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The Things That You Have Seen

PROLOGUE (1:1-3)

1:1 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,

The opening words of the book of Revelation immediately reveal Jesus Christ as its futuristic and central theme, presenting Him in His present and future glory. The book's prophetic character is indicated in the words "the revelation of Jesus Christ" that concerns "things that must soon take place." The word *revelation* is the translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis* (the basis of the English word *apocalypse*) without the article, meaning a "revelation, disclosure, or unveiling." It is a revelation of truth *about* Christ, a disclosure of future events surrounding His second coming when Christ will be revealed. It is also a revelation which comes *from* Christ.

The title, "The Revelation to John," merely identifies the human author, whom we believe to be the apostle John (see Introduction; John's name appears three other times in this book, 1:4, 9; 22:8). The subject actually is a revelation *of* Jesus Christ, described as given by God the Father to Christ the Son and then revealed "to his servant." The revelation of the Father to the Son is a common theme in John's Gospel (John 3:34-35; 5:20-24; 7:16; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10, 24; 16:15; 17). The substance of the revelation, "things that must soon take place," is similar to expressions in Daniel 2:28-29, 45 and Revelation 4:1; 22:6.

That which Daniel said would occur "in the latter days" (2:28) is here described as "soon" (Gr., *en tachei*), "quickly or suddenly coming to pass,"

indicating the rapid progression of events once they begin to occur. The idea is not that the event may occur soon, but that when it does, it will be sudden (cf. Luke 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rom. 16:20). A similar word, *tachys*, is translated “soon” seven times in Revelation (2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6–7, 12, 20).

Revelation 1:1 also says this revelation came from Christ “by sending his angel to his servant John.” The progression of the revelation was from God the Father to Christ the Son to the angel, who communicated the message to John. The name of the angel is not given, though Gabriel has been suggested (cf. Dan. 8:16; 9:2, 21–22; Luke 1:26–31). The reference to John as a “servant” (v. 1) rather than as an apostle is not unusual considering the way other New Testament apostles referred to themselves (cf. Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1).

1:2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

The expression “bore witness” in verse 2 means “to testify.” The book of Revelation is not only the Word of God in that it originates in God, but John testifies to his reception of it. It has the added weight of being “the testimony of Jesus Christ,” and John was faithful to record everything he saw. He was an eyewitness.

1:3 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.

An unusual feature of the opening verses is the special blessing in verse 3, which is addressed to the reader [singular], and to those [plural] who hear and keep the words of the prophecy. This structure reflects the situation of the early church. Copies of the various New Testament books were not readily available, so the letters were read aloud in the assembly (cf. Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13).¹ The blessing on both the reader and the hearers is fulfilled as they “keep” or observe what is written (which is emphasized

again in 22:7). Revelation is the only book of Scripture containing such a direct promise of blessing. This blessing is the first of seven in the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14).

Revelation is described by the phrase “the words of this prophecy,” implying that the book as a whole is prophetic. The importance of the prophecy is emphasized by the phrase “for the time is near.” The Greek word for “time” here is *kairos*, which means a season of time in contrast to the terms *hōra*, “hour,” and *chronos*, which means time as on a calendar or clock. The next great event on God’s prophetic calendar, the imminent return of Jesus Christ to rapture His church, is near from the standpoint of prophetic revelation and could occur at any moment. Our task is to be obedient and expectant!

FOUR AGES IN REVELATION		
Chapters	Age	Years
Chapter 1–3	Church Age	? Years
Chapter 4–19	Tribulation Age	7 Years
Chapter 20	Kingdom Age	1,000 Years
Chapter 21–22	Eternal Age	Endless

SALUTATION (1:4–8)

1:4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

The recipients of Revelation were the seven churches in Asia, that is, the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is part of modern-day Turkey. We will discuss these in more detail when we consider Revelation chapters 2–3.

John’s greeting of “grace . . . peace” is also common to Paul’s letters. These

two words capture the richness of the Christian faith. Grace is God’s attitude toward believers, coupled with His loving gifts—which will never change. Peace refers to our relationship with God—which includes both the peace made with God at salvation and our ongoing relationship with Him, which we can enjoy, or fail to enjoy, as we walk or fail to walk in obedience to God.

The eternal God, the source of all grace and peace, is introduced as the One “who is and who was and who is to come.” Because of subsequent references to Christ and the Holy Spirit, this is best understood as referring to God the Father. The concept of past, present, and future corresponds to the three-fold chronological division of the book itself (1:19) and is used to help us grasp the timelessness of the Godhead (this phrase also occurs with variations in 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5).

Joining the Father in salutation are “the seven spirits who are before his throne.” Some consider the term an allusion to the Holy Spirit (cf. Isa. 11:2–3). Others believe these were seven angels in places of high privilege before the throne of God (cf. Rev. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). The word *spirit* is commonly used of evil spirits, that is, demons or fallen angels; of the human spirit (cf. Mark 8:12); and occasionally of holy angels (cf. Heb. 1:7, 14). Those who favor the seven spirits as referring to the Holy Spirit find justification in Isaiah 11. The message originates in God the Father and the Spirit.

1:5–6 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

This greeting also comes from Jesus Christ in His character as the faithful witness (cf. 3:14), the firstborn of the dead—referring to His resurrection—and as the ruler of the kings of the earth. As the faithful Witness, Jesus fulfilled the role of a prophet (John 18:37). In contrast to those who had been restored to life only to die again, Christ is the first to receive

a resurrection body, which is immortal (cf. Acts 26:23).

Just as Christ is “the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15), indicating that He was before all creation in time, so Christ is first also in resurrection. As Christ is first (cf. “firstfruits,” 1 Cor. 15:20) so others are to follow Christ in His resurrection. Later in Revelation we read that Christ and all the righteous dead are included in “the first resurrection” (Rev. 20:5–6). The wicked dead are raised last, after the millennium (20:12–13).

Jesus’ witness and His resurrection are now past. His role as the Ruler of all the earth’s kings and kingdoms is still future, to be achieved after His victory over the beast and the false prophet (Rev. 19), fulfilling Isaiah 9:6–7 and many other verses (cf. Ps. 72:11 and Zech. 14:9). But the special emphasis here is what Jesus has already accomplished for believers, because He “loves us” or “keeps on loving us,” and “has freed us from our sins” (the aorist tense in Greek, once for all) by His own blood.

Just as Christ has the right to rule, though He has not yet taken His throne as King, so believers have been made both a kingdom and a priesthood (cf. Rev. 5:10). As a kingdom, we are under Christ’s sovereign rule (Col. 1:13), and as a priesthood we have the privilege of direct access to God (1 Pet. 2:9). The only proper response to such a glorious reality is to offer a doxology of praise to God, as John does at the end of verse 6, sealing it with “Amen” (“So be it”).

1:7 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.

John’s doxology is followed by an equally glorious announcement: the second coming of Jesus Christ. The use of the present tense depicts a future act that is so certain to be fulfilled it can be spoken of as already happening. Christ was received by a cloud in His ascension (Acts 1:9), and so He will come again in the clouds of heaven (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27).

There is no indication that the world as a whole will see Christ at the time of the rapture of the church (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16–18, where believers will be

caught up “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,” v. 17). But when Jesus comes back to establish His kingdom, all will see Him, including both those who “pierced him” and all the peoples of earth. Of course, Jesus’ crucifiers who were responsible for His death on Calvary are dead, but this term doesn’t have to be limited to them. According to Zechariah 12:10, the nation of Israel will look on Jesus when He returns and mourn its rejection of Him as Messiah, although many Jews will be saved during the tribulation. The wailing of the Gentile nations will in large part be not a cry of repentance, but one of terror at judgment.

To this John adds, “Even so, Amen.” This is a powerful statement of the certainty of Christ’s coming and the events surrounding it. The NET Bible seeks to capture this force with the rendering, “This will certainly come to pass! Amen.”² Jesus is called “the Amen” in Revelation 3:14.

1:8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

God now speaks, declaring Himself to be the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The description of the Father

JESUS CHRIST IS THE CENTRAL FIGURE OF REVELATION 1: 1–8. HE IS:

- 1. The Source of revelation (v. 1).**
- 2. The Channel of the Word and the testimony of God (v. 2).**
- 3. The faithful Witness, the Firstborn of the dead, and the Ruler of earth’s kings (v. 5).**
- 4. The God of grace who loves us, has cleansed our sins, and has made us a kingdom and a priesthood (vv. 5, 6).**
- 5. The coming King whose return will be powerful and glorious (v. 7).**

6. The Almighty God of eternity past and future (v. 8).

given in verse 4 is then repeated here, concluding with the title “the Almighty,” a word that occurs nine times in Revelation. It is probable that verse 8 applies to Christ, even as verse 4 does to God the Father, since Christ is the eternal Second Person of the Godhead (cf. Rev. 22:12–13).

THE VISION OF CHRIST GLORIFIED (1:9–18)

1:9 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.

It's clear that John was not writing to the believers in the seven churches of Asia Minor as their superior or simply an uninvolved witness to the events that would impact them. Far from it; he was their fellow believer in Jesus and their fellow sufferer for the Lord's sake. As the longest-surviving apostle, John was well known to these churches, and he felt a very close bond with them in their time of tribulation. And like them, he was also called to patiently endure hardship for Christ. John himself, of course, was also enduring a trial as a lonely exile on the island of Patmos.

This small island, rocky and forbidding in its terrain, about ten miles long and six miles wide, is located in the Aegean Sea southwest of Ephesus just beyond the island of Samos. Early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius state that John was sent to this island as an exile under the ruler Domitian. (See Introduction.) According to Victorinus, John, though aged, was forced to labor in the mines located at Patmos. Early sources also indicate that about A.D. 96, at Domitian's death, John was allowed to return to Ephesus when the emperor Nerva was in power.

It was in these bleak circumstances, shut off from friends and human fellowship, that John was given the most extensive revelation of future things shown to any writer of the New Testament. Although John's persecutors could confine his body, they could not imprison the Holy Spirit or silence the

testimony of Jesus!

1:10–11 I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

John was carried beyond normal sense into a state where God could reveal supernaturally the contents of this book. Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14; etc.), Peter (Acts 10:10–11; 11:5), and Paul (Acts 22:17–18) had similar experiences.

Some Bible commentators say the expression “on the Lord’s day” refers to the first day of the week,³ the day of Christ’s resurrection and Christians’ day of worship, while others believe it is a reference to “the day of the Lord” as used in the Old Testament—an extended period of time in which God deals in judgment and rules over the earth. Although it is common today to refer to Sunday as “the Lord’s day,” it is not used this way in the Bible. The New Testament consistently refers to Christ’s resurrection as occurring on “the first day of the week,” never as “the Lord’s day” (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Ryrie notes, “[The word] ‘Lord’s’ is an adjective . . . used only here and in 1 Corinthians 11:20 in the New Testament. Unless this is a reference to Sunday, there is no place in the New Testament where this expression is used for that day, since the usual designation is ‘the first day of the week.’”⁴ So John was projected forward to the future day of the Lord as he received the revelation of the unfolding of the end times.

The voice John heard was undoubtedly the voice of Christ, who had identified Himself in verse 8. John is given the command to write what he sees, a command given twelve times throughout the book (in 10:4 John is told not to write). The message of the entire book is to be sent to each of the seven churches of Asia Minor along with the particular message to the individual church. The seven churches are mentioned in the order of the letters of chapters 2 and 3, following the circular route that a messenger would take

in visiting each church to deliver the messages.

1:12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me,
and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,

In the tabernacle and later in the temple at Jerusalem, one of the items of furniture was a seven-branched lampstand, a single stand with three lamps on each side and one lamp in the center forming the central shaft. It would seem from the description here that instead of one lampstand with seven lamps there are seven separate lampstands, each made of gold and arranged in a circle.

The symbolism of the lampstands is explained in verse 20. They represent the seven churches and are significant symbols of the churches in their principal function of giving light. The golden metal, as in the tabernacle and Solomon's temple, represents the deity and glory of Christ, and the implied olive oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit.

1:13–16 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Christ is portrayed as in the midst of the lampstands, that is, in the midst of the churches. His title, "son of man," frequently appears in the Gospels, but only twice in Revelation (here and in 14:14). The title emphasizes Jesus' humanity and Messianic character, and He used it more than any other term to refer to Himself.

This description of Christ has special significance in light of the events that are portrayed in Revelation. His long robe and sash are the clothing of a priest and judge. His snow-white hair corresponds to the vision of God in

Daniel 7:9, which also describes the throne of God as “fiery flames” and “burning fire.” This is a picture of the deity of Christ, who possesses all the attributes of God. His eyes as a flame of fire speak of the searching righteousness and divine judgment upon all that is impure. The bronze of His feet symbolizes divine judgment as embodied in the Old Testament type of the bronze altar and other items of bronze used in connection with sacrifice for sin (cf. Ex. 38:30). The picture of Christ standing ready to judge and purify is completed by the description of His voice as the thundering voice of the Son of God revealing the majesty and power before which human authority must bow.

Three additional aspects of this initial revelation are mentioned in verse 16. The seven stars Christ holds in His hand are identified in verse 20 as “the angels of the seven churches.” Since the word *angel* means “messenger, one who is sent,” it is best to understand these angels not as divine beings, but as the leaders in these churches who are responsible for their spiritual welfare. These messengers representing the churches are in Christ’s right hand, indicating possession, protection, and sovereign control.

Christ is also described as having a sharp two-edged sword coming out of His mouth, representing divine judgment (cf. 19:15). As the ancient Roman historian Vegetius stated, the Romans were accustomed to using the sword as a principal weapon of offense. They were instructed to use it in such a way as not to expose themselves to a thrust from their enemy. They were to employ the sword in a stabbing action, since a stroking movement with its edge would seldom kill an enemy. So as used here in Revelation, the term implies killing the wicked.⁵ The particular word used for *sword* (Gr., *rhomphaia*) here refers to a long and heavy sword, mentioned five other times in Revelation (2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21). This is a weapon of devastating judgment.

The final reference to Christ in verse 16 is to the brilliant glory of His face. The bright light which seems to accompany the glory of God blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, and is both a terror to unbelievers and a blessing to believers. In 1 John 3:2, this same apostle assured us: “We know that when he [Christ] appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

1:17–18 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

The majesty and the glory of the vision he saw so overwhelmed John that he fell on his face before Jesus. John was the apostle who had enjoyed such intimate fellowship with Jesus on earth, even leaning on Him at the Last Supper. But now John is in the presence of the risen and glorified Son of God, whose power and majesty are no longer veiled and whose righteousness is revealed to be a consuming fire.

The revelation of God and His glory on other occasions in the Bible had a similar stunning effect, as illustrated in the cases of Abraham (Gen. 17:3), Manoah (Judg. 13:20), Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:23; 43:3; 44:4), Daniel (Dan. 8:17; 10:8–9, 15–17), and the disciples at Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt. 17:6). Those who do not fall down before God at the revelation of His glory and majesty are brought to immediate self-judgment and reverent fear as illustrated in the cases of Gideon (Judg. 6:22–23), Job (Job 42:5–6), Isaiah (Isa. 6:5), Zacharias (Luke 1:12), and Peter (Luke 5:8). In compassion toward the disciple whom He loved, Christ laid His hand on John and told him not to be afraid.

The eternal nature of Christ as the Son of God and Second Person of the Godhead is described in the expression “the first and the last.” As the eternal God, Jesus is the One who lives (present tense, i.e., “lives continually”), who died at one time, and who is now resurrected and is “alive forevermore.” And as the One who conquered death, Jesus also has “the keys of Death and Hades.”

This is a statement of Christ’s sovereign authority over both physical death and life after death. The Greek word *hades* is commonly translated “hell” in older versions of the Bible. But it is rightly translated here because Hades refers to the intermediate state and is distinguished in Scripture from the lake of fire, or *gehenna*, which refers to the eternal state.

In His death and resurrection, Christ stripped Satan of any authority

he may have had over death (cf. Heb. 2:14–15). Because Christ alone holds the key or authority over death, no one can die without divine permission even though afflicted by Satan and in trial and trouble—a word of comfort to all suffering believers. And because Christ is in authority over Hades, He is also sovereign over the life to come.

JOHN COMMISSIONED TO WRITE (1:19–20)

1:19–20 “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

Here in verse 19 is a three-part outline of Revelation. Though many outlines have been suggested for the book, none seems to be more practical or illuminating than the one given here.⁶ The things referred to as having already been seen are those we have just studied in chapter 1. The second division, “those [things] that are,” includes chapters 2 and 3 with the seven messages of Christ to the churches. This contemporary situation gives the historical context for the revelation that follows. The third division, “those [things] that are to take place after this,” would include the bulk of the book, comprising chapters 4 through 22.

The advantage of this outline is that it deals in a natural way with the material. In fact, we can say that this outline is the only one that allows Revelation to speak for itself without artificial manipulation and that leads to a futurist interpretation. It is worth noting that practically all other approaches to Revelation produce widely differing interpretations with little uniformity. The futurist school at least agrees on some of its main lines of interpretation.

The concluding verse in chapter 1 gives the key to the symbolism of the preceding revelation. As noted earlier, the mystery of the seven stars is revealed to represent the messengers to the churches, and the seven golden

lampstands are the churches themselves.

Perhaps the most important thing we can say at this point is that the revelation embodied in this book, though often presented in symbols, is designed to *reveal* truth, not to hide it. Symbols in Revelation refer to something literal. There is a reality behind the symbols. Though all the symbols are not explained, in the great majority of cases the symbols are interpreted in one way or another in the Word of God. So even though many people say that Revelation is too hard to understand, or too filled with symbolism to be meaningful in today's world, that is simply not the case. God gave us His revelation for our understanding, our obedience, our warning, and our encouragement.

Chapter 1, emphasizing as it does the glory of Christ, is in essence the theme of the entire book moving progressively to the climax—the second coming of Christ in power and glory to the earth in chapter 19. The spiritual significance of Christ and His coming to judge the world is applied in chapters 2 and 3 to the spiritual problems of the contemporary church, and forms the second major division of the entire book.

NOTES

1. Thomas interestingly notes that books like Revelation that an apostle designated for public reading also helped the church in later years to distinguish writings that were intended to be part of the canon of Scripture from the many other writings in circulation at the time that claimed have to apostolic authority. See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 62–63.
2. Michael H. Burer, W. Hall Harris III, Daniel B. Wallace, eds., *New English Translation: Novum Testamentum Graece* (Dallas: NET Bible Press, 2003), 633.
3. For the argument that “the Lord’s day” refers to Sunday, the first day of the week and the day of Christian worship, see Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 89–91.
4. Charles C. Ryrie, *Revelation*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 19.
5. Flavius Vegetius Renuis, *The Military Institutions of the Romans*, trans. Lt. John Clark (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 19–21.
6. See Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), vol. 4, 297.