

# “Unveiled” // Revelation 1:1–18 // *The Book of Revelation* #1

## Announcement

### Church at the Dome VID

How ‘bout that? Listen, these moments have always been really important to us in the life of the church because it allows us to be together as *one church* and it gives us a chance to celebrate—not how big we are—but what God is doing in the Triangle and what we get to be a part of. And it always inspires us to dream about what he wants to do in the future. Listen, I’ll make no apologies for it—we want to make Jesus famous here in the Triangle. We want every person who lives here to know that he loves them and to not be able to ignore him—it’s like Charles Spurgeon said: “If people in our community will perish, let them have to leap to hell over our dead bodies, and let them perish with our arms wrapped around their knees.” These events are an important part of how we do that for our community. Coming together like this at one of the biggest arenas in the Triangle is something it’s hard for people to ignore. So I want you to plan to be there and bring people.

By the way, the University of North Carolina, to my knowledge, has never allowed something like this before, but God showed us favor and opened this door for us! What an opportunity to be in one of the biggest arenas in the Triangle to put Jesus on display in the heart of one of our nation’s most strategic college campuses. And you don’t have to be a Carolina fan to attend. Maybe you feel like the devil lives at UNC. If so, that’s fine. Let’s just take Jesus over there.

**You excited about that? For now, mark your calendars and check our website ([summitchurch.com/churchatthedome](https://summitchurch.com/churchatthedome)) for updates.**

## Intro

**OK ... if you have a Bible, and I hope you do, open it to the very last book in your Bible—the book of ... *Revelation*. We’re going to spend the next few months in this wild and crazy book.**

(And, by the way, it’s Revela*TION* (singular), not Revelation(s). There is one Revelation, not three of them.)

I’ve actually preached through this book before ... it was back in 2004—which was *21 years ago* (How many of you were here for that?) 21 years ago ... I was 14 years old at the time, and I didn’t feel like I did a great job with it, so we figured it was time to do it again.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sources consulted: Tim Chester, *Revelation for You: Seeing History from Heaven’s Perspective* (London: The Good Book Company, 2019); Jen Wilkin, “Unveiling”, Session 1 of Revelation: Eternal King, Everlasting Kingdom Bible Study, July 1, 2024; Tim Keller, “[The First and the Last](#)”, June 29, 2008, Redeemer Presbyterian; Matt Chandler, “You Were made for this Day”, Session 1 of The Overcomers Bible Study of the Book of Revelation, rightnow Media and Harper Christian Resources, May 7, 2024; Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, “[How to Read Apocalyptic Literature](#)”, June 9, 2020, The Bible Project; Tim Mackie, “[The Book of Revelation - Part 1](#)”, December 14, 2016, The Bible Project; Louie Giglio, “[The Reigning Christ in the Midst of His Church](#)”, April 14, 2024, Passion Church; Skip Heitzig, “[The Flow of the Future](#)”, May 21, 2023, Calvary Church; Craig Groeshel, “[The End: Snapshots of Revelation](#).” And others as noted throughout.

Many of you are fairly **unfamiliar with the book of Revelation**—it feels like the *sci-fi* section of your Bible, and you're confused by it, even if a little intrigued. AND if you're honest, some of you are downright terrified by it. Fear not, my friends: I'm a professional. I am certified to take you in and out of this book and ensure that no one gets ... **left behind**.

Seriously, how many of you have **never** heard a sermon series on the book of Revelation? **For me, growing up I heard them All. The. Time.** The tradition I grew up in was fairly obsessed with the **end times in general** and the **book of Revelation in particular**.

- We had our charts and our timelines of the last days, with little speculations about which contemporary political figures were the various beasts of the Apocalypse; we had our annual prophecy conferences, our end-times movies, and our rapture board games ... *None of that is a joke.*

I was **particularly terrified by** the concept of the rapture—which is the belief that Jesus will come again, suddenly, like a thief in the night, at which point all true believers rise to meet him in the clouds, and those who are left behind go through the tribulation with the Antichrist and the mark of the beast and the four horsemen and the bowls of blood and all that stuff.

- It could happen at any moment, and so as a kid, if **for any reason** I couldn't find my parents, even for a minute—if I called up the stairs and no one answered—I'd start running through the house in a panic, saying, "I knew it! I knew I wasn't really saved!" and I'd be certain I was gonna bust into my parents' bedroom and find my mom's clothes fallen into a pile on the floor because the rapture had happened and I'd been left behind. (I'm not sure, by the way, why we always assumed everyone's clothes would be left, but that's the way it was in the movies, and I didn't ask questions.)
- In fact, true story: I had a **recurring nightmare in which the rapture happened**, and I and my whole family started to ascend, but I only got to the top of my house and then dropped back down to earth because that was all the faith I had. It was terrifying! **How many of you can relate in some way to this?**
- **The other night**, Veronica and I were lying in bed and I was telling her about this upcoming series on Revelation, and she started asking me questions about the rapture and if it was really true that one day in one instant all the real Christians would vanish, and she was talking about how scary that would be, and I just softly and silently slipped out of bed and lay down on the floor beside the bed, and so after she'd talked for a while she was like, "J.D., J.D.?" and then she started hitting the bed where I was supposed to be and she was like, "J.D., that's not funny," but I told her I was just trying to test how confident she was in her salvation ... Just kidding. I didn't do that.

**We'll get into the specifics of some of that stuff later, but let me just say: I'm glad we're not obsessed like that at this church**, though I sometimes wonder if we have fallen into the opposite error: namely, that we **rarely ever talk or think about** the end. If I asked you, "When was the last time you had the thought, '*TODAY could be the day of Jesus' return!*'?" many of you would have a hard time ever remembering a time you thought that. And Scripture says we should live every day with that awareness. Because only then will we live rightly.

**Get this:** Bible scholars point out that Paul frequently ties his moral commands to the return of Christ, and that's because it's not until you see your life through the perspective of the **second coming** that you'll develop the mindset to obey.<sup>2</sup>

**So all of that makes Revelation a crucial book for us to study. Because while mysterious, it is one of the best practical helps for living out the Christian life.**

Today, I'm going to walk us through this first chapter, but first, I want to **highlight verse 3:** *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*

- This is the only place in the Bible I know of where a promise like this is made—a blessing promised to the one who reads this book *ALoud* and one on those who listen—so we're going to try to honor that as literally as possible, and as often as we can, we're going to just read the text aloud and listen. We won't do it the same way every week, but for chapter 1, could you stand as I read this over you?

[1] The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, [2] who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Again, vs. 3: *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.* [4] John to the seven churches that are in Asia. (Real quick—the Apostle John is the author of this book—the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and three other letters to the church, 1, 2, and 3 John. This book, in fact, was first and foremost a letter to seven churches John had helped plant in Asia Minor. We'll learn more about them later.)

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, (You say, *seven* spirits? Yeah, but that's not a new construction for the Trinity—seven simply represents perfection, so this is a poetic way of depicting God's fullness) [5] 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 [6] and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. [7] 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.

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

[9] 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. [10] I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a

<sup>2</sup> The Bible actually talks more about Christ's second coming than it does his first. In fact, some scholars estimate that for every 1 prophecy about Jesus' first coming, there are as many as 8 that point to his return. And yet, Jesus' 1st coming gets its own holiday, Christmas, but his 2nd coming rarely even makes it into our preaching rotation.

trumpet [11] 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.”

[12] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, [13] 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. [14] The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, [15] his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. [16] 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.

[17] 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, [18] and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. [19] Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. [20] 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.

**You may be seated!** If your Bibles are open, go back to **vs. 1: The revelation of Jesus Christ ...**

- “The Revelation,” in Greek, means literally “the unveiling.” This book is the unveiling of Jesus Christ. But the first *question* is, “What is being unveiled?” Is Jesus the one doing the unveiling, or is it Jesus himself being unveiled?
  - Do you see how that phrase could mean either? If I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, today we’re going to have the presentation of Bryan Loritts, I could mean that Pastor Bryan is going to present something to us, Bryan Loritts is going to present something to you—or I could mean that we are *presenting Bryan Loritts to you*. See what I mean?
- So, does John mean this book is a **revelation of Jesus (where Jesus is the one being revealed)**, or a revelation **by** Jesus (where he is the one doing the revealing?) And the answer is ... **YES**.
  - In fact, scholars say the way this phrase is written in Greek is ambiguous, because what follows is both a **revelation of Jesus** and also a **revelation from Jesus** about the things that must soon take place.

**So, let’s consider. First, it’s a revelation of Jesus:** HEAR THIS: The main point of Revelation is not to give us a **specific timeline** of events or help us figure out which beast represents Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, or Angela Merkel. The point is to **pull back the curtain of history** so that we can see the powers at work behind the politics on earth and the authority of Jesus above it all.

**People read the book of Revelation**—with all the dragons and beasts—and imagine it as this **delusional fantasy world**, but see, almost all the images have a direct correspondence to something in the Old Testament.

John is pulling back the curtain to help his readers look at their world through **spiritual eyes** and recognize the powers at work in the structures around them—spiritual realities that have been true from the days of the Old Testament when God first revealed them through the present and to whatever comes in the future. **It’s not just a book about future things; it’s a book about victorious spiritual struggle in every era.**

This is “the unveiling.” The unmasking of what is really going on in the world.

It was probably the most shocking reveal in film history. Darth Vader looked down at a desperate Luke Skywalker, who was now helplessly clinging to a pole above a massive pit, his right arm recently severed by Darth Vader’s lightsaber. And Darth Vader says, “Join me, and we’ll rule the galaxy together.” And Luke says, “Never!” And Vader says, “Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father.” And Luke said, “He told me enough, he told me you killed him!” and Vader (PIC) responded by saying: “No—I am your father.”

Interestingly, that line was kept secret from the entire cast and crew of Star Wars until the premiere. It was a surprise to all of them. When they shot the scene, what Darth Vader actually said was, “Obi-Wan killed your father.” They changed it later to, “I am your father” and dubbed it in and didn’t tell anybody—only George Lucas, Mark Hamill, and the movie director knew the actual line; the rest of the cast and crew—Princess Leia, Hans Solo, R2-D2—they all learned it at the movie premiere.

Revelation is the revealing moment where Jesus pulls off the mask and shows us **who he actually is** and what he’s **actually been doing** in world history.

(One more little fun thing: This week I spent some time with our City Project students, teaching them how to answer the hard questions in Christianity before they go on their mission trip ... well, in the middle of my presentation, the whole front row, with no warning, started pulling off their sweatshirts and I was like, “What is going on?” and they stood up (PIC) to reveal these amazing shirts with Nic Cage emblazoned on their chests in all his resplendent glory. It was amazing. That’s what John is doing. He’s pulling off the sweatshirt to reveal the glory beneath.)

It’s a revelation OF Jesus, but it’s also a revelation by Jesus, (vs. 1), about “the things that must soon take place.”

**As you might know**, theologians are divided as to the best way to interpret a lot of the symbols and the timelines in Revelation. And let me say clearly, theologians I respect are on different sides of some of the questions. The two main approaches to this book to take most seriously, in my opinion, are premillennial and amillennial. Want to learn some big words? Stay with me for a minute.

- The **premillennial position** comes from the belief that the earthly reign of Christ described in Revelation 20—a 1,000-year millennium—will actually physically occur sometime in the future. We’re not there yet; it’s something coming in the future. We are *PRE*-millennial. This approach takes a straightforward, fairly literal approach to the book of Revelation, believing John is foretelling **actual things** that will **occur in the future**.
- **Second is the “amillennial” approach.** “Amillennial” means literally “no millennium,” and this view takes that name because amillennialists interpret almost everything in the book of Revelation, including the teaching about the millennium, as symbolic and pointing to some deeper spiritual reality. Thus, all the judgments—seal judgments, trumpet judgments, four horsemen, Antichrist, the beast, the mark of the beast—these are not specific things that are coming in the future, as much as things that symbolize what we experience now. Specifically, the

“millennium,” the reign of Christ depicted in Revelation 20, is not an actual millennium; that’s simply symbolic of the present church age we live in, during which Christ reigns spiritually from heaven.<sup>3</sup> So, a-millennial.

Personally, I take a premillennial approach to the book—meaning I believe the things we read in Revelation are about actual, future events. I take this approach because it’s literally what John said about the book, **vs. 1—this letter is about things *that must soon take place***. It’s about the future, not just the present. I also think this approach gives the fairest treatment of all the biblical evidence, takes most seriously the Old Testament promises and finally, it’s the oldest view in the church, the one embraced by most of the earliest church fathers who spoke about these things.<sup>4</sup>

**But here’s the thing:** Even if you disagree with me on this, there’s still a lot here in this study for you to be blessed by. Because, again (back to **vs. 1**) this is **primarily a *revelation OF Jesus*** and the spiritual forces at work in the world. The Apostle John, who wrote this book, said in his first letter to the church that the *spirit* of Antichrist is already at work in the world now, which means that regardless of what’s coming in the future, the spirit behind the future Antichrist is already here and already at work, and that means the principles we learn about spiritual forces are as applicable today as they will be to anybody in the future.

You see, again, and we’ll return to this over and over, one of the primary keys for interpreting Revelation is realizing how much the imagery in Revelation has its roots in the Old Testament. Get this: Of the 400 verses of Revelation, there are over 500 references to the Old Testament—more than one per verse! And primarily the Old Testament books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Jeremiah.<sup>5</sup>

Which means when you see something mysterious in Revelation, to figure out what it’s talking about, the first place you look is backwards to see what that symbolized back in the Old Testament. For example, the locust plague—instead of saying, “Locusts with beating wings must be John’s way of talking about an invasion of Apache helicopters, and John just didn’t know how to describe it, which is why he used ‘locusts.’” (That’s an actual explanation I heard, by the way.) Instead of doing weird stuff like that, you should first ask, “What do locusts represent in the Old Testament?”

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<sup>3</sup> Two others: preterist and postmillennial--**Preterists** believe that Revelation basically describes the events between 32 A.D. and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Basically, a preterist believes that most of the things we read in Revelation are about past events. **Postmillennialists** believe that through the spread of the gospel, the world will increasingly reflect God’s kingdom, leading to a golden age—the millennium—after which Christ will return. Jesus comes back after the church has established the Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. It is also beyond doubt that the disciples in Acts 1:6 held a premillennial view, because they asked Jesus before he ascended, “Will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” Their question reveals that they believed that Jesus would bring, at some point in the future, an *actual* kingdom to earth; that Jesus, not them, would be the one to bring it; that the nation of Israel would be central to it, and that the church had not totally replaced Israel as the recipient of all the Old Testament prophecies. Had they been amillennials, they would certainly have phrased their question differently, recognizing the millennial reign had already begun; had they been postmillennials, they would have said, “Do you want us at this time to build the kingdom for you to reign over? When will *WE* have built it sufficiently for you to reign over?” Instead, they assumed Jesus would fully bring the Kingdom, not them. You could argue the disciples were just wrong in their assumption, and Jesus didn’t feel like correcting them here, but that seems unlikely to me for 2 reasons: 1. Is it realistic that the disciples could really spend 3 years with Jesus and then 40 days after his resurrection learning from him directly about the Kingdom of God and their mission in it and been able to get this one central, fundamental premise so fundamentally wrong? 2. Why would Jesus not have corrected that assumption? And, why does Luke, the author of Acts, never correct their assumption?

<sup>5</sup> These were all the books written when Israel was in exile, when they’d been banished from their homeland to Babylon, and what John is saying is, “Just like Israel was in exile back then, so the church is in exile right now.” In fact, in Revelation John frequently refers to the world as Babylon.

So as we move through this book, I'll explain how I interpret various things (how Jesus and I interpret them), but even if you disagree with Jesus and me, you'll still be able to benefit from the principles we learn about the powers at work in the world and Jesus' sovereignty above them all. You in for that?

Which brings me to the question of **why Jesus chose to reveal all these things to John. John tells us in vs. 9: "I, John, your brother and companion in suffering ..."** (1:9)

**The church in John's day was not doing particularly great, at least in the physical sense—**

- **By this point, all of the apostles** had been martyred, except for John, and he'd been exiled to the **isle of Patmos**, the Roman equivalent of Alcatraz.
- Church history tells us he'd first been tortured by the Romans before being exiled—boiled in oil, specifically. Which never really registered with me until I burned my own hand with oil a few months ago. **I was doing the initial seasoning of my Blackstone grill**, which some of my friends had given me as a gift, and the instructions told me to cover the surface really deep in olive oil, bring it to a boil, and then wipe it off with this little scraper they gave me. Well, I did it after dark (because I wanted to be able to use the grill for breakfast the next morning), and I was in a hurry and got a little careless, and as I was scraping off the boiling oil with the little scraper, a little wave of it washed up over onto my hand. It's been a while since I've been in that kind of pain. It would not stop burning! I literally submerged my hand in ice water for three hours, but it wouldn't stop feeling like it was on fire. Eventually, around midnight, I went to the emergency room—I felt like such a wimp—but they numbed my entire hand from my wrist forward so I couldn't feel anything, and then I felt better ... and then I thought, *John experienced that over his whole body*. Needless to say, he was suffering.
- **The people John was writing to were suffering too.** The church was going through one of the worst persecutions in history. Nero had made Christians the scapegoat for Rome's calamities and used that as a pretext for hunting them down and killing them. **Emperor Domitian had followed suit and Emperor Trajan, the new emperor, seemed like he was going to be just as bad.**

**John, from his remote isle in Patmos**, sees no immediate relief on the horizon, and he knows the church needs a vision. But, hear this: It's not a vision that all of this is going to go away tomorrow. That might have been the vision he first wanted, but this was a vision of a Jesus sovereign over it all.

Some of you need to see that same vision today. Your suffering might not be the same as John's—maybe you're not literally being fed to the lions ... but suffering is suffering, right? And you've asked God, "How long, O Lord?" You've got unanswered questions. Pain. Disappointment. Acts of injustice that have been committed against you. And you're like, "How am I supposed to sing about victory in Jesus when my life feels like a constant string of disappointments, tragedies, and failures?"

John's letter is for you. So, here we go. **The Revelation of Jesus Christ. John says:** [10] I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ... [12] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, [13] 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. (Do you recognize that, by the

way? Golden lampstands, a long robe and golden sash—you should, since we just studied the tabernacle design. These are the garments of the High Priest, standing in the Holy Place. John is like “Here’s Jesus, our great High Priest, standing in the Holy Place.”

And, vs [14] The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, [15] his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. [16] 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.

John then gives a description of the Jesus standing before him. It’s a breathtaking vision:

- **White hair** in those days symbolized wisdom; so saying Jesus had brilliant white hair, like snow, means this Jesus is wiser than the wise.
- His **eyes were like flame of fire**, which means his insight penetrated more deeply than the sharpest laser.
- His **face shines like the sun at full strength**—we can’t look directly at the Sun, lest we go blind; John can’t even look directly at Jesus’ face. It shone with that kind of energy.
- **His voice was like the roar of many waters** (which indicates not just decibel level, but fullness and immensity). Just think of the roar of the ocean or a waterfall.
- **In his right hand he held seven stars.** The average star puts out a trillion megaton bombs of energy each second, which is why it’s good that we’re 93 million miles away from the closest one. But here, John is no longer 93 million miles from the power of one of those stars; he’s 9.3 steps from it.<sup>6</sup>
- **Out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword**, meaning his words possess the ability in themselves to pierce and to destroy.

[17] When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (And **that’s not intended to be a figure of speech either**. John literally thought he was going to die.)

Now, something I want you to consider: This is the first time John has seen Jesus in over 60 years, and Jesus and John had been BFFs on earth. In fact, in his Gospel, John refers to himself rather **confidently** as “the one that Jesus loved,” which I’ve always thought was a **huge flex**.

- John was like, “Jesus likes you too ... but I’m his favorite.”
- (By the way, in reality, what John meant by that was not that he was Jesus’ favorite; he’s communicating his amazement at the fact that Jesus would keep on loving him despite how badly he’d failed him. The tense of the verb in Greek is continuous, which means you should really read it as “*the one that Jesus kept on loving.*”<sup>7</sup>

**But suffice it to say they were close. In fact, in John 13:23, John says that at the Last Supper, he leaned his head back and rested it on Jesus’ chest.**

- Listen, I’ve got some guy friends that I feel pretty close to, but **none that I** do that with during dinner, and if that’s your idea of male friendship, I’d just as soon not be your friend.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller, “The Cosmic King,” from the series *Revelation: The Final Word*, preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on May 23, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.daveblackonline.com/disciple\\_whom\\_jesus\\_kept\\_on\\_lovi1.htm](https://www.daveblackonline.com/disciple_whom_jesus_kept_on_lovi1.htm)



- But you know what **male** would do that with me? **My son.**
- **Jesus was more than a friend to John.** He was John's comfort and shield, his refuge, his safe place.

And again, this is the first time they are seeing each other in over **60 years**, and Jesus reveals himself to John in a way that makes John think he's going to die.

**WHY** would Jesus appear to him this way? It's because that's how John most needed to see him right now, a Jesus who is sovereign over *everything*—and that's because Jesus' **plan right now was not to deliver his church** from persecution and pain. Jesus wasn't showing up **with news** saying, "Hey, John, relax. It gets better." No, in the near future, it wasn't going to **get better**.

So, what Jesus shows to John is his incredible power and majesty over all of it, so that John can rest in him even when he can't understand what Jesus is doing.

**You see, in times of intense persecution** or suffering, you don't need a sentimental Jesus who makes you feel warm and cozy at night—a Jesus who is one part genie, one part therapist, one part life coach, and the rest part warm blanket; you need to **see a Jesus who is sovereign over all** other powers at work in the world.

**I grew up with this picture of Jesus (PIC)** ... You might have seen the same one. Maybe for you it was up in a Sunday School classroom or on the back of a fan you used at your non-air-conditioned church, that had Jesus on one side and advertisements for the local funeral home on the back. It's like an oil rendition of an Olan Mills portrait—Jesus with his full lips and his perfect skin and his beautiful, flowing, John Muller hair. And in these pictures, Jesus always had this expression on his face like he'd just seen a bird fly by or something. But **the result was that my image of Jesus was** this sad, jobless guy with tears in his eyes who lived a lot in his feels. And hear me, I do love the tenderness of Jesus, but see, when you're really in pain, or suffering under injustice, you don't just need a warm, tender Jesus; you need a Jesus who holds the power of stars in his hand. A Jesus who speaks with the roar of many waters and whom you know has the last word in it all. A Jesus who is sovereign over crazy emperors and cancer cells and malicious ex-husbands and hit blog pieces.

It's like **Rev. Tom Skinner**, the African American preacher from Harlem, said, it's hard to worship a Jesus who looks like someone who "wouldn't have lasted 10 minutes in my neighborhood."

Now, the question: **Is this Jesus we're seeing in vv. 10–17 a different Jesus** than the one John had presented in his Gospel? Has he changed? Is this like a new version of Jesus?

No, he hasn't changed. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever! It's just that in his first coming, Jesus' incredible power and glory were **veiled ...**

- **True, we got little glimpses of it**—like when Jesus spoke to a hurricane and the wind and waves died down immediately. Like they were an unruly toddler he was scolding.
- Or when he spoke to legions of demons and they instantly obeyed, crying out with fear in his presence and pleading for mercy.
- Or when the soldiers and Judas came to take Jesus off to be crucified and they said, “Which one of you is Jesus?” and Jesus said, “I AM” and just saying that name, the name of God, made them all stagger backwards and fall to the ground.
- (Or recently, I learned this ... **for you nerds: This scientist I was reading considered [how much raw power it would take to generate the matter in the food necessary to feed the 5,000](#)** by multiplying the loaves and fish. Remember, Jesus created all that food out of thin air. The scientist assumed each person ate about **8 oz. of food**, and then, using Einstein’s famous matter-to-energy formula ( $E=MC^2$ ), he concluded that the **amount of energy necessary to create that much matter** out of nothing would be equivalent to all the electrical power available on earth working at 100 percent output for four years straight. And **Jesus does it without even breaking a sweat.**)

So truth be told, that power was **always there**, but it was **VEILED**.

But here it is, **now, UNveiled** in all its strength so that John, his body still scarred and blistered with oil burns, exiled in Patmos, can know that Jesus is in charge of all of this and John’s story will end quite well indeed, just like he promised.

**John continues:** [17] **But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last.**

- **The first and the last.** That means Jesus is God, right? Sure, because whatever is first, before everything else, is God. But Jesus’ point is to say, “John, if I’m standing there at the beginning and standing there at the end, **you can be sure that I’m** in charge of everything here in the middle too.”

**“He laid his right hand on me.” The one with the power of a star in his hand touches you? How can you even survive that?**

- **(Interestingly, by the way, in Daniel 10, God appeared to Daniel in a way strikingly similar to this.** [Remember how I told you so much of the imagery here goes back to the book of Daniel?] Well, in Daniel 10, when God appeared to Daniel this way, Daniel passed out, just like John had, BUT Daniel records that an angel touched him to revive him and told him not to be afraid. God couldn’t touch Daniel directly or his holiness would have killed him.<sup>8</sup>

But here, John deviates from the Daniel script. God touches John directly and it doesn’t kill him. How?)

Well, this hand of God is now nail-scarred. Look at vs. [18] **I am the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore.**

- All the wrath that God had against sin has been put into Jesus, so there’s no more wrath left for John. Nothing left to threaten him. The full measure of penalty for John’s sin had been removed; all that remained was unbroken, unchallenged acceptance and love.
- Listen: If you’re a Muslim or a Buddhist, this is what you most yearn for from God. The knowledge that he’s totally for you and has no wrath over any sin, ever, to hold against you. But you don’t feel like you can know God that way because you know that you’ve sinned.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel 10:1–17

- Me too! But the gospel is that Jesus took the full punishment for that sin so that you can stand without fear in his presence. He can literally touch you—you can literally stand before his face—and you won't die.
- Stand in wonder, my friend: The hand of God has both the power of seven stars in it and is nail-scarred at the same time. That means it is fully in control of all things, and yet full of only tenderness and love for you.

Jesus continues ... and [in my hands] I have the keys of Death and Hades (or "hell").

These nail-scarred hands now hold the keys of Death and Hell.

- **What's the significance of holding the keys?** Well, the one who holds the keys holds the power! Right?
- **Illus. I remember being at a place—a nice hotel resort or something—and it was one of those places where the valet puts all the expensive cars up top.** Somehow, they never keep my rented Jeep Cherokee up there when I throw them the keys and say, "Hey bro, leave it up top." But one of the cars they had up there **was this beautiful Lamborghini**—and I'm sorry, ladies, but when you're a guy and you see a car like that, you have to go look at it. Right, guys? Veronica is always annoyed at me because I have to go check it out. So as I'm peering into it—there's nobody around—it suddenly starts. This guy had his remote start button he'd pressed from over there. He was like, "Bro, you can look, but you're not taking that anywhere. I got the keys."
- **The one with the keys has the power. Jesus is saying,** "The powers of the world may threaten you, John; they may boil you in oil and lock you up in isolation, but I hold the keys to all those things. These things are all my servants now, ultimately serving my purposes. And I'm weaving it all for your good, just like I've promised. I'm in charge, not them."

In Ephesians 1, Paul says this in his own way. He says that "we have been predestined [established by God's firm decision] according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." **All things. All. Things. Meditate on that, Christian.** There is not one stray molecule, not one stray cancer cell, not one stray child or spouse, that is not directed by Jesus according to the sovereign dictates of his counsel for your GOOD and his glory.

Now, I **do want to be careful** here. I'm **not saying that God** is the one making bad things happen to you. You see, we live in a fallen world, and the result is a lot of people do a lot of terrible things to each other, and even the earth itself brings calamities and misfortune upon us. **God is not the one doing these things to us directly.** What I'm saying is that **Jesus promises that none of those things are outside his control**, and he promises to commandeer every single one as a part of his perfect purposes in your life. He's using even the pain and the tragedy and the persecution as part of his good plan.

**Like John, you may feel like you are in the middle of tribulation.** Jesus doesn't show up with either answers or relief. I can't promise you that tomorrow it all goes away. And his purposes **may remain a mystery** to you for a while. But **this vision of Jesus** assures you that there is a **purpose that Jesus pursues** in it all, and he will not fail to fulfill it.

**That's the vision** Jesus gives us in the midst of tribulation. He is the sovereign one standing in the Holy Place with the stars in one palm and the keys to death and hell in the other. He was there at the beginning, and he's the one standing at the end, and **because he's the one standing at the end, I can be sure he has a plan in the present.**

I've told you this before: A few years ago I had a friend, about my age (so again, in his mid-30s) say to me a few years ago, "*Hey, I'm watching this great show—have you ever heard of it? It's called '24.'*" And I'm like, "Bro, where were you for the entire decade of the 2000s?" That was all we talked about!

And I told my friend about the time Veronica and I had taken the whole third and fourth seasons with us on a weekend beach retreat. I'm not sure we ever made it to the beach, just binge-watching the show. And at the end of one of the seasons, I think it was season 3, Jack dies! Like, *dies*. Or at least, you think he does. It certainly looks like he does. And I'm like, "Wait a minute ..." cause I've got the box of the fourth season here in my hands, and Jack's face is on the box! Something doesn't add up! Something sinister is afoot. It looks like Jack is dead, but his face is still on the box, so I think everything is gonna be alright."

John pulls back the veil and says, "His face is still on the box of the final season! And for now it may look like the bad guys are in charge, but they are not the ones writing the script. **Let the powers of earth do what they want; they're not writing the script. His face is still on the box.**"

Whenever I'm discouraged, or I feel overwhelmed, I can look at the first chapter of Revelation, and say, "His face is still on the box! He wins!"

#### **Jesus says to John in this opening vision of Revelation 1:**

- **"John, Look at me.** I am more powerful than you could ever imagine."
- **Look at me, John: I died for you** ... in your worst moment, I showed my love for you.
- **John, look at me!** I used my great power to save you, and now I am using that same great power to perfect my purposes in you. Death and hell can't touch you; I absorbed them into my nail-scarred hands, and now I'm turning all their power for my purposes and your good.

**So what are you afraid of, John?** Do you really think Caesar is winning, John?

- The only legacy Caesar is going to leave is a **cheap pizza place** and some ruins in Rome.
- And NERO? Don't be afraid of Nero, John. One day your name, John, will be the most common name in the English language, and people will name their dogs Nero.
- **John, look at me: I have the keys to death and hell.**
- **Look at me, struggling believer,** I'll get you through this!
- **Look at me, lonely college student,** I'll take care of you.
- **Look at me, divorced mom**—I'll be your strength and shield and the Father to your fatherless children."
- Do you think I can't control cancer? *I have the keys to that ...*
- You think I don't know you need a job? I have the keys to that too.

- **Do you think I don't know you're worried about your marriage?** I got those keys too!
- Are you overwhelmed by your temptations and your weaknesses and addictions? Is pornography just destroying you and you don't know how to shake it? Is anxiety crushing you? I have the keys to all of those things.
- **LOOK AT ME!** Look at my power, my control, my love. My right hand holds the power of the stars and holds the keys of death and hell, and it's a nail-scarred hand, which means it's filled with nothing but blessing and healing for you.

**The purpose of Revelation isn't to terrify us, but to give us a towering vision of the justice of God and the authority of Jesus above it all.<sup>9</sup>**

### Conclusion / Music (It is Well)

**Here's been my prayer in this series:** that God would open your eyes to see the authority of Jesus.

- It's one of my favorite Old Testament scenes: **2 Kings 6**. The wicked king has sent an army to come after Elisha and his servant to kill them. And the servant is terrified because he sees this massive army coming up over the hills to destroy them. But Elisha was totally unfazed and the servant said, **"How can you be so calm?"** and Elisha kind of rolls his eyes and says to God, "Lord, open his eyes!" and suddenly, the servant sees around this massive invading army an even more massive army of angels, standing ready to protect Israel. God pulled back the veil on what was happening in the world and that was enough—seeing God was in charge of it all is what the servant needed to have peace.
- ***And don't think that's just a sensationalized, one-off, weird Old Testament thing. John's about to show us that's always happening!***
- **In the 1800s, John Paton** and his wife were serving as missionaries among a hostile indigenous tribe on the New Hebrides island. One night, they were surrounded by warriors intent on killing them. The Patons prayed through the night, and to their surprise, the attackers never struck. Later, after the tribe converted to Christianity, the chief explained why they hadn't attacked that night. He said they saw **hundreds of men in shining garments with swords drawn**, standing guard around the missionary's hut.<sup>10</sup>
- What if you could see, at all times and all places, this kind of Savior standing guard over you, with his right hand of tenderness on you, and he won't let any pain or tribulation into your life that he doesn't intend to use for good? Whether you get delivered or boiled in oil and banished to Patmos, he's still in charge.

This is the vision that you need to see. Your time of tribulation may last a little while longer, but it won't be forever and he's in charge of it all.

Listen, I know some of you would love me to preach a theology that says if you'll just do what God wants, he'll make all your problems go away. And I'd love to do that. But that's not the biblical message. The biblical message is that Jesus is sovereign over it all, pursuing his good purposes in it all.

**Christian counselor Larry Crabb** says he loves using the book of Revelation to counsel suffering people, because, he says: **"On the island of Patmos Jesus did not give John relief from dire circumstances. Instead he gave him an unforgettable vision of the Son of God."** Larry Crabb

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Jen Wilkin

<sup>10</sup> From *Angels: God's Secret Agents* by Billy Graham.

**So friend, it's time for some of you to behold that vision. Stop shrinking before your tribulation and start gazing at your Savior. The key to victory in tribulation is always WORSHIP.**

Worship wherein you *defiantly* declare, with John, **"My problems are big, but Jesus, you are bigger."**

Our worship is a weapon, and **even when I don't** feel like it, I can say, *"When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well, with my soul.' And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back like a scroll, the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, even so, it is well, with my soul!"*

*So let's stand right now and declare that together, defiantly, as a church ... Can we? You stand, and worship teams, you come ...*