

# RE: VELATION

Seeing Jesus · Seeing Self · Standing Firm

Stanley D. Gale



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*Re: velation*

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For Linda,  
wife of my youth and love of my life





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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is not a commentary on Revelation. It addresses the seven letters to the churches to which the book is directed, but it is not even a thorough commentary on those letters. Rather, this book deals with the message of Revelation as a whole through the messages to the seven churches.

Those seven messages form a single pastoral letter of our Lord Jesus Christ to His church across the world and through the age. Our Lord speaks to those who count themselves disciples to equip them for life in a fallen world, awaiting His return.

Our approach, as the subtitle suggests, will be to see Jesus, see ourselves, and stand firm. We run the race by fixing our eyes on Jesus, beholding His glory as Revelation uniquely enables us. He calls our attention to the spiritual condition of the church and those who are the church. And He counsels us to health and functionality, renewal and restoration. We will highlight those elements that fortify us in our journey, essentials for Christian discipleship—love, suffering, repentance, faith, abiding, humility, wisdom, and hope.

Throughout, our Lord Jesus urges us to stand firm in Him against the schemes of our spiritual enemy the devil. He calls us to overcome, to abide in Him who is our salvation, our shield, our strength, and our solace.

—Stan Gale



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# INTRODUCTION

**velation.** ve·la·tion /və'lāshən/noun. 1. the act or process of veiling or the state of being veiled. 2. the formation of a velum<sup>1</sup>

Yes, *velation* is a real word. It speaks to things hidden. This is a book regarding velation. It has to do with what is not apparent to us, hidden for one reason or another but integral to the Christian life, things God wants us to know about His Son, about ourselves, and about our journey from now into eternity.

God addresses velation through revelation. Throughout Scripture God manifests His glory and brings clarity to His plan of redemption. Just as we see more clearly through the adjustment of a camera lens, the realities of redemption are brought into focus, particularly in the person and work of God's Son (Heb. 1:1–3). God is also at work in our individual lives to reveal what is hidden in our hearts (Heb. 4:12), perhaps sins or hindrances to our Christian health and maturity.

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1. *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “velation (noun),” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/velation>.

God works both objectively and subjectively. He reveals *to* us, and He reveals *in* us. Through His revelation in creation, the Bible, and His Son, God reveals His glory, goodness, and grace. Through the illumination of His Spirit, God exposes our sin, softens our hearts, and draws us to Himself. The Spirit uses His inspired word as a mirror to our soul. He captures our attention not simply so that we will *know* but so that we will *do* something about it (James 1:22–25), whether in changed belief or changed behavior.

God addresses velation by revelation for what He wants us to know and how He wants us to grow.

### **The Book of Revelation**

There is no more neglected resource for Christian living than the book of Revelation. God has given it to us to cultivate awe, love, and longing for our Lord Jesus and to stimulate faithfulness, obedience, and perseverance as we await His return. Revelation has in view not only the triumphant return of Christ but also the reigning presence of Christ in the interim. God wants us to see both. The perspective He gives has everything to do with how those who are His conduct their lives in faith, hope, and love.

We tend to think of Revelation as concealing rather than revealing. We scratch our heads at strange imagery and exotic visions. But the express purpose of the book is to make known. What Daniel was told to seal up (Dan. 12:4) until the time of the end, John was told not to seal up because the time was at hand (Rev. 22:10; see also 1:3). It's like the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption had been

tagged, “Don’t open until Christmas.” Well, Christmas had come, and it was time to explore what had been promised.

With the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the page of redemptive history had turned to the last chapter, what the writers of Scripture call the “last days” (Heb. 1:1–2; see also 1 Peter 1:20). “Last days” does not refer simply to end times. Rather, it has to do with culmination. Like the last chapter of a murder mystery in which the plot comes together and the killer is revealed—in this case it is Jesus who is revealed as the promised Messiah come in “the fullness of the time” (Gal. 4:4–5), who is to be apprehended by faith.

Revelation is often treated like a crystal ball, read with its prophecies in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. But the intent of the book is not to position us before the window looking for signs and wonders but rather to keep our eyes on the road for the journey before us. Revelation is not so much a puzzle book as it is a picture book. It vividly communicates God’s message to shore up the faith of His people as they await the return of their risen King. It pulls back the curtain to reveal the sovereign hand of God at the helm of human history. It celebrates the living Lord who has ascended to reign on high for His church. And it makes us aware of the nature of the challenges we face in this world.

Revelation is like a graphic novel. It doesn’t just tell; it shows. For example, if I were to represent a nation through the symbol of a bald eagle, your mind would not go to Canada or to Russia; it would go to the United States. If I say it’s pouring outside, you would understand it’s raining heavily. But if I say it’s raining cats and dogs, that communicates the downpour in a more vivid, visceral way through the use of

imagery. When the psalmist says that God's word is sweeter than honey (Ps. 19:10), he is using metaphor to stimulate spiritual taste buds to partake and be energized by what God has written. That is the sort of language of Revelation.

When John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), people would have looked to see the literal Jesus coming to be baptized. But when Revelation shows us Jesus, it does so as a figurative lamb, alive though having been slain (Rev. 5:5–6). The message of the Bible is poured into that image and that scene, and God wants us to see it.

Revelation employs a genre of writing that communicates figuratively rather than literally. We don't go outside to look for literal cats and dogs after a soaking rain. The book is filled with numbers that hold significance and images that evoke truths. Like poetry, this sort of genre not only informs the mind but also stirs the heart. When Revelation shows us a multitude clothed in white, we should not expect to encounter a mass of people in bleached robes. Rather, these are people whose raiment is "made...white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). The stain that has been removed is actually the stain of sin. In view is Jesus's sacrifice for sinners and the righteousness provided by God. Through the imagery, God bids us to Himself, where we reason together about His Son.

The images of Revelation become meaningful to us through a grasp of the Old Testament. The book is littered with quotations and allusions to Old Testament teaching. That depth of appreciation is enriched when we understand that the entire Old Testament has to do with Jesus (see Luke

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24:44–47; 2 Tim. 3:15).<sup>2</sup> Revelation shows us Jesus. At one point we see Him as “a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (Rev. 5:6). At another point He is described in glory and might:

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. (Rev. 19:11–13)

Titles, images, and connections are spread throughout Revelation to communicate Christ and deepen our appreciation of Him.

We don't typically think of Revelation as being practical for Christian living, but it is not only practical, it is also necessary. It provides perspective and practices that help us to press on in the face of the obstacles we encounter in this fallen world in the light of Christ's reign and return. With its emphasis on the present, the book is brimming with relevance. John offers a blessing on the one “who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep

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<sup>2</sup> For more insight on the structure, flow, and emphasis of Revelation, see Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2000); and G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

those things which are written in it” (Rev. 1:3). Notice the verbs: *read*, *hear*, and *keep*. When John brings the book to a close, he again emphasizes the practical nature of the book: “Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:7). *Keeping* involves holding firm with an eye to application. It is in the keeping of what God reveals that we will safely navigate our daily journey of faith.

### **Revelations to the Churches**

Revelation is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor, present-day Turkey (Rev. 1:11). These seven churches were actual communities of faith at the time of John’s writing. In this case we want to understand Revelation like any other New Testament letter. Just as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth or Rome, John wrote to the churches at Smyrna and Sardis.

We see the genre of the book at play, however, in that seven is the number symbolic of completeness. It represents the whole, the totality. For example, in the above description of Jesus where we read of a lamb having seven horns and seven eyes, the number seven communicates comprehensiveness. Jesus is all powerful and all knowing. Nothing can overcome Him. Nothing is hidden from His sight.

As a symbol of completeness, the messages to the seven literal, geographically located congregations become a multi-faceted single message to the church throughout the world and throughout the age. That is reinforced in the conclusion of each of the seven letters where the message applies beyond that local congregation to all the “churches” (for example, Rev. 2:7; 3:6).



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While Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches, the entire book is a letter. It opens like a letter, such as one written by Paul or James, identifying author and recipient along with extending greetings. It also closes like a letter with wrap-up remarks and an expression of blessing: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen” (Rev. 22:21). In New Testament letters God speaks to His people to minister to them pastorally and to strengthen them in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Revelation does the same through vivid imagery and movement.

Each letter to the seven churches contains a swatch of a portrait of Jesus, a glimpse of the glory of Christ. For example, in the letter to Laodicea, Jesus is introduced as “the Faithful and True Witness” (Rev. 3:14), echoing language from Revelation 1:5 and 19:11. Revelation wants us to fix our eyes on Jesus and be encouraged by what we see. Through it Jesus intends to guide and guard His sheep against the schemes of the devil that they face daily in this present evil age (Gal. 1:3–5).

In the upper room, before His betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus prayed to the Father for His disciples: “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:15–18). Revelation is given by God in respect to that prayer. Through it our Lord alerts us to the evil one and assures us of strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

In reading the seven letters, we are not reading someone else's mail. They are addressed to each church and to every believer throughout the age. In addition to filling our eyes with the glory of Jesus, each letter calls us to pay attention to the voice of our Lord. The letters contain words of commendation and correction, fleshed out in the issues of each local church. These are issues that the larger church wrestles with from the first century to the final days.

Ultimately, Revelation has to do with whom we worship. That question has direct bearing in seeing Jesus, in seeing ourselves, and in living our lives. Will we love and serve the living God, or will we bow to idols? Will we trust in the unseen God, or will we be swallowed up in fear and unbelief? Will we side with Him who overcame, or will we throw in our lot with the ruler of this age and his fallen kingdom? Will we be faithful to Christ in the midst of a pagan culture that entices us to do what is right in our own eyes, to compromise our faith and find life in the offerings of the world? Revelation and the letters to the churches press these questions on us and urge us to faithfulness.

Always on the horizon of Revelation are a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation unmarred by the scourge and stain of sin. At book's end an eighth church looms large, wooing us, warming our hearts—the New Jerusalem: “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light” (Rev. 21:22–23). We read the letters to the seven churches in anticipation of what is to come and what awaits those whose citizenship is in heaven, who

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belong not to the perishing kingdom of this world but to the everlasting kingdom of God and His Christ.

**Re: velation**

The word *velation* is not a word we tend to use. But it does whet our appetite to behold what God wants us to know. He wants us to see Jesus in multifaceted glory—risen, reigning, returning. He wants to draw us nearer to Himself as the Spirit exposes our hearts and grows us in grace. He wants to illumine for us the perils and pitfalls of life in this world and to show us His sufficiency.

One day there will be no more velation. The apostle expresses it in terms of *now* and *then*: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). We will see Jesus as He is. We will no longer hide from God as did our first parents in the garden of Eden. We will find ourselves in the full enjoyment of our God into all eternity.

In *Re: velation* we embark on an endeavor of discovery. We want to know Jesus, that our hearts “may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2–3). We want to know what it means that our life is hidden with Christ, so that “when Christ who is our life appears, then [we] also will appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4) and so that we will live as befitting a child of God, putting “to death therefore what is earthly in you:

sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5 ESV).

We turn now to the portrait of Jesus presented in Revelation.

*Chapter 1*

## A PORTRAIT FOR THE AGES

*Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me.*

—REVELATION 1:12

Alfred Eisenstaedt's photograph of a US Navy sailor kissing a nurse in New York City's Times Square captured the elation of the winding down of the Second World War. The image of a terrified nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running naked toward the camera of AP photographer Nick Ut conveyed the horror of the Vietnam War. Dark plumes of smoke billowing from the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, evoked the stunned horror of a nation. Each of these photographs is a snapshot not only of a subject but also of a time.

The Bible gives us pictures not in the photographic sense, but drawn with words. We find words that describe Joseph, who was said to be "handsome in form and appearance" (Gen. 39:6), and words of abstraction describing the beloved of the Song of Solomon:

His head is like the finest gold;  
His locks are wavy,

And black as a raven.  
His eyes are like doves  
By the rivers of waters,  
Washed with milk,  
And fitly set.  
His cheeks are like a bed of spices,  
Banks of scented herbs.  
His lips are lilies,  
Dripping liquid myrrh.

His hands are rods of gold  
Set with beryl.  
His body is carved ivory  
Inlaid with sapphires.  
His legs are pillars of marble  
Set on bases of fine gold.  
His countenance is like Lebanon,  
Excellent as the cedars. (5:11–15)

The picture presented in the Song is not something drawn by a sketch artist to help find a missing person. Rather, it is drawn by comparisons to communicate the passion of the bride as the beholder of her bridegroom.

There is another picture the Bible presents. In appearance it stands contrary to that of Joseph:

He has no form or comeliness;  
And when we see Him,  
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.  
(Isa. 53:2)

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But the Bible's description of Him is not primarily physical; it is redemptive.

The pages of Scripture represent Him in a variety of ways, through an array of settings. We see Him in the Passover lamb of Exodus, a slain substitute for sinners. He is foreshadowed in David, king over Israel. His mission is anticipated in godly Hosea courting a prostitute. He is the rock that gushed water when struck, the manna provided by God to sustain His people, and the burning coal taken from the altar by which God removed Isaiah's guilt and atoned for his sin. He is the shepherd of the Twenty-Third Psalm, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, and the ram sacrificed by Abraham in place of Isaac, his only son, whom he loved. His portraiture fills the whole Bible because all of Scripture is about Him (Luke 24:44–47) and testifies to Him (John 5:39).

This portrayal of Jesus as God's Messiah reaches Revelation. It is a portrait for the ages unveiled in the fullness of time. It uses brushstrokes found throughout the Old Testament, given vivid color in the New, with perspective from the depth of history. It doesn't render Jesus like someone we would see in a portrait gallery. Rather, it shows Him as the image of the invisible God and redeemer of God's people. It is given to fortify our faith, to focus our hope, and to fuel our love as we live our days awaiting His return.

Before we turn our attention to the letters to the seven churches, let us gather before the majestic, Scripture-rich portrait of Christ lifted up for us in Revelation. Beholding this portrait will sharpen our gaze on the One who speaks to us in the letters. We will focus on three facets of

this multidimensional portrait, seeing Jesus as the Christ in terms of prophet, priest, and king.

### **Prophet**

Revelation is a letter written by John, given by God, addressed to seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 1:4). Yet it becomes clear that it is the voice of Christ Himself that we hear. Early on our attention is directed to the One who speaks: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,’ says the Lord, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (1:8).

John then hears a voice telling him to write what he sees. He turns to look at who is speaking. This is what meets his eye:

In the midst of the seven lampstands [was] One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. (Rev. 1:13–16)

The One speaking makes clear who He is. He is not an angel; He is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. John is understandably shaken by what meets his eye. But Jesus says, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives,



and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (1:17–18).

Jesus is the sender of the letters to the churches. But He is also the subject of the letters, including the entire book of Revelation. As prophet, Jesus is both messenger and message (see Heb. 1:1–3). He is the Word made flesh.

John writes of Him as one “like the Son of Man” (Rev. 1:13). “Son of Man” was Jesus’s favorite title for Himself during His earthly ministry. By it He laid claim to the title of prophetic promise referred to in the book of Daniel:

I was watching in the night visions,  
And behold, One like the Son of Man,  
Coming with the clouds of heaven!  
He came to the Ancient of Days,  
And they brought Him near before Him.  
Then to Him was given dominion and glory and  
a kingdom,  
That all peoples, nations, and languages should  
serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
Which shall not pass away,  
And His kingdom the one  
Which shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13–14)

In his vision John sees the hair of His head white like wool, His eyes ablaze with fire, and His feet like bronze, His voice like that of a multitude—expressions drawn from Daniel (7:9–10; 10:6). John was beholding the One described by Daniel; He who would judge the nations had come!

We will explore some of these descriptions when we turn to the seven letters. But for now we want to see that the One speaking to us is the One spoken about. Jesus is the I AM, the First and the Last, a reference to His deity (Ex. 3:14; Isa. 44:6). He took on our humanity, lived in obedience, died in our stead, and lives forever in victory. Salvation is found in Him and in Him alone, for only He holds the keys to Hades and death. His mission has been executed and the free offer of the gospel extended. This is the Jesus who commands our ear.

### **Priest**

A *prophet* was anointed by the Spirit of God to bring God's word to the people. A *priest*, however, was God's anointed to represent the people to God, offering sacrifices and interceding for them. As prophet, Jesus came in perfection as both the messenger speaking the word of God and the message as the Word of God incarnate. As priest, Jesus was not only the one offering the sacrifice but was Himself the sacrifice offered, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The writer of Hebrews contrasts the priesthood of Christ with the priests under the old covenant. The finality of Christ as priest is enabled by His sinlessness and unbroken intercession (Heb. 7:23–25). The writer explains the perfection of Jesus as both priest and offering. As our Great High Priest, He “does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (Heb. 7:27).

While Hebrews describes the priestly work of Christ, Revelation depicts the priesthood of Jesus, borrowing Old Testament titles and imagery. John sees a heavenly vision of a sealed scroll. The scroll conveys not merely God's plan of salvation but also His execution of it.

From the vision of heaven we hear a voice asking who is worthy to open the scroll. A search is made, but no one in all creation is fit to open its seals. John begins to weep. Unless the scroll is unsealed, God's plan of salvation is unfulfilled. But then John hears these words: "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (Rev. 5:5).

John lifts his eyes to see not a lion but a lamb—a living lamb standing at a throne. He is credentialed with Old Testament prophetic promise: from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:9), in the line of David (Isa. 11:1–5). This lamb is not just alive. He is alive having been slain. The picture is of Jesus Christ, a lamb without blemish once sacrificed on Calvary's cross, now raised in victory from the grave and elevated to the right hand of God Most High to reign for His church.

The saints of heaven erupt in praise and worship:

You are worthy to take the scroll,  
And to open its seals;  
For You were slain,  
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood  
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and  
nation. (Rev. 5:9)

The whole of creation is brought together as a choir; and the church, represented by its elders, falls down to worship

the Lamb. This tells us something about the Lamb. Only God is to be worshiped. Jesus is God incarnate, the Lamb given by the Father to be sacrificed for the sins of His people.

It is from the focal point of Christ's priestly reign that Revelation unfurls its visions, like waves of the advancing tide, one lapping over the other, moving inexorably toward the culmination of the new creation. Jesus lives. He lives in victory, having been crucified in vindication of the Father's justice and validation of His work as priest and sacrifice. He is *the* overcomer, and all those whose faith is in Him will overcome in Him.

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). All who trust in Him will not be disappointed. As Jesus went from suffering to glory, our course follows the same path. We press on, our hope assured, our worship directed, our love compelled. As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death in this fallen world, we can be of good cheer:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow [us]  
All the days of [our lives],  
And [we] will dwell in the house of the LORD  
Forever. (Ps. 23:6)

### **King**

The dominant depiction of Revelation is Jesus as king. He reigns on high for His church, the people for whom He died and for whom He lives, the people for whom He will return. He who was the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 42, 49, 53) was

exalted and given all authority (Matt. 28:18; Col. 3:1–4). He is the risen, reigning, returning King. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom (Dan. 2:44; 7:14; Luke 1:32–33).

Revelation begins with a portrait of Christ as a lamb on a throne. It concludes with a portrait of Christ on a white charger:

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written:

KING OF KINGS AND  
LORD OF LORDS.  
(Rev. 19:11–16)

In His first appearing, Jesus did not come to judge (John 3:17). But when He comes in glory, it will be to judge and pour out the wrath of God on those who rejected Him, in fulfillment of Psalm 2. All of Scripture is brought to bear.

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom at His first coming. The kingdom was a constant theme of the teaching of His earthly ministry. He often described the kingdom through His parables. At the end of the age, that inaugurated kingdom will be consummated. The fallen order will be done away with and the new creation ushered in. The kingdom of the world will perish, along with its counterfeit king and those under its oppressive dominion (Rev. 20:10–15). The kingdom of God and His Christ will be realized as an everlasting kingdom. And He will reign forever and ever.

Revelation concludes by lifting our eyes to Jesus, again bringing to bear Old Testament descriptions fulfilled in Him: “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 22:16). By these titles Jesus is claiming that He is God’s promised Messiah (Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–9). His reign is the dawn of a new creation (Num. 24:17; 2 Peter 1:19) that will endure into eternity.

### **A Portrait Prevailing**

Why is it so important that we keep this portrait of Christ before us in the course of our lives? It’s because of the nature of our journey as we await His return. In this world we will have tribulation. But we can take heart because Jesus has overcome the world. In this world we will face assaults from the evil one, laying siege to our faith. But Christ has overcome the works of the devil. Amid discouragement, fear, and doubt that assail us, Revelation turns our eyes on Jesus.

A theme that runs throughout Revelation is overcoming. The blessings of salvation are granted to the one who

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overcomes, a refrain of each of the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). One of the reasons we need to keep Christ before us is this: *we cannot divorce overcoming from Christ*. Jesus is *the* Overcomer. He is the one who conquers, who prevails over Satan, sin, and death (John 16:33; Rev. 5:5; 6:2; 17:14). We conquer through faith in Him (1 John 5:4–5) because we share in His victory.

If we take our eyes off of Jesus, overcoming may seem dependent on our efforts at being good Christians. After all, in the letters to the churches, the promises of everlasting life are extended to those who overcome, this after Jesus calls for repentance and fidelity. Overcoming is cast in terms of obedience and good works. As Revelation draws to a close, overcomers are set in contrast to “the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars” (Rev. 21:8). We are told of the New Jerusalem that “nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false” (21:27 ESV). If we take our eyes off of Jesus, who of us would not quake because we can see ourselves in each category of wretchedness and must confess that we have fallen short?

The portrait displayed in Revelation, however, makes it clear that overcoming is bound up in Jesus Christ. All those descriptions of Him throughout the book compel us to see a salvation that is of the Lord. We overcome not by our works but by the blood of the Lamb, which makes us clean. When John says that it is our faith that has overcome the world (1 John 5:4), he is pointing us to the person and work of Jesus as the object of our faith. We overcome through faith

in Christ, and that not of ourselves but as a gift of God. It is all of God (Eph. 1:3–14).

We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But we are not saved by faith that is alone. Saving faith is sanctifying faith. Overcoming has to do with both the life we have in Christ and the life we are called to live in Christ. Overcoming carries the same dual sense as does abiding in Christ (John 15:1–6). We have spiritual life through abiding in Christ, like a branch has life through being joined to a vine. But we are also commanded to abide, which shows up in a life of fruitfulness, obedience, faithfulness, and service. Our overcoming does not point to our efforts but to the effects of God's workmanship of grace in us.

God gives us this portrait of our Lord Jesus in Revelation to give us comfort, courage, and confidence as we live today in light of tomorrow. We benefit from understanding and meditating on its redemptive brushstrokes. It is not a portrait we are to visit occasionally. We are to keep it continually before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus with each breath, with every step. Nor is it a portrait that we are simply to admire. We must respond fittingly, listening to Him as prophet, trusting in Him as priest, and following Him as king. And through it all, we are to render to Jesus, along with the Father and the Spirit, our undivided worship.

We turn now to Christ's words to the seven churches, each of which begins with a look at the divinely painted portrait of Him who is our salvation.