coming of the glorified Son of Man into the throne room of the Ancient of Days. It is a reference to the Ascension, not to the Second Coming. John has just finished telling us that Jesus is the *archon* of the kings of the earth, which is what happened at the Ascension. When Jesus approached the Ancient of Days, He was given full and complete authority, dominion, and glory. He was given a kingdom such that all people, nations, and languages should serve Him—in short, everlasting dominion.

The Ascension was His coronation as *archon* of the kings of the earth. Revelation is a description of how He began that reign two thousand years ago, and how His reign would culminate at the end of all history in the appearance of the bride from Heaven.

In Zechariah, the prophet describes a day in which the people will see the one they pierced, and how they will mourn for Him. That day is described as a day in which the Spirit of Grace and Supplication is “poured” upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This is a description of Pentecost—when the Spirit was literally poured out upon them—in that city, to that extent, and with that effect.

We are enabled to see the Lord’s approach to the Ancient of Days through the preaching of the gospel. This is what it means to declare the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are enabled to see Him as pierced through the preaching of the gospel. This is what it means to portray Him as crucified. We are enabled to mourn for our sins through the preaching of the gospel. This is what it means when the one who was pierced pierces our hearts. As John says, even so, and Amen.

We do not need to marvel at how such things can be accomplished through the folly of preaching because the heart of the message preached is a Person. He is the first and last, the height and the depth, the Alpha and Omega, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. It is appropriate that He was given everything by the Ancient of Days because He Himself is the one who is, who was, and who is to come. Before Abraham was, I am, He said.

THREE-FOLD FELLOWSHIP

I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.
(Rev. 1:9)

The writer identifies himself simply as John. He is traditionally taken as John the apostle, and for good reason. Although Revelation is a completely different genre from the gospels, the close kinship between this book and the fourth gospel is plain.

He describes himself two ways. The first is simply as “brother.” The second is “companion,” a rendering of *synkoinonos*—a “partaker together with.” The apostle is a brother together with those to whom he is writing, and he also fellowships together with them, partaking together with them, in three things. The first bond of their fellowship is tribulation, the second is the kingdom, and the third is perseverance. All three are connected to Jesus Christ—they are the tribulation of Jesus, the kingdom of Jesus, and the endurance of Jesus.

John was on the isle of Patmos—a small Greek island in the Aegean. He was exiled there, as he says, “for the word of God” and because of his “testimony of Jesus Christ.” The word for testimony is *marturia*, which is related to our word *martyr*. A martyr is one who witnesses or testifies to what he has seen or experienced. Because faithful martyrs have often had to seal their testimony with their blood, the

word has come to mean one who dies for his faith, as Antipas did (Rev. 2:13). But the witness who is willing to go to the point of death begins witnessing a lot earlier than that in the course of his life. The spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 19:10). John was exiled to Patmos for the testimony of Jesus Christ, and while he was there, he was given the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

IN THE SPIRIT ON THE LORD'S DAY

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.
(Revelation 1:10–11)

John begins to tell us the beginning of the vision. He had been exiled to Patmos, and on a particular Lord's Day, he was in the Spirit. This tells us, incidentally, that there is a day set apart for the Lord, the first day of the week, the day He rose from the dead, which is to say, Sunday. John was in the Spirit, which is to say he was in a trance, capable of seeing the vision that he saw.

While in that condition, he heard a great voice behind him and he turned and looked. This is a something we see later in Revelation. He first hears, then turns, and looks at what he heard (Rev. 7: 4, 9). The speaker behind him had a great voice, clear as a trumpet, and He identified Himself

as Jesus Christ. The way He did this was by calling Himself the Alpha and Omega (the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet), and then repeating it another way by saying He was the first and the last.

John is then given his commission—he is told to write down in a book what he sees in the vision, and then he is to send that book to the seven church in the province of Asia. Those seven churches, in order, were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

IN OUR MIDST

And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. (Rev. 1:12–13)

John has heard a loud voice, a voice like a trumpet. He turns to see who is speaking, and the speaker is obliquely identified as the Lord Jesus. The first thing John saw was the collection of lampstands. These lampstands are identified just a few verses down as the seven churches of Asia to which John is writing (v. 20). This vision of the Lord includes a number of vivid descriptions that run into the next verses, which we will get to shortly, but for now it should simply be said that the one who spoke, telling John to write to the seven churches, was the Lord Himself. He is identified as one “like a Son of Man,” which is how the Messiah is described in Daniel 7:13 when He was

presented before the Ancient of Days and was given universal dominion (Dan. 7:14).

The thing that should be emphasized here is that the seven lampstands are the seven churches, and the Lord was standing in the midst of the churches. He identifies with them, He stands with them, and as we shall see, He holds their pastors in His right hand (v. 16). He walks among them.

A VOICE LIKE MANY WATERS

His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. (Rev. 1:14–15)

A vivid description is given of the Lord Jesus, and in true apocalyptic colors. He wore a long robe, down to the feet. The color of the robe is not specified here, but He had a golden sash around His chest. Both His head and hair were white, strikingly white—white like wool, white like snow. His eyes were fiery flames, and His feet were like refined brass just out of the furnace. His voice was like the sound of many waters.

The golden girdle around His chest indicates priesthood (Ex. 28:8), although the Lord Jesus held a priesthood much higher than that of Aaron. His head and hair were white, not like the whiteness of skin, but a pure white. In the next verse (v. 16), we see that His face shone like the sun at full strength, so it was a penetrating whiteness. Picture a

sun that is white, not yellow. Feet that are like burnished bronze also show up in the Old Testament—the feet of the cherubim that surrounded the throne of God had feet that color (Ezek. 1:7). And the angelic messenger that came to Daniel was very much like this (Dan. 10:6) in a number of particulars. His face was like lightning, his eyes like torches, his feet like burnished bronze, and his voice was like many waters. John is clearly describing the Lord with terms previously used for one of His great servants.

Having a voice like many waters is not an unusual scriptural trope. “And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice was like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory” (Ezek. 43:2). Such a voice sounds like thunder (Rev. 14:2), and later on John says that it sounded like a huge multitude, or a great thundering (Rev. 19:6). When we open our Bibles to read the Word of God, or attend worship in order to hear it declared, we should feel like we are standing on a rocky beach near the base of Niagara Falls. God’s Word fills all the available space.

A PROFOUND MYSTERY

And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. (Rev. 1:16)

The description of Jesus Christ continues in the same vein. Here we learn three more things about Him—that Jesus holds seven stars in His right hand, a sharp two-edged

sword comes out of His mouth, and His face shines like the sun in its full strength.

The messengers of the churches, their angels, are described under the figure of stars in the Lord's right hand. The image is one of the Lord's presence with those churches—the lampstands are the churches, and the stars are therefore their pastors (v. 20). If the “angels” were *heavenly* emissaries, this would be an odd way to describe them. The entire scenario portrays the Lord's identification with the churches, and in this case, with their pastors. The pastors are stars, and this is said to be a “mystery.”

This ties in with the next description. The word *angel* simply means “messenger.” It is used (of course) of heavenly messengers, but it is also a word that describes human messengers. For example, John the Baptist is said to be an angel (Mark 1:2), and these angels are also men assigned to the churches. But as messengers, they do not have the authority to come up with their own messages. They do not speak on their own authority. They are heralds, men commissioned to announce what someone else has told them to say.

And this is how they are pictured here. Jesus is the one speaking. When Christ speaks to the churches, the double-edge sword comes out of His mouth, and His ministers are held in His right hand as He preaches. This is what gospel authority means. Jesus speaks the Word while He holds the men speaking it. A few verses later, the pastor at Pergamos is told that this is where his authority lies—“to the angel of the church in Pergamos write: These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges” (Rev. 2:12).

Later in Revelation the two-edged sword (representing preaching) is associated with the rod of iron which Christ will use to rule the nations (Rev. 19:15). This rod of iron is prophesied in Psalm 2:9, and the Lord wields it through His servants (Rev. 2:26-27), but the Lord Himself is the one who holds it (Rev. 12:5).

The Bridal City is described later as having no need for a sun because her Bridegroom is that sun (Rev. 21:23; 22:5). That reality as later described is foreshadowed here.

THE KEYS OF DEATH AND HADES

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and I have the keys of hell and of death. (Rev. 1:17–18)

Understandably, when John saw this vision, he simply collapsed. The vision was overpowering, and John fell down, virtually dead. But the Lord—for He here clearly identifies Himself as the Lord Jesus—laid His right hand on John. This is the same right hand that holds the seven stars, who are the pastors of the seven churches in Asia. When the Lord touched John with His right hand, His first words were “fear not.” The vision preceding provided ample reasons for collapsing, but the words that follow were the Lord’s encouragement to rise up and “write.” The vision was overwhelming; the words were enabling.

The reasons for gathering himself together were these. Jesus is the first and the last. He is the one who was alive,

who died, and who rose again from the dead to live forever. This was sealed with a solemn Amen. In addition to everything else, the Lord Jesus—on account of His descent into Hades and His resurrection from that place—was the possessor of the keys of both death and Hades.

The word rendered as *hell* in the AV is actually Hades. This is not *Gehenna*, the place of final condemnation, but rather Sheol/Hades, the place of the dead where Jesus preached to the disobedient souls from Noah's era (1 Pet. 3:19-20). Jesus is now the Lord of death, the conqueror of Hades.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT

Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; (Rev. 1:19)

John is then instructed to write down what he has seen. Revelation has many “time stamps” within it, but it also has some time hints, like this one. John is told to write what he has seen, the things that are happening in the present, and the things that will occur after that, in the future. He is not told to write down what has happened, what is happening right then, and then to hit the pause button for two thousand years or more. The expectation clearly is that the “things hereafter” are the things that will be unfolding in the immediate future.

This is supported by the time stamps that occur elsewhere in the book. Two thousand years ago, the things described in this book were going to happen *soon* (Rev. 1:1). The Lord was coming *soon* (Rev. 3:1). The Christians

of that era were warned about what must *soon* take place (Rev. 22:6). The Lord was indeed going to come and fulfill His words *soon* (Rev. 22:7, 12, 20).

This same reality is assumed in this passage. Write down what you have seen, what you are seeing, and what you will see (right after this).

WHY THE ANGELS SPEAK

The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches. (Rev. 1:20)

The last verse of this chapter may be considered the introduction to the next two chapters. In this section of Revelation that is opening up, messages are being given to the angels of the seven churches of Asia. Remember the Lord Jesus was standing in the midst of seven lampstands (Rev. 1:12-13), He held seven stars in His right hand (Rev. 1:16), and a sharp two-edged sword came out of His mouth. In this verse, we are given the meaning of the mystery, and in the two chapters to come, we will see how the Lord exercises this ministry.

So we know that the seven lampstands are the seven churches and that the Lord Jesus was walking around in the midst of His churches. The seven stars that He held in His right hand are the seven “messengers,” or pastors of these churches. The sword in His mouth is His Word,

which He gives to the successive pastors in the upcoming passages.

So this is how it works: Jesus speaks, and then He tells John to write what He has spoken. The implication is that the angel of the church is to speak what he has read. So Jesus speaks, John writes, the angel reads, and the angel speaks.