

This past December Star Wars Fans anticipated the latest installment of the Star Wars movies. The Last Jedi debuted on December 15 to much fanfare and expectation. Since its release Star Wars fans have debated the good and the bad of the movie. I saw it early in January. There were some spectacular scenes and powerful moments. When you put together special effects, dramatic music and a big screen, you can create quite an effect. I remember thinking a few times, “this is pretty well done. But none of it really happened.” For a few moments, good won against the dominant evil force. But it wasn’t real. It was just a movie. And after the lights came up and we walked out into the -25 parking lot, we were back to reality.

We all know that moments in movies where good triumphs over evil aren’t real. But we’re drawn to them maybe just to taste for a moment what it would be like to be part of good defeating evil. Wouldn’t it be something if there were a moment like that in real life? Wouldn’t it be amazing if we were there to witness it?

Well that time is coming. Every day this world exists is one day closer to it. It will be the day on which Jesus returns and everyone will see him. Those who have rejected him will mourn on that day. But those of us who have accepted Him will rejoice and be awestruck by His majesty. But how will we persevere until that day? How will we keep going and growing in our Christian walk?

Some of you came today in an upbeat and positive mood. Life goes well or you’re doing well. Some of you have come through a difficult week. Maybe you’re barely hanging on because of some health issue or bad news or something tough relationally at work or home. Some of you have come through an ordinary week. You’re Christian life is ho hum; something that you kind of do but without much enthusiasm these days.

How can we keep going and growing in our Christian lives with whatever has happened this past week or recently? Revelation provides us with the answer. **We must behold the Apocalyptic Jesus Christ.** By that I mean we must take in the vision of Jesus Christ provided throughout Revelation and live in light of it. Many of us know Jesus as our shepherd, friend, savior and suffering servant. But we need to add to our knowledge the portrayal of Jesus throughout Revelation. Today, we are going to see the first of 7 visions of Jesus given to us throughout this book. I pray that at least one or two aspects of the portrayal here will encourage, strengthen and embolden you today. I pray we will encounter

the apocalyptic Jesus who will one day return in glorious triumph for all the world to see. I pray that until that day, we will be encouraged to continue on in our walk with Him by His strength.

We just scratched the surface of Revelation last week. If you took up my assignment, you spent some time in Revelation this past week. You likely experienced some encouragement. But there might have been much that was hard to understand or interpret. How can we interpret it? One major resource we have is the rest of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Eugene Peterson points out that Revelation has 404 verses, there are 518 references to earlier Scriptures. John especially quotes from Ezekiel, Daniel, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah and Exodus. But Peterson argues that there's probably not a single Old Testament book to which John doesn't make at least some allusion.

So to understand the last of the 66 books of the Bible, we need to read the first 65. Peterson says "it makes no more sense to read the last book of the Bible apart from the entire scriptures than it does to read the last chapter of a novel and skip everything before it. So we will refer back to some of John's Old Testament references to help us interpret Revelation.

We will experience this today in the first vision of Jesus. I pray God will use it for His purposes among us today. So let us open our hearts to His Word as we come to it. Revelation 1:4-20.

Revelation 1:4-20 (ESV) (Page 867 – Pew bibles).

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

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. 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.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

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.

Last week we learned that Revelation is given to us in the form of an Apocalypse with Eschatology. It also includes prophecy and yet comes in the form of a letter. In verses 4-8, we find a somewhat normal introduction to a first century letter. John identifies himself as the author. Then he identifies the recipients. – the 7 churches in Asia. We will soon find out the exact identity of these churches. But notice the number 7. It will occur again and again in Revelation. It is a favorite number for John and in apocalyptic literature. It symbolized completeness or perfection. So the 7 churches were real individual churches. But these 7 may signify that this revelation was for the complete church.

Then John continues in the protocol of a 1st century letter by wishing a blessing on the recipients. “Grace to you and peace,” first “from him who was and is and is to come.” This unusual expression refers to God the Father. The way John states this in Greek violates Greek grammar rules. But it’s like he wants to grab the reader’s attention to stress the changelessness and eternity of God. The recipients were about to go through some terrible persecution. But John immediately reminds them that God is eternally existent without beginning or end.

So we have “Grace and Peace to you from God the Father who was and is and is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne.” Notice the number 7 again. Some commentators think this refers to the 7 archangels of Jewish tradition. Or maybe they’re 7 members of God’s crew or spiritual entourage. But I agree with commentators who see this as a unique way to describe the Holy Spirit. Seven again indicates perfection and completeness. Yet 7 could also indicate the broadness and expanse of the Holy Spirit. We could think of Him like having 7 modes of operation. We find something like this in Isaiah 11:2. This talks about the Servant of the Lord. It states “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 fear of the Lord.” So John could be giving this blessing from the Father and the Spirit described as a 7-fold spirit. But there’s one more person in the Trinity – the Son.

Here's where we begin to unpack the apocalyptic Jesus Christ. I have linked all descriptions found here on the back page of the bulletin so you'll have them. You might want to add a note or two about some of them. John can't seem to keep himself from describing Jesus in multiple ways. So he piles on descriptions wherever he can starting in verse 5.

Jesus is **The faithful witness (1:5)**. During his life, Jesus faced intense pressure to change his witness. The Pharisees and Sadducees wanted him to deny that he was Messiah. The Romans wanted him to deny that he was king of the Jews so they could let him go. His family wanted him to deny that he was a public figure so he could fulfill His responsibilities at home. But Jesus remained faithful to the truth. He would not deny His identity even at the cost of his life. In giving a revelation to people, it was very important that the witness giving it was faithful. Jesus was a faithful witness to death. And one commentator points out that all those called witnesses of Christ in Revelation suffer the penalty of death.

John also calls Jesus **The firstborn of the dead (1:5)**. That's a paradoxical phrase. Born and dead describe the same person. Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. The dead don't get born unless they get resurrected or reborn. In this phrase, John reminds his readers that though many of them will face death and may die in this persecution, that's not the end. They will follow the firstborn of the dead to be second born and on and on.

John also reminds his readers that Jesus is **The ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5)**. This might seem weird to those who living under the powerful Roman Empire. But it reminded them who was in charge and called them to remain faithful to the true king. Jesus is sovereign over all earthly powers then and now.

So John wishes us grace and peace from the Father – the one who was, is and is to come; the Spirit described as the seven spirits before the Father's throne and Jesus – the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead; the ruler of the kings of the earth. That would be a good introduction to a letter. Now John could move into the body of his letter. But John can't help himself. He goes on to describe Jesus further in pronouncing a blessing upon Jesus.

Jesus is the one (who) **He loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood (1:5)**. That's a part of Jesus we are most familiar with. Yet John wants to remind us of our redemption and release. "Freed" is literally loosed like releasing us from chains. That's what Christ did with his blood. It paid for our release from the chains of our sin.

Then John describes something Jesus did. **He made us a kingdom, priests to God the Father (1:6)**. Well that's an interesting way of putting it. What do we think of when we hear the word kingdom? Most often we think of a place or territory or a realm ruled over by a king. Here John says Jesus made us a kingdom. Here the kingdom consists of the

people of God. It is made up of those loosened from their sins through Christ's blood. So we make up part of the kingdom of God.

Jesus has also made us priests to God the Father. Every Christian is a priest. Just as the Israelites were called to be a nation of priests at Mount Sinai, Christians are called priests in the New Testament. God called his priests to live holy lives. But they also represented God to the people and the people to God. We live that out today when we speak the message of reconciliation to others. We also bring others to God in prayer.

Now John ends the blessing to Jesus by giving glory to Him. He states "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Him is Jesus because that phrase started with "to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood." Okay finally, we're done John. Let's get on with the vision.

No. John can't stop. He has to get one more thing in there about Jesus. Verse 7 - **He will come on the clouds and every eye will see him (1;7)**. Coming on the clouds is a loaded phrase. It goes back first to the glorious vision of the son of man in Daniel 7:13. Daniel states "I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man." The Jews understood this one to be a divine figure. What was Jesus' favorite self-designation – Son of Man. What does Jesus say will happen after the tribulation of those days? Matthew 24:30 – "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the son of man and 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." At Jesus' trial when the High Priest challenges Jesus by saying "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus responds in Matthew 26:64 – You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." The high priest tore his robes and they condemned Jesus to death. John uses the exact same language here to remind his readers that Jesus will return for all to see. Those who have rejected him will mourn for Judgment Day has arrived.

Then in verse 5 God speaks for one of the only times in Revelation. He declares I am the Alpha and Omega the one who was and is and is to come. So God emphasizes his own eternal nature that John refers to earlier. Finally, the introduction to the letter is done.

Finally in verse 9, John begins telling the story. One really cool feature about Revelation is that we get to walk through the visions with John. He doesn't just tell us what he saw. He narrates what happened and how he responded. John gives us the setting. He was on the island of Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. This

means he was there as some sort of punishment. He was exiled to Patmos, a small island off the coast of Ephesus. Likely, the governor sent John there in hopes that his influence would be reduced. John was likely quite old and respected. The governor may not have liked the optics of executing a respected older man. So John was on Patmos.

He was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. I take this to mean he was worshipping the Lord and open to Him on Sunday. The Lord's Day was an early Christian term for Sunday because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday. Suddenly, John hears behind him a loud voice like a trumpet. Trumpets are loud and clear. Trumpets are mentioned again and again in Revelation more often here than the rest of the New Testament put together. They are usually associated with last things.

The voice, who we will soon discover is Jesus, **He commissioned John to write down the revelation for the 7 churches (1:11)**. Jesus names the 7 churches. They follow the order in which a courier would travel from Patmos to the mainland. The Christians in these churches would be a small minority that faced persecution from mighty foes. From outward appearances it might have seemed hopeless. But John will pump them up with hope.

He will describe the one who spoke these words. We enter uncharted territory for the New Testament here. The Gospel writers do not tell us what Jesus looked like. But John will. Verse 12. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me and on turning I saw 7 lampstands (notice 7 again). Verse 13 – And in the midst of the lampstands one **Like a son of man (1:13)**. There's that designation son of man again. But here John seems to use this phrase to tell us a human like figure. Notice when describing Jesus' physical appearance, John has to use comparisons. He can't just describe Jesus' appearance. Though Jesus was human, He was more than human.

First, he tells us what Jesus wore. He was **Clothed with a long robe and a golden sash. (1:13)**. A robe reaching down to one's feet may have signified distinction. But the sash around his chest brings to mind the priest's clothes from the Old Testament. How appropriate for Jesus. He is the bridge between God and man. He presents us to God and God to us.

Then John tries to describe what Jesus looked like. His **Hair was white like wool and snow (1:14)**. White hair could indicate wisdom and the dignity of age. But another possibility is purity. Wool is not necessarily white. But when pure wool is white it is apparently very white. And John adds the comparison of snow. It brings to mind Isaiah 1:18 –

Come now let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

If white hair symbolizes purity **Eyes blazing like fire (1:14)** could mean purifying. As he stands among the lampstands, Jesus’ eyes see through facades or fakeness. This is the penetrating insight of one who is sovereign. His gaze penetrates us and purifies us. We cannot hide anything from Him.

Then John describes **Feet like burnished bronze refined in a furnace (1:15)**. This word translated burnished bronze is not found anywhere before this book. The context does not make clear what it means. It could be the alloy of copper and iron which makes bronze. Having gone through a furnace points to some sort of metal that has been purified. But whatever John specifically meant, it seems he wants to communicate these were feet of strength. The best comparison we have for something like this comes from Daniel with Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of an image in Daniel 2:32-45. Nebuchadnezzar sees an image or statue whose head was fine gold. Its chest and arms were silver; its middle and thighs were bronze; its legs were iron and its feet partly iron and partly clay. Then a stone strikes the image’s feet and the whole thing comes apart. Each metal symbolized a kingdom of decreasing strength until it reached the bottom – iron mixed with clay. So this statue had a weakness in its foundation. But Jesus has feet of burnished bronze and strength. He will not collapse or be brought down.

John then describes Jesus’ **Voice like the roar of many waters (1:15)**. It’s like Jesus’ voice had the roar of a great waterfall. He has a **Sharp two edged sword coming out of his mouth (1:16)**. This is a symbol for God’s Word. It divides, searches and lays open our lives. There likely was not a literal sword coming out of Jesus’ mouth. But His words were so striking and true that John can think of no better way to describe them.

Then John describes Jesus’ **Face shining like the sun full strength (1:16)**. We can’t look at the sun shining full strength. Yet this is Jesus in his unveiled glory. His face shines like the brightest sunniest day. You know the blessing I sometimes use at dedications from Numbers? May the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you.

Jesus reveals Himself as pure and purifying; Strong and stable with a mighty voice speaking profound words of truth while His face shines like the sun. John responds in the only way he can. “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though

dead.” This was not just an act of worship. It was the only response John felt appropriate in the presence of the all-powerful Christ. To keep standing before such a presence would be like blasphemy.

But Jesus then comes to comfort John. He touches him and says “Fear not.” It is such a familiar phrase from God to His people. He is with us and we need not fear. Then Jesus gives John and his readers more reasons for confidence. He is **The first and the last (1:17)**. Now back in verse 8, God speaks and says “I am the Alpha and Omega. Those are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. It means God is at the beginning and the end and everything in between. Now Jesus takes that divine title for himself. I am the first and last.

Then he reminds John and his readers who will face death threats, “I am **The living one - The one who died and lives forevermore (1:18)**. So though they may face death, Jesus has been through death. Though they may die, Jesus has died and now lives forever. The one they follow is life forever. In fact He **Holds the keys to Death and Hades (1:18)**. Hades was the place where departed spirits went. It is linked with death as an enemy throughout Revelation. In ancient mythology, both heaven and Hades connected to the earth by doors or gates. So whoever held the keys had great power. But Jesus declares He holds the keys. He is supreme over death. So even if these listeners would die, the Lord had the power to bring them out of this realm of the dead.

So Jesus encourages John who lays at his feet. Jesus is eternal – the first and the last. He himself died and yet now lives forevermore and he has the keys to Death and Hades. Then Jesus repeats the commission. “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.” This means that John will see things that are already – things that have happened or are happening. But he will also see things that are to come.

The vision concludes with Jesus doing some interpretation for us. Remember He stands in the midst of 7 lampstands holding 7 stars in his right hand. **In the midst of 7 golden lampstands holding 7 stars in his right hand. (1:12,13, 16, 20)** (Notice the 7’s again). He tells us the 7 lampstands are the 7 churches. So this is a beautiful image of Christ standing in the midst of the churches. He is present with the churches regardless of their strengths or weaknesses. The seven stars represent the seven angels of the churches. What are these angels? They could be human messengers or leaders in the church. They could be actual angels designated to each church. Or they could be the spirit of the churches – like the personification of the church’s spirit. Jesus will direct the message he has to the angel of each church. But regardless of the interpretation, Jesus stands among the churches and is authoritative over the seven angels.

This is the first vision of Christ in Revelation. It provides us with a picture of Christ that goes way beyond a carpenter walking around Galilee with some dense fisherman. Not only is He the suffering servant, friend, shepherd and load bearer. He is all that is described or portrayed in this passage.

But how might this vision make a difference in our lives this week? Well John Newton the former slave trader and author of Amazing Grace provides us with a great approach. Tony Reinke writes “Throughout his writings, Newton is eager to remind his readers of this one essential core conviction about the Christian life: beholding the glory of Christ rouses joy, empowers obedience, and transforms the Christian into the image of Christ.” Behold the glory of Christ. Keep your focus on Christ. Newton writes “If I may speak my own experience, I find that to keep my eye simply upon Christ as my peace and my life is by far the hardest part of my calling.” Now look at whatever you’re facing in life with this Christ by your side – on your side and working on your behalf. Whether you’ve had an ordinary week, difficult week or wonderful week, this apocalyptic vision of Jesus Christ can give you hope and motivation for obedience and holiness. I want to close today by giving you some time to respond to something that Christ has said to you. Or maybe some aspect of His character or actions here has spoken to you. You need to respond with praise or repentance or blessing. So will you come to Jesus and respond to who He has revealed Himself to be – then I will close our time in prayer.