



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Text Revelation 1:9-20

Revelation

“A Portrait of Christ”

TRANSCRIPT

We are in our third study in the book of Revelation. We're in chapter 1, and we're going to finish the chapter as we look at this magnificent vision that John had of Christ, look at verses 9 through 20; Revelation 1 beginning with verse 9:

“I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because 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 the sound of a trumpet,

saying, ‘Write in a book what you see, 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 with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands;

and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.

His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire.

His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.

In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.

As for the mystery of the seven stars which 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.’”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank you for this Lord’s day, when we have the opportunity to look at this vision that John received on the Lord’s day. And Father, we pray you bless us as we study it, and we gain a sense of the majesty that impressed John, what he saw. Give us a sense of it, and help us to understand the meaning of that vision, and certainly to understand that we have a living Savior, who is glorious and powerful, who holds us in his hand.

That’s a truth that should give us great encouragement in this world in which we live, which is a dangerous world. And yet what danger can touch us if we are in the Savior’s hand? Only that which he allows; only that which he purposes for our good and his glory, and your glory. And so, Father, we thank you for this text of Scripture, and this vision that you gave your apostle, and pray that you bless it to our understanding and our edification.

Encourage us with it and build us up in the faith. May that be the result of our time of study and worship together this morning. And Father, we pray for other ministries that go on in this assembly. We thank you for those that minister throughout the week. Pray for the ladies’ ministries this week, and the other ministries that take place, and ministries that go beyond this city.

We pray for Mike and Jane Gendron as they go abroad; pray that you bless their ministry in Central America. We pray for the tape ministry, the radio ministry, and we thank you for those that serve you in that capacity, and work behind the scenes, and don’t get the attention that others do who stand behind a lectern or in a pulpit, but whose ministry is very important.

Thank you for those that work in the nursery, and in other areas of the church, who do important work – secretaries, and maintenance personnel, those who work and volunteer in so many areas, Father. We thank you for their service, and pray you’d bless it. Bless the outreach of this church. Bless the outreach here this morning within the walls of this church that we’d be built up in the faith spiritually.

We pray for our needs materially; they are great. We think of those that are sick, and some whose names are listed for us on the list of prayer requests face great difficulty, and are struggling with serious illness. We pray for them, and pray you’d give healing mercy, certainly give encouragement to them and to their families; and Father, help all to look to you –to set their hearts on the one who’s on the throne, who is in control.

Our triune God, who’s given us glorious promises and assurances that in the end, everything will work to our good. We have trouble seeing how that’s possible sometimes, and yet that’s what you promise us, and we live by faith, not by sight. So strengthen their faith, and strengthen the faith of all of us, Father, because the day will come when we all go through the valley, and we must face difficulties.

So prepare us for that through our time of study. In this hour we pray that you’d build us up in the faith, strengthen us, equip us to live lives of faithful service to you. May this be a time of instruction and a time of edification, a time of strengthening. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] For nearly 2,000 years, people have wondered what Jesus looked like. And for much of that time, there have been no lack of artists who have given us their ideas. Museums and galleries and cathedrals all over the world are filled with paintings and statues and etchings and frescoes of Christ, from the cradle to the cross and beyond. He’s been portrayed in all kinds of ways, from a dour, gloomy figure in the Middle Ages to a happy, athletic type in modern times.

The fact is, of course, we don’t know what Jesus looked like. The closest thing we have to a description of his physical appearance in the Bible is Isaiah 53:2. Isaiah said that he would be like a root out of dry ground, and have no stately form or majesty. Now, that is Christ in his incarnation. That’s Christ in his earthly life, the Christ of the gospels, but John got a very different look at the Savior, and it was an amazing sight.

Jesus was standing among the golden lampstands, shining like the sun. John records it in the second half of chapter 1 of the book of Revelation. It is a portrait of the

glorified Christ, and John gives it to us in verses 12 through 20. But first he tells us why he wrote the book, and how and when and where he got the vision.

He writes in verse 9 that he was on the island called Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Patmos is a small, rocky, crescent-shaped island in the Aegean Sea, on the southwest coast of Turkey. It’s about ten miles long, and at its widest point, about five miles in width. It was used by the Romans as a penal colony where political prisoners were banished and sentenced to hard labor in the quarries.

The Roman authorities evidently believed that John’s preaching was somewhat seditious. Maybe they thought that he was a threat to emperor worship in the region of Asia, and so they exiled him to this island. He identifies himself with the persecuted. He introduces himself as a brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus.

Now, the order of those three I think is important; the tribulation, the kingdom, and the perseverance. The day of tribulation is part of the present. The blessings of the kingdom are in the future, so until the kingdom comes, in the present we need perseverance. But that perseverance is only in Jesus. He is the model of it. We look at his life and we can see how we are to live our lives in the midst of trial and tribulation.

He lived it perfectly, as the perfect model and standard for us. He faced all kinds of difficulty; faced the greatest trials. He was faithful to the end – the faithful witness, as John has called him. He’s the model of this perseverance, but also he’s the source of it. We cannot persevere on our own strength. We must persevere. We have the standard of it. But the only way we can do it is through him, in him, in the power that he gives.

As he told the disciples at the end of his farewell discourse, or the upper room discourse in John 16:33, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage – I have overcome the world.” He’s overcome it for us. I mean he not only gives us the example of how to overcome it, but having done so, he’s done that, as I say, for us, and he promises that he will give us overcoming power. We have that in him.

And we’ll need it, because if we speak the Word and have a testimony for Christ, as John did, then we, too, may very well be banished. Maybe not to some barren island in the Aegean, but banished from friends, or even from family. That’s not uncommon. You cannot be open and vocal and clear about your faith, even in the most tactful and pleasant way – and we certainly should express our faith in a tactful and pleasant way.

But even so, even giving the best form of testimony, we cannot give it clearly without in some way, at some time, turning some people against us. But if that happens, and if we are banished, as it were, from family and friends, we have better family and friends as a result. John, you’ll notice, doesn’t call himself “your apostle.” He calls himself “your brother.” The Lord has put us in his family, with better brothers and sisters and friends than the world could ever provide.

In verse 10, John tells us that it all happened on a Sunday, on the Lord’s day, when he was in the Spirit. Maybe he was in the Spirit something like the trance that Peter was in when he was on the rooftop of the house of Simon the tanner in Acts 10:10, and he has that magnificent vision of the sheet coming down from heaven. Or perhaps the condition that Paul was in when he was caught up into the third heaven.

John says that in this state, in the Spirit, he heard coming from behind him a loud voice, a clear voice, like a trumpet. The words and command were unmistakable. They’re given in verse 11: “Write in a book what you see, 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.”

So this book isn’t John’s idea. He didn’t write it because he saw some need to give encouragement to the persecuted church, and having seen that need, knowing how widespread the persecution was, and how important it was to get a word of encouragement to them, he decided to write this book, and then chose the style of apocalyptic literature in which to communicate it. That’s not what happened at all.

This isn’t John’s choice of a book, of a subject. He didn’t choose any of this. He wrote what he saw, and he wrote what he was commanded to write, because this had been revealed to him by God. So what we have in this book is a book with divine authority behind it. This is God’s revelation, not John’s revelation. It was communicated to him by God, and was to be given to the churches.

And there is an urgency about the message, and a need for us to know it and to heed it. I think that urgency is signaled here in the trumpet-sounding voice. It’s as though it calls him to attention; it calls him to be alert. It alerts him to the need, and gives him, as it were, his marching orders. There’s an urgency about this, so naturally, he hears a trumpet, and he turns to see who was speaking to him.

And when he saw him, he says in verse 17 that he fell at his feet like a dead man. Now, that happened immediately. “When I saw him, I fell at his feet.” But he first tells

us what he saw on that Sunday, on that Lord’s day, so that we’ll know why it is that he fell at his feet. And what he saw was no root out of dry ground, no unattractive, despised Jesus, no corpse on a cross. He saw the living glorified Christ.

And what more appropriate day to see the resurrected Christ than on the first day of the week; the day of the week when Christ was raised from the dead? Sunday is a weekly reminder of that for us. It is a weekly reminder that we have a living Savior. I suppose that if we really had a sense of that, really had the force of that in our minds, every Sunday when we got up the first thing we’d think was, “We have a living Savior – he’s alive.”

It shouldn’t be limited to Sunday because he’s alive every day of the week, but certainly Sunday is a reminder of that. And very significantly, on this Sunday, on this Lord’s day, John gets a vision of him, and he puts this vision of Christ in his glory at the very beginning of the book, to reassure us that our Savior is living and powerful. And we need that reminder, because the church now, as then in John’s day, was what our Lord called it, a little flock.

That’s how Jesus referred to the church in Luke 12:32. He said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom.” What an amazing statement that is to this little flock, and at the time just a handful of disciples, he says, “God Almighty has chosen to give you the kingdom that will cover this earth, and will govern the universe,” to this little flock. But it’s a little flock.

And it seems to be a vulnerable flock, and at the end of the first century when the small, persecuted church was surrounded, as it were, by wolves, by powerful forces, and things seemed hopeless, they – and we too – are reminded that they’re not hopeless; not at all, never. The Almighty, one infinitely greater than the emperor, than Caesar and all of his armies, or any tyrant that’s ever arisen and sought to wear down the church – that this one is actually among us.

That’s what John says. He was standing, he tells us, among the seven golden lampstands. Now, the lampstands, the Lord explains at the end of the chapter, represent the churches of Asia Minor. And as we explained I think it was last week or one of our earlier lessons, that number seven indicates that it’s all the churches; it’s complete. And so this is a message for every church.

It’s an image of the church that John probably borrowed from Zechariah 4. He seems to have gained much from that chapter. A picture of the Holy Spirit, but also I

think a vision of the churches, because there you have a vision of the seven-branched golden lampstand, the menorah that stood in the holy place of the temple. If you’ve ever visited Rome, then you certainly would’ve gone to the forum and seen the Arch of Titus near the coliseum, at the very entrance of the forum.

And it’s this colossal arch that Domitian erected in honor of his brother’s victory over the Jews in 70 A.D. And inside that arch there are sculptures of the Roman soldiers taking away the treasures of the temple. And some of them have been effaced –over time, they’ve worn away – but one that is distinct, of all of them, is of a Roman soldier carrying the seven-branched lampstand.

And it was a symbol, a sign that the nation of Israel was crushed. But not the church; God’s light was still shining, but now it’s not shining in one lamp in one place, and not in some physical lamp, but in the seven lamps in many places, and would soon be shining all over the world. Now, that’s the significance of the lampstand. It is the church, and the church is a light-bearer; it bears God’s light.

The lamp – at least an ancient lamp, which was fueled by oil and wicks and lamps on top – was not the light itself. It was the light-bearer. And that’s what the church is – we bear the truth of God. We’re not the truth. We carry the truth. Paul gives us a description along those lines in different words, but in a similar way, in 1 Timothy 3:15. The church – and he’s speaking of the local church – is the pillar and support of the truth.

We bear the truth. We’re not the source of the truth any more than the moon produces light. Its light is borrowed light, and so is the light of the church. It comes from Christ, and we are to reflect it. And we are to shine in the darkness. That’s our privilege, and that’s our purpose. That’s our function – it’s to give out the light of God. It’s to give out the whole counsel of God.

A lamp or a light bulb doesn’t give out partial light; it doesn’t give out little pieces of light. It gives out light. And so, too, we are to give out the light of God. We are to proclaim the whole counsel of God, and declare God’s greatness and his grace in Jesus Christ, his son. And if we don’t do that, then we don’t carry out our function, and we are worthless.

There’s no point in being if we’re not bearing the light and proclaiming all of the Word of God. And if that’s the case, then God will remove the lampstand, just as he removed that menorah from Jerusalem. That’s the warning that will come in the next

chapters. But here we’re not given warnings; we’re given encouragement. This chapter is to encourage God’s people.

And the message is very simple: Christ is among us, and he is glorious, and he is powerful. John describes him as “one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to his feet, and girded across his chest with a golden sash.” Son of man is the heavenly figure of Daniel 7:14, who comes with the clouds and approaches the ancient of days, who gives him a kingdom, and gives him the promise that all of the nations will serve him.

It’s the messiah. The son of man is a title for the messiah. He is the king, and here it is attributed, that title, to Christ, as our Lord used it throughout the gospels. And we see Christ here, clothed like a king and a priest, with this garment that reaches to his feet, a white garment. It’s a mark of distinction, as is the golden sash. Some of the details we’re not certain as to what they mean, but certainly this gives you the picture of majesty and authority.

And he has great authority; he has divine authority. That’s reflected in the description of verse 14, where he’s described in the same way that the ancient of days is described in Daniel chapter 7. There, the heavenly Father sits on a flaming throne, dressed in a robe that is white as snow, and his hair is like pure wool. That’s who the son of man approaches in Daniel chapter 7, to receive his kingdom.

Here, in John’s vision, Christ has a head and hair that were white like white wool, like snow, and his eyes were like a flame of fire. So he is described with the same terms in the same way here that the ancient of days is described in Daniel 7, signifying that Christ is God. He is not the Father. The Son is not the Father. The two are distinct in person, but they are one in essence. They are equal members of the Godhead, co-eternal and co-powerful.

Christ, as we often say, is very God of very God. Our king is God, God the Son, and his eyes are on fire, symbolizing his penetrating insight. He sees everything, and he will judge all things. Not only in the churches – that’s a stress that comes in the next two chapters – but in the world, and down through history. He judges things today, providentially, but the day is coming when he will judge this world.

That’s what this book will move toward; the coming judgment and the coming kingdom. His strength is pictured in verse 15 with the description of his feet being like burnished bronze when it has been made to glow in a furnace. It is durable. This is tested

metal –to go back to the book of Daniel. And so much of the book of Revelation draws upon the book of Daniel in its substance and in its style.

But if you remember from that book, in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar, the great king, has a dream. No one can interpret it for him. His soothsayers can’t interpret it, and under the threat of death, Daniel looks to the Lord, prays for insight, and receives it from the Lord, and he interprets the vision. But the vision is of this great statue, and the statue has a golden head, and it has silver chest and arms, and as you move down, the metal becomes less precious.

And then at the feet of that great statue is a mixed material; the feet were made of iron and clay. And then a stone from heaven struck the image on the feet. The statue falls apart, and the stone crushes it to powder, and the wind blew it away. Well, that’s the destiny of the kingdoms of this world. As great and as glorious as they are in the eyes of men, as permanent as they may seem to us, they’re transient.

Christ is going to come, he’s going to destroy it all, and the wind is going to drive it away, and it’s going to become as nothing. And then that stone grows and it fills the earth. That’s the kingdom of Christ. That’s what we have our hope in. That’s what we look forward to. And here, we see his feet are not of mixed material; they’re of strengthened material, of metal that has been tested.

And this is the picture of a king who cannot be overthrown. His feet are not of clay; they’re of bronze and tested metal. He is strong and stable. Our hope cannot be overthrown. Our king cannot be defeated. He is mighty. His voice is like the sound of many waters; maybe like the waves that were crashing on the rocks of Patmos, or the thunder of a great waterfall. That may be what John has in mind.

This is the one who John describes in his gospel at the very beginning, as the Word who was with God, and was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him. They came into being through his powerful, majestic word. You go back to Genesis chapter 1, and God speaks, and he speaks everything into existence. And John then describes the beginning as coming through him, the one who speaks.

He spoke the universe into existence because his Word is creative and powerful. It’s like many waters. Now, this is the one in whose care we are. He is holding us. Verse 16, in his right hand he held the seven stars. Verse 20 defines the stars as the

angels of the seven churches, but it includes the churches. He holds the angels of the churches. He holds the churches in his hand.

We’ll ask the question when we come to it, are those heavenly angels or are those human messengers? We’ll discuss that in verse 20. But the idea here is that Christ is in heaven, and has the churches on earth in his hand. We are under his sovereign protection. The distance between heaven and earth, however great that distance is, is no impediment to him. He is the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

He sits at the Father’s right hand. He sits in complete authority over this earth. And he holds us in his all-powerful right hand, and he will never let us go. I think this takes us back to John 10:28, where Jesus gave that great promise and assurance, “I give eternal life to them,” speaking of his sheep, “and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

Once a child of God, always a child of God – those whom God saves, he saves forever. That’s the greatness of his grace. That’s the sufficiency of his sacrifice. To use Luther’s words, Christ is a mighty fortress. We are safe in his care. But he’s also a mighty warrior, because John saw a sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth. As the early Christians read this, they might well have thought of the Roman legions with their two-edged, tongue-shaped swords, marching across the world conquering the nations.

But we have a conqueror, too, and he has a sword. It is the Spirit of his mouth, his Word. It’s sharper than any two-edged sword, and it is invincible. This is his only weapon of warfare. It’s all he needs. He speaks with power and causes his will to occur, and he will do that at the end of the age when he returns. He’s described later, the end of the book in chapter 19, as seated on a white horse with a sharp sword coming from his mouth.

And not literally, of course – you need to remember as we go through this book the first statement that John makes, in verse 1 of chapter 1, that these things were signified to him. That’s the meaning of that word, communicated. They came to him in symbols. He speaks symbolically, and so the sword is his Word. He speaks, and he destroys the enemies. He merely speaks, and that happens.

And that will literally happen; that’s not figurative. He will slay the beast and the false prophet. He will cast them into the lake of fire. In the meantime, the church has been entrusted with his sword, which in our hands is the Scriptures, the Word of God, the

proclamation of the gospel. We’re not defenseless in this dangerous world. We have a powerful king, and we have an invincible sword.

It cuts deep into men’s souls. It lays their souls bare, and it brings them to conviction and conversion. It’s powerful and effective, because it belongs to Christ, and through the Holy Spirit he makes this sword useful in our service to him. It’s an impressive picture John gives of Christ as the divine king and conqueror, who is for us. But his vision reaches its apex, its high point, at the end of the verse, verse 16.

John says, “And his face was like the sun shining in its strength.” This is the glory of the exalted Christ. It is dazzling. Well, who can look into the face of the sun? John couldn’t, and in verse 17 he says, “When I saw him I fell at his feet like a dead man.” And we know the reason why, having seen this vision. But this is the response of a creature to his God.

You remember in John’s gospel when the arresting soldiers came for Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and they asked for Jesus the Nazarene, not Jesus the Son of God. Jesus the Nazarene, that Jesus from Nazareth, that carpenter – they asked for him. And he said, “I am.” And they realized, if not then, later, he’s more than a carpenter. He’s more than a mere man because when he said, “I am,” they fell to the ground.

They were impelled to the ground. His name alone is powerful. Men cannot stand before it. But when they stand before him at the end of the age, and see him in his strength and glory, and see something like this – but this is coming to us in figurative terms. When they see him face to face in the effulgence of his glory, they will not be able to stand before him. They’ll fall down before him – every knee will bow before him.

Later, in chapter 6, as the judgments are being poured out, the men of this earth ask, “Who is able to stand before the wrath of the Lamb?” And the meaning of their statement is no one’s able to stand. And then in chapter 7 we find a multitude standing before his throne. Well, no man in his strength can stand before God, but those in Christ will be able to stand.

But even here we see a child of God, his apostle, cannot endure the effects of Christ’s glory. John lost all of his strength. This is finite man before the infinite God. He fell before him as a dead man. It’s only the touch and assurance of Christ that revives him. John hears Christ say those very familiar words, “Do not be afraid.” All through the gospels, the disciples heard those words – “Fear not.”

When Christ came to them on the sea in the storm at night, they were terrified by this specter that was coming toward them – at least, that’s how they interpreted it. They thought it was a ghost, as one might well imagine they would’ve thought; as we might have thought if we were to see something like that coming through the storm across the waves. And yet he greets them with the assurance, “It is I. Do not be afraid.”

He could give that assurance to them because of who he is. He can give that assurance to John here because of who he is and what he had done. He is the First and the Last, which is like saying he is the Alpha and the Omega. It’s essentially the same thing. And that, again, is another ascription of deity that he takes to himself. This is the way God the Father in verse 8 describes himself, as the Alpha and the Omega.

And Christ says that he is the First and the Last, which is essentially the Alpha and the Omega. He is the sovereign Lord. He is the Living One, he says. “I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.” He conquered the death of the cross, and the resurrection of the body. We have a living Savior. And because he is alive, we will live. Christ says, “I am alive forevermore.”

Forever – he is indestructible, which means that all of us who are joined to him share in that indestructible life. Through faith in Christ, we are in him, and we have what Christ has. That’s Wesley’s great hymn, “alive in Him, my living Head” – we have what is in Christ. And not only that, because he conquered the grave, he has the keys of death and of Hades. He has authority over life and death.

One of the British commentators wrote, “Not only had he burst out of the prison, he had carried away the keys.” So we may pass into the dungeons of death, but Christ has the keys to set us free, and he will. We will be resurrected, as he was; that is our hope. The grave is a fearful thing, and we shouldn’t speak about it lightly as we face it, as we face death and the prospect of our cold, dead bodies being lowered into the ground.

That is a daunting thought; it does cause some fear, but we don’t need to fear it. Christ has authority over all of that. He has the keys. He has the power to send men to death, and to deliver them from death. That’s a great encouragement. It was a great encouragement to a little flock of persecuted Christians. The gates of hell shall not prevail against that church, small flock though it is.

Persecuted though it is, it will not be worn down by the gates of hell. The governors and emperors have the power to send men to their deaths, and the early Christians had witnessed that with Nero, who had committed horrific crimes against the

Christians in Rome. And Domitian, a generation later, did the same. Foxe, in his *Book of Martyrs*, describes how he imprisoned, burned, stoned, and hanged Christians who would not deny their faith.

That’s a terrifying prospect. The people to whom John wrote, they faced it. It was a very real prospect of facing fire and sword and gibbet. And many still do in parts of the world, but there is great encouragement and incentive here in what Christ appears to be and says – incentive to remain faithful. Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

And he is able to do that – he has authority over hell. I mentioned earlier the arch of Titus that Domitian built in honor of his brother. It’s interesting that at the other end of the forum is the arch of Septimius Severus, who built his arch a little over a hundred years later. He was another emperor who viciously persecuted the church. Both of these arches stand like great gates, and between them were the houses of power.

The Roman senate, its house was there; the Roman government was seated there, the palaces of the emperors, the temples of the gods, of Jupiter and Saturn and Mars. Well, today it’s all a ruin; just a relic. Imperial Rome is gone, but the church still stands. The gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Nero, Domitian, all of them, prevailed for a moment, then suffered bitter deaths, as do all the opponents of Christ, and as will the antichrist in the future.

Christ has all authority. He has the keys of death and of Hades. He sends men to their eternal destiny; that’s the significance of holding the keys. That’s the vision given of him. Not a root out of dry ground – he is no longer in his humiliation. Not a corpse on a cross – he’s not dead. He is risen; he is alive; he is in his exaltation, full of such glory that it would make us all fall down as dead men if we were to see him.

And yet with such power that he can raise the dead, and he will, and that means that we will prevail; the small flock, that little flock that God has determined to give the kingdom to will receive that kingdom, and enter into it. Now, in verse 19, the Lord instructs John to write this book. “Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.”

Verse 7 gives the theme of the book; “he is coming with the clouds.” Verse 19 gives the outline of the book. “The things which you have seen,” that refers to this vision of the exalted Christ. “The things which are” refer to the state of the church in

chapters 2 through 3, so we have write the things that are past, write the things that are present.

And then “the things which will take place after these things” are events that are still future. That section begins with chapters 4 and 5, which is a vision of heaven and what’s to come in the future. But the future begins in earnest in this book when the seal judgments are broken in chapter 6, and those future events continue on to the end of the book. So that’s the outline of the book.

Finally, in verse 20, Christ speaks of the seven stars. “As for the mystery of the seven stars which 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.” Now, who are these angels? Are they heavenly or earthly? Are they spirits or men?

Many interpret them as being human messengers, or preachers, or even the pastors of the churches, because each of the letters to the seven churches begins with the formula, “to the angel of the church of Ephesus,” or Pergamum, or whatever, “write.” So perhaps these are men who are messengers. But the book of Revelation is filled with angels, and they always refer to heavenly angels.

So it is reasonable to assume that that’s the meaning here. We take the clear meaning of words and texts and use the clear meaning to interpret the obscure meaning. And if we do that, and consistently translate this word or interpret this word “angels,” then we would understand these to be heavenly angels, heavenly beings, spirit beings. If that’s the case, then there are angels connected to the churches.

And that’s not without precedent, because we go back to the book of Daniel, in Daniel chapter 10 we read of nations having patron angels. Michael is the defender of Israel. So churches evidently have angels over them. Maybe they are guardian angels. We really don’t know what they do, what their function is, but they have some ministry to the churches to which they are attached.

They are in some way ministers of Christ, and so what this does is really give us even further assurance that we have powerful beings on our side. Later, in chapter 10, at the very beginning, John has this vision of a strong angel coming down from heaven, and he plants his feet on the earth, one on land, and one on sea. He’s this colossal angel. He’s powerful, and that’s the kind of strength that governs the church.

We have these kind of beings on our side. But as impressive as that may be, it cannot compare to what we have here in this chapter, in this vision, because far more significantly than having angels on our side is that Christ is on our side, and he holds the stars and the churches in his right hand. Angels are finite, as great as they may be; he’s infinite, and that means we’re absolutely secure.

This is the vision that John was given of Christ. We need a vision of him. Proverbs 29:18 tells us that where there is no vision, the people perish. Well, that may simply mean that where there’s no divine revelation, where the Word of God is not taught, the people perish, and that’s certainly true. But what we have in the Word of God here is a vision, a real vision of the Lord God.

And this is a vision that we need, because this is a vision of who Christ is, and understanding it, getting this vision, is transforming. This is the only portrait of Jesus that we need. The Savior is alive, and he is sovereign, and that should instill within each of us an adoration of him, and a trust in him. He is the First. He was before all things, planning them with his Father and with the Spirit from eternity past.

And he is the Last. He will be there at the very end for us, holding onto us. So what do we have to fear? We look forward to his coming. We look forward to seeing him. But our relationship with him is not only a future event; it’s a present reality. He is the First, and the Last, and he’s everything in between. He is here, now, and he’s all-powerful. He’s all-wise and all-loving.

He walks with us through the storms of life, and all of the uncertainties of life, so we’re to trust him. We’re to trust him now, and we’re to walk with him now. I think that’s the encouragement that John’s giving to this group of churches to whom he’s writing – to the churches down through the ages – to the little flock that is God’s. Be encouraged, and walk with the Lord.

So may God give us the grace to do that; to live in the full light of this glorious vision. It’s a great comfort for his people – for his people. But if you’re not one of his people, if you have not believed in Jesus Christ, then this cannot be a comfort. It only terrifies. This is the one who is alive, and he holds in his hand the keys of death and Hades. He has authority to send people to their deaths and their eternal destinies.

So as the author of Hebrews says, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” But you can fall into his loving arms rather than fall into his hands of judgment by putting your faith in him. That’s all that’s required; simply

believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, recognize your need as the Savior, and trust in him, and he will receive you. He receives everyone who believes in him.

He will receive you, forgive you, and make you his child forever. What a great truth that is. If you don’t know Christ, turn to him, and if you’re his child, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then you’re firmly in his hand, and may this vision help each of us to live faithfully – faithfully to him as we walk through this world. Let’s bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the vision that you gave to John, and the vision that he has given to us of what he saw on that Lord’s day on the isle of Patmos. Glorious vision of Jesus Christ, who is alive – we have a living Savior, who’s powerful, whose hand is upon us. We’re secure in it. Help us to rest in that, and live faithfully for him. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.