

REVELATION

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES



JANUARY BIBLE STUDY 2019 • LEADER GUIDE

 **LifeWay**
Biblical Solutions for Life

From the Editor

This January Bible Study 2019 Expository Notes and Leader Helps is intended to help those who will teach JBS. Included in this guide are:

Teaching Plans—The teaching plans, beginning on page 3, are designed for eight sessions using the 2019 January Bible Study Personal Study Guide, *Revelation 1–3: The Letters to the Seven Churches*. The table of contents shows how the chapters in the Personal Study Guide are distributed among the eight sessions.

The Personal Study Guide (PSG) has been designed as a teaching resource. Each adult will need his or her own PSG. Each teaching plan suggests ways a teacher can use the PSG during the session.

A variety of questions and learning activities in the PSG will help readers understand and apply the Scriptures to their lives. An alternate plan for teaching this study could consist of short lectures combined with small- or large-group discussion of the questions and learning activities.

Expository Notes—The expository notes, beginning on page 23, provide in-depth commentary for a teacher's use.

Preaching Guide—The preaching guide, beginning on page 75, provides sermon outlines and ideas for the pastor who wishes to emphasize the theme of JBS 2019 from the pulpit.

CD-ROM—The CD-ROM included with this book contains everything in this Leader Guide as well as additional teaching helps such as teaching items, PowerPoint® backgrounds, clip art, *Biblical Illustrator* articles, and planning and promotion ideas.

Do you ever wonder what to do with all this material when January Bible Study is over? Here are some suggestions: Conduct a weekly Bible study for business people or stay-at-home mothers. Conduct a weeknight study for apartment dwellers, mobile home residents, or language or ethnic groups. Or conduct a weekend retreat for singles, students, or an Adult Sunday School class.

Whatever you do in JBS, we pray that these materials will enhance this study and that lives will be changed as a result.

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Life By Design

We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make life work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him (Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1).

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity (Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23).

We need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for

us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God (John 3:16; Colossians 2:14; and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction (Mark 1:15; Ephesians 2:8-9; and Romans 10:9).

When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity (Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10).

Now that you have heard this good news, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

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TEACHING PLANS





TEACHING PLAN

Session 1

YOUR NOTES

The Majestic Glory of Father and Son

Revelation 1:1-20

Before the Session:

a. Read the introduction and chapter 1 of the Personal Study Guide (pp. 4-20) and the introduction and Expository Notes on Revelation 1 in this Leader Guide (pp. 24-31).

b. Write on a large writing surface or project onto a screen the words *disclosure* and *unveiling* (Step 1). Have the words displayed as adults arrive.

c. From the CD-ROM, prepare to project on a screen **Teaching Item 1: Seven Churches Map** to use in Step 1. For Step 5, print and make copies from the CD-ROM of **Teaching Item 2: Son of Man**.

d. Provide a Personal Study Guide for each participant. Make available extra Bibles and writing instruments.

Leading the Session:

1. As learners arrive, call attention to the displayed words *disclosure* and *unveiling*. Ask adults to name reasons we might have for keeping something hidden from view. Then call for a volunteer to read the first paragraph of the Introduction on page 4 of the Personal Study Guide, that begins with “The very first word of this remarkable book is *apocalupsis*.” Note that the purpose of this unveiling was to encourage the church and help them understand what lay ahead. Stress that from beginning to end, the book is about Jesus Christ and His ultimate triumph over all evil.

Summarize the information under the Introduction in the Personal Study Guide (p. 4) to describe the persecution and dangers believers faced during the days when John was writing this book. Project on a screen **Teaching Item 1: Seven Churches Map** (and direct attention to the map on Personal Study Guide p. 97). Use **A Closer Look** in the Personal Study Guide (pp. 19-20) to describe Asia Minor—what is known about its culture and geography during Bible times. Note John’s location on the map, in exile on the Isle of Patmos, as he wrote the words of this book. John was living in a time when the government and the culture were hostile toward believers and the gospel message.

Encourage learners to complete the **Living in a Hostile Culture** learning activity in the Personal Study Guide (p. 11). Call for volunteers to share their responses. Read these sentences from the Expository Notes (p. 26) that describe the early recipients of John’s writing: “Followers of Christ were rejected by government, religious leaders, the community, and often their own family members. Hearing that God had a plan must have been a great comfort to them.” Ask: *How is it a comfort to us today, hearing that God has a plan?* Encourage learners to think about the plan God had for the believers at each of the seven churches, as we work our way through this study.

2. Write on the board: *Close at hand* and *A long way off*. Invite a volunteer to read Revelation 1:1-3. Point out that John lived and wrote with the expectation that

the time is near (v. 3) for Jesus to return. Note that in the way we measure time, Jesus' return was a long way off from the day John wrote these words because today we are still waiting for His return. Use the information in the Expository Notes (p. 28) to explain the Greek word *kairos* used in verse 3. Explore what it means to live with expectancy that Christ's return is near.

Call attention to this text in the Personal Study Guide (p. 12): "The expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ has always dominated the hope of believers. When the return of Christ is relegated to some distant future, we rob our faith of its vitality and our witness of its urgency. It is the anticipation of the soon return of Jesus Christ that creates passion and urgency within believers." Ask: *As believers, how should we live, showing our expectation that Jesus is returning soon? As believers, how does it impact our attitudes and actions when we view Christ's return as some far-off event? How should the urgency of Christ's return impact the ways that we live and serve?* After allowing time for responses, stress that when we live with the expectation of His return, we will be much better witnesses in sharing the gospel message.

3. Invite a volunteer to read Revelation 1:4-8. Refer again to **Teaching Item 1: Seven Churches Map** so learners can see each church's location in relation to Patmos where John was living when he wrote these words. Direct attention to verse 4 and the words, **the seven churches in Asia**. Use the Expository Notes (p. 28) to briefly describe the two viewpoints about the seven churches described in chapters 1-3: (1) that the seven churches represented certain church ages throughout history or, (2) that the seven churches were addressed to particular churches that John knew, but that the message was intended for the whole church. Point out that with either view, we

can learn from the churches as we think about how these biblical truths can be applied in our lives and our church today.

Call attention to the verse 4 words, **the one who is, who was, and who is to come**. Ask: *What do we learn about God from this verse? In what ways do these words express confidence and power?* Next direct attention to the words, **the seven spirits before his throne**. Call for a volunteer to read the paragraph in the Personal Study Guide (p. 12) that begins "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the dominant Person"

Invite learners to silently read verses 5-8 and name aloud the details they find describing Jesus in these verses. Ask: *What do we learn about Jesus from these verses?* Supplement the discussion with information from the Expository Notes (pp. 28-30). Note that with the mention of Jesus Christ in verse 5 (God the Father and the Holy Spirit were mentioned in verse 4), John highlighted the Trinity's involvement in the Revelation. Point out that with the title **Alpha and the Omega**, Jesus was declaring His eternal nature. In an apocalyptic book like Revelation, Jesus was helping to shore up our faith and letting us know He is in control.

Direct attention to **We Know How It Ends!** learning activity in the Personal Study Guide (p. 13) and lead the group to discuss their responses to it. Ask: *How does knowing how it ends help us as we face struggles and challenges in living for Christ today?* Read this sentence from the Expository Notes (p. 30), "The one who is going to bring history to a conclusion is one we want to trust knows everything from beginning to end." Declare that we can step confidently toward the future knowing the One who holds the future in His hands.

4. Transition by asking: *What are the kinds of things we might say when we are introducing ourselves to someone who*

YOUR NOTES

doesn't know us? Encourage learners to listen for how John introduced himself. Call for a volunteer to read verses 9-11. Ask: *How did John describe himself in verse 9?* Note that John knew by first-hand experience the persecution that believers were experiencing. Using details in the Expository Notes (p. 30), briefly explain what John meant when he wrote that he **was in the Spirit on the Lord's day**. Stress that John experienced "a kind of spiritual contact with the Holy Spirit that could only be deemed as supernatural. On the day of worship, John was experiencing something utterly different from normal human communications" (Expository Notes, p. 30). This helps us better understand all that follows in the rest of the book.

Note that the seven churches are briefly mentioned in verse 11. Call attention to the section titled, "**The Letters to the Seven Churches,**" beginning on Personal Study Guide page 15, and encourage learners to read the information about the churches before next session's study. Note that understanding the culture, geography, and challenges surrounding each church helps us as we study the words Christ proclaimed to each church in chapters 2 and 3.

5. Distribute copies of **Teaching Item 2: Son of Man**. Encourage learners to silently read Revelation 1:12-20 and find these descriptions of the Son of Man, who is Jesus. Record the verse number in the blank beside the description on Teaching Item 2. Then invite a volunteer to read the verses aloud. Call for two more volunteers to read aloud Matthew 17:2 and Daniel 7:13-14. Explore the similar language used in these three Scripture passages.

Using the information in the Expository Notes (pp. 30-31), lead the group to talk about the meaning of the descriptions of Jesus in verses 12-20. Ask: *What was John's response when he saw this vision of Jesus? What might your response be if*

you saw something like this? How does reading a description of Jesus like this one encourage us to want to worship Him?

Call attention to verse 17 and note John's initial reaction to this vision—he fell **like a dead man**. Also note Jesus' first words to John here—**Don't be afraid**. Point out that *don't be afraid* (or similar words: *fear not, be not afraid*, etc.) appear numerous times in the Old and New Testaments. Invite learners to read verse 18 silently. Then ask: *What reason did Jesus give for why John did not need to be afraid? How does having Jesus in our lives help us with the fears we face today?* Read this sentence from the Expository Notes (p. 31), "Nothing is outside of Jesus' sovereignty." Ask: *How was the fact of Jesus' sovereignty a source of comfort for believers at the time Revelation was written? For believers today?*

Call attention to verses 19-20, key verses in this chapter. Explain that **Write what you have seen, what is ...** refers to what will unfold in chapters 2 and 3. With verse 19, John set the stage for the rest of our study. State that some think these three phrases in verse 19 refer to dispensations of world history and church history, while others say it was simply John's way of recording the divine revelation unfolding before him. Ask: *What have you discovered in Revelation 1 that gives you hope for today?*

Between now and the next session, encourage learners to reflect on John's vision of the risen Lord as we prepare to examine the seven churches and hear what God is saying to us through the messages to these churches.

EXPOSITORY NOTES





EXPOSITORY NOTES

Introduction

YOUR NOTES

Introduction to Revelation 1–3

Imagine living among the first generation of Christians in the Roman Empire, facing difficulties in many sectors of life. The Jewish Christians were considered traitors to their own ethnicity and to the traditions of their religion. The Roman government was perpetually offended as Christians declared “Jesus is Lord.” To the governing authorities, it was both a mystery and criminally treasonous to refer to an executed rabbi and traveling magician as “Lord” when only Caesar was to hold that title. Then, there was simply everyone else. The majority of people were polytheists (the belief that there are many gods), and the thought of a one, true God arriving on the earth, living as a man, and dying for our misdeeds was laughable. None of their gods cared that much about mortals.

It was into this culture flood that Christianity was born and began to thrive. By the time we come to the final book of the Bible, the apostles had been scattered and most had died. But they had used the forced relocations as missionary opportunities. Everywhere they went, they preached the gospel, fulfilled the compassion ethic of Jesus, and planted churches. While they ministered, however, our first-century brothers and sisters also suffered.

Living with the End in Mind

Revelation is the one apocalyptic book of the New Testament. Though that sounds a bit overwhelming to tackle, it is an encouraging book to the church. In giving us this “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1), we see in dramatic detail how God worked in the church, can give us endurance to keep working, and embolden believers to live faithfully until the end.

Grant Osborne noted “that Revelation is composed of three genres: apocalyptic, prophecy, and letter.”¹ Even noting these three styles in this book helps us to keep life in perspective. John was sending letters of instruction to individual congregations that help all of us in maintaining faithfulness to Christ. But the living we do in the “here and now” is never separated from what is going to come in the “by-and-by.” Our present living is given context through understanding the eternal realities of God’s sovereignty and His eventual work to close the books on our current history.

It has been a natural tendency for us to study, teach, write, and preach about Revelation through the lens of what will happen to us in the future. After all, it has the apocalyptic details of dragons, beasts, streets of clear gold, bowls of wrath, and a portrait of the eternal home for the saints. So, over the centuries, the church has developed various interpretations for the prophecies held in the book.

But Osborne again helps bring some context to the overall study of this sometimes-dizzying book. He wrote, “The value of this identification cannot be overstated—it helps the reader to realize that the book is not just a casebook for identifying future events but more a theological workbook addressing the church in the present through the prophecies of the future.”² By seeing the letter-writing feature of the book, the church is taught to live out its present in view of the future. With victory secured in Christ, in the cross, and in the future time of judgment, believers can press into their current lives with bold faith.

Author, Date, and Place of Writing

The authorship of Revelation was assumed to be the apostle John in the early portion of the church. But beginning in the third century, Dionysius of Alexandria and various other church leaders throughout church history have questioned the apostle John as the author. The arguments against his authorship include internal items such as the Greek grammar and external elements such as the presence of other prominent church leaders who also carried the name John.

However, the witness of the early church along with other strong arguments for authorship by the apostle John, son of Zebedee, are weighty enough for us to rely upon. We can find a number of ties in vocabulary and syntax with the other books by John within the New Testament.³ Thomas wrote about the issue: “the fact remains that the case for the authorship of the Apocalypse by the apostle John rests solidly on the near-unanimous testimony of the early church and a significant body of internal data that liken it to John’s other NT books.”⁴

With this work proceeding with the position that the apostle John was the author, we turn our attention to the date and place of its writing. In 1:9 we read, “I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction, kingdom, and endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Thus John clearly identified Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea, as the place of writing. Not so clearly seen in the words of this book but determined by context and history is the date, most likely somewhere around AD 95 during the persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian.

Persevering in the Faith

One of the great themes of the book and of our study is that of persevering. As John wrote the book, he did so while suffering as a prisoner in exile. We have a tendency to dramatize the early church leaders in our mind in a way that does not reflect their reality. John was elderly and subject to the harsh conditions of a penal colony separated from the mainland. He was alone and likely had a difficult time fending for himself. It is into such a scenario that God graced us with the Book of Revelation that encourages us to persevere.

As we give attention to the first three chapters of this lengthy letter, we’ll observe that perseverance is both a command and a promise. God knows that the work of perseverance can never be completed by sheer human determination. Not even after our salvation can we be strong enough to endure by our own willpower, emotional strength, or mental discipline. Instead, we need God’s very presence and filling in our lives. Thus, the book begins with a description of the glorified Christ working in the midst of the church. The perseverance called for can be guaranteed for us because of Jesus’ presence with us. As God spoke through John to the seven churches in Asia, they were both confronted and challenged to remain faithful. The call for their repentance was the kindness of God to remind them of their allegiance to Christ.

1. Grant R. Osborne, “Revelation” in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. Robert L. Thomas gives an excellent and detailed overview of these arguments for the apostle John’s authorship due to vocabulary, syntax, and concepts in his book *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1992), 11-17.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.



EXPOSITORY NOTES

Revelation 1:1-20

YOUR NOTES

The Majestic Glory of Father and Son

Dystopian futures and apocalyptic stories have always been popular to write and tell. It seems there has been a resurgence in this genre over the last few years. Series of novels, television shows, and movie franchises have been built around various forms of the future. Story arcs normally go horribly wrong for humanity and culture as a whole. Within the last few years, we've been inundated with stories of colonies fighting against one another (like *The Hunger Games* trilogy) or zombie apocalypses (like *The Walking Dead* television show). It is common that our man-made apocalyptic stories reveal the evil within our hearts and how humanity works to destroy itself. So we write our stories with a twinge of hope in a band of heroes who will save the day.

The biblical apocalypse we find in the Book of the Revelation is the answer to our fears and gives a perfect portrait of our hopes. Within so many stories we write, tell, and televise, there is a hero. It is the character who, by some stroke of luck or by the building of a coalition, defeats evil so the oppressed can be liberated. All of our dreamt-up heroes are mere shadows of the one, true hero: Jesus Christ. In the first chapter of Revelation, we are given a mysterious vision of our hero and how He works to bring righteousness to His people.

Prologue (1:1-3)

When we come to this book, it opens unlike others. The very first words set it apart as it asserts its claim to be **the revelation of Jesus Christ**. The word *revelation* can just as easily be translated as *apocalypse*. It communicates multiple meanings for us. It is a revealing of the true nature of Jesus Christ to us. As we study John's message, we are going to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of Jesus. The book is not just about the means God uses to bring about judgment and restoration. It is an unveiling of the nature and character of God the Son.

The word *revelation* also gives a sense of finality. An apocalypse brings a revelation not to be taken lightly as God showed His servants **what must soon take place**. The early recipients would read a connotation of decisiveness and destruction into what would come next. This apocalyptic revelation still tells Christians what will happen next. It is a word to the church that God is active in the world, and that He has a plan. The early believers needed this message because of the persecution they suffered from so many sectors of society. The Roman Empire saw the Christians as usurpers who served a lord other than Caesar. The Jewish leaders saw them as heretics who had abandoned the faith to follow after a disgraced rabbi. Plus, the general public constantly misunderstood what it meant to be a Christian. Followers of Christ were rejected by government, religious leaders, the community, and often their own family members. Hearing that God had a plan must have been a great comfort to them. It can equally be a great comfort to believers in this era as we wait for God's restorative work in the world.

The prologue tells us how John received this astounding word. God delivered an **angel** who would communicate with John. It is important to remember that an angel is a messenger of God's truth. Angels do not invent or originate the truth but are sent to convey it. The inclusion of this detail regarding an angelic means of delivering truth continues to

**Modern-day port
of Patmos from the
entrance to the cave
of the Apocalypse.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB
SCHATZ (28/1/11)



provide a boundary marker for us to understand John's role as well. John was bearing a witness to what was given to him. He received from the angel what the angel received from the Lord. John's authorship for this book is listed in the first verse. It is reminiscent of how he is described in the Gospel of John. We read there, "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). John was committed to testifying **to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ**. John faithfully recorded the words and the evidence of what must soon take place.

In light of receiving this revelation from God through John, a promise was given to those who both hear it and heed it. Verse 3 promises those who hear and obey will be **blessed**. A blessing associated with an apocalypse was a distinguishing mark to this book at the time it was delivered. It closely relates to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; specifically the section we call the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. There are two categories of people who will be blessed according to Revelation 1:3: the reader and the obedient hearer. It was common in ancient times for an elder or lay leader to publicly read such a letter to the congregation. Delivering such a message would most definitely be a blessed or happy occasion. Reading it showed faith and faithfulness to deliver what would prove to be a deep and mysterious word from God. But the hearer who obeyed would also be blessed. "These two concepts, hearing and keeping, are combined frequently in both OT and NT. In fact, the Hebrew word for 'hear' also means to 'obey'; the two concepts are inseparable biblically."¹

The press for why hearing and heeding the revelation is so important is because of timing. The reader is told that **the time is near**. In general, the Greek language used two terms for the concept of time: either *chronos* or *kairos*. *Chronos* represented the actual passing of seconds, minutes, hours, and so on. But here, John used *kairos*, indicating an occasion or a season. The time that is near is not just a spot on the calendar but a season of time that holds great significance. Thus, all that will follow is worthy of careful attention and obedience.

Salutation and Doxology (1:4-8)

John made a specific statement that the book was being delivered **to the seven churches in Asia**. With this phrase, numerous doctrines regarding the end times have been launched. The seven churches that received a letter in chapters 2-3 are all historic churches. They existed in Asia (in the region of modern-day Turkey), and John would have been familiar with them. However, they were not the only churches at the time, as we have evidence from the various New Testament epistles. Within our modern eschatology (the doctrine of last things), there are generally two schools of thought about John's addressing these seven churches. One is that the seven churches selected represent certain church ages throughout history. "For example, Ephesus would represent prophetically the apostolic period until the Decian persecution (A.D. 250), followed by Smyrna, which represents the church of martyrdom extending until the time of Constantine (A.D. 316)."² A second viewpoint is that seven is not a sacred number indicating future church ages. Rather, these are seven churches that show a "diversity within a basic unity" and though the "revelation was addressed in particular to seven churches known to him [John], its message was also for the whole church in general."³ Though there are various end-time doctrines, the basis of many of them stem from how these letters are applied to the immediate context of John or to a future time. Regardless of your view, it is critical that we move through the letters that will be delivered with a view of how the biblical truths can be applied to the believers of today.

John highlighted the authorship of the book in a threefold fashion. First, this revelation is from God, and He is described as **the one who is, who was, and who is to come**.

The phrase stands as the strong reminder of God's self-existence and sovereign position over creation. The combination of these phrases adds to the power of this book, giving us confidence that God knows what will happen in the future state of our world. He was there at the beginning, we have confidence of His presence with us now, and He will be with us when the whole of human history comes to a close.

The Revelation was also coming **from the seven spirits before his throne**. This phrase has carried various interpretations. It can refer to the fullness of the Holy Spirit's presence (as seen in 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). The number seven is often seen as indicating completeness, so this could be a nuanced statement about the important nature of the Spirit's role in this special revelation. The phrase has also been associated with the idea of the angels of the seven churches from 1:20; often interpreted as the pastors of the seven Asian churches. One other viewpoint is that the seven spirits are angels accompanying the work of God. The first of these three viewpoints would seem to carry the most weight in view of the context of this book, along with the other prophetic literature of the Bible.

The third originator of this revelatory message is **from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth**. With this third descriptor, John has given a rounded-out view of the Trinity's involvement in the Revelation. The Father is positioned as the eternal One, the Spirit is shown in fullness, and now the Son of God is included in the authorship. But we should not too quickly move past the concept of **witness** within the description. Jesus is the epitome of a **faithful witness** that all believers should emulate. Throughout the book as a whole, the reader views the trustworthy work of the Savior as He brings about the end of all things. In the letters to the seven churches, it is to His steady sovereignty that believers owe their allegiance. The work that Jesus has done reveals His kingly disposition toward us as that of love and of desire to liberate us from our sin debt. In Christ, freedom is available for the person of faith, and it sets our thinking clear on the calls to faithfulness that will be received in the seven letters.

The recipients of the book are going to receive a set of shocking messages. Some of the individual churches will receive devastating rebukes, so it is within the nature of God's character to give an encouraging word first. They were reminded that Jesus **made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father**. The work of Christ was not to put His people in a neutral position. Our salvation does not simply wipe out a debt, but it causes us to have a new identity. Our commitments are transferred from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God. Within our new citizenship, we are now those who speak for God in the world (giving out the gospel) and speaking to God on behalf of those in need (intercessory prayer). The priestly role is a sacred trust that God has given to all believers.

Because of His redemptive work, Jesus deserves to be worshiped in the most excessive fashion possible. He has made us into something completely new; from enemies of God to **priests** in His kingdom. It is for this and so much more that God deserves the declaration we find at the end of verse 6. He deserves for us to declare His **glory and dominion forever and ever** for His character and His redemptive work. John stated that Jesus has both **set us free from our sins by his blood** and **he is coming with the clouds** to bring mourning to those who have persecuted Him. The Lord will arrive to reward the believer and judge the unbeliever.

Then we come to God's personal declaration that reinforces what was said in verse 4. God personally stated, **"I am the Alpha and the Omega ... the one who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."** This underscores the eternal nature of God. When we come into contact with an apocalyptic book, we don't want to think that the author or the main

character is lacking in any way. We want to trust that the one who is going to bring history to a conclusion also knows everything from beginning to end. We want the assurance that sovereign control has been executed over it all. By emphasizing this point, receiving the passages to follow shore up our faith rather than undermine it. Knowing that God is who He says He is makes the journey of faith and faithfulness much easier.

The Son of Man and the Churches (1:9-20)

John gave a bit of insight into his circumstances while writing the book (v. 9). He was a member of the church who was personally persecuted by the legal authorities of the Roman Empire and sentenced to live in the penal colony on the island of Patmos. He reminded the readers that he was a **partner** to them **in the affliction, kingdom, and endurance that are in Jesus**. Because he was willing to testify about Jesus, he had suffered. But it was with faith in God's sustaining power that John continued to remain steadfast. He had known the spectrum of experience with Jesus from first-hand relationship to the affliction heaped upon him. Yet we find John devoted to the Lord in such a measure that he was caught up **in the Spirit** and in a spiritual experience that delivered this book to the rest of us in the church. What comes next in the first chapter is an unveiling of the work of Christ going on for the believers in the world.

First came the announcement to John through a heavenly voice so pronounced that it sounded **like a trumpet**. At the moment of this revelation to John, he was **in the Spirit on the Lord's day**. In this moment, God had brought John into a kind of spiritual contact with the Holy Spirit that could only be deemed as supernatural. On the day of worship, John was experiencing something utterly different from normal human communications. His natural senses could never perceive what his spirit would be exposed to through the work of the Holy Spirit. The description that he **heard a loud voice ... like a trumpet** is an image of overwhelming importance. Throughout both this book of the Bible, other books of the Bible, and in the ancient world, the sound of a trumpet would indicate the announcement from a governing authority or the approach of a military force. It was a signal to John and to the recipients of the book that a message was being received that should be obeyed.

God then told John that he would receive a message that was to be given **to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea**. As we progress through this study, each letter will be studied and the city in which the church resided will receive a bit of an overview as well. Taken as a whole, these cities could have been traveled to in the order they are presented here. They were "situated on a great circular road that tied together the most populous, wealthy, and influential part of the Asian province, the west-central part."⁴ The message in its immediate context was addressed to congregations that needed the calls to faithfulness from Jesus and had potential influence.

John's reaction to receiving the reverberating message was the same as anyone would have: he **turned to see** who gave it. It was of course the Lord who was **one like the Son of Man**. The title points to Daniel 7:13-14 where the same title is used and linked to the "Ancient of Days" who rules everything. Jesus has received an everlasting kingdom. The imagery of this man is used again in Daniel 10 with numerous connections to the descriptions in Revelation 1.

John found himself looking at a vision of Jesus moving about the scene of **seven golden lampstands**. The lampstands represent churches (see Rev. 1:20). In particular, it likely makes reference to the seven churches about to receive specific communiqués to them. However, as seven often symbolizes the idea of completion, the verse also can

indicate that Jesus is moving about the church as a whole. The dress of Jesus is a long robe with a **golden sash wrapped around his chest**. In His glorified state, we are watching Him in priestly garb. Perhaps even alluding to the dress of the High Priest as recorded in Exodus 28:4.

The physical appearance of Jesus shows His glory and power. White hair and eyes of fire along with feet that appear to be like burnished bronze from a furnace all indicate the purity or holiness of Jesus. He is most definitely in His glorified state. Even His voice is distinct from that of a human as it is **like the sound of cascading waters** and is accompanied by a **sharp double-edged sword coming from his mouth**. Similar to the description of the trumpet-like volume (v. 10), John was describing Jesus' presence as awe-inspiring, both to him and to us. His final descriptor is that of the radiance of Jesus' very face **shining like the sun** at midday. In every way possible, from His hair to His feet, the presence of Jesus is extraordinary. It should propel us into worshipping Him. That was John's reaction in such a manner that he fell in an almost dead-like state before the Son of God. The comforting reaction of Jesus can cause us to love Him even more. The King of glory touched the shoulder of the old apostle who was exiled for his faith.

The first personal words of Jesus to John are, **Don't be afraid**. It is a moment unlike any other for John. Throughout the Bible, the call to be strong and not to fear begins early, with God speaking to Moses in Exodus 14:13. Moses shared that message with Joshua (Deut. 31:7). We see the message carry through the Old Testament for those who are faithful. Jesus Himself used a similar statement with the apostles in Matthew 14:27 when He came to their boat by walking on the water. Then, in Revelation 1:17, the Lord delivered to John this message once again. Jesus could say this because He can truthfully say **I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades**. Nothing is outside of Jesus' sovereignty.

Revelation 1 ends with the directive to John to **write what you have seen, what is, and what will take place after this**. Some take the three phrases as a matrix for the dispensations of world history and church history. Others interpret it simply as John's recording the divine revelation that was being given to him. In either case, Jesus directs for this apocalyptic vision to be recorded for the rest of the church so that the churches—both the specific seven to receive letters and the church universal—would benefit from God's gracious self-revelation to us.

1. Grant R. Osborne, "Revelation" in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002) 58.
2. Alan Johnson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 12 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) 419.
3. George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972) 24.
4. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992) 94-95.