



# REVELATION

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JOHN P.  
SCHARLEMANN

**LIVING WAY**  
BIBLE STUDY

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- 4. THE NARRATIVE** – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P.A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P.A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson, and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

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The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P.A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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# REVELATION

JOHN P. SCHARLEMANN

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SYMBOLISM IN NUMBERS

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PERSONAL APPLICATION – REVELATION 1:1–8

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*“In our own church body, the study of Revelation has been discouraged and there are some good reasons for its neglect. There are many passages that seem obscure and confusing. The imagery is violent and frightening and its mysterious style seems bizarre to the modern reader.*



**T**he Revelation to John attracts more curiosity than any other book of the Bible. Self-styled media evangelists are eager to distort John’s images and symbols into a day-by-day countdown of the world’s destruction. Some authors have used Revelation to accumulate minor fortunes. There is a simple explanation for all this curiosity. We all inwardly wish to find some specific indication of our own future. To some degree, Revelation fulfills this curiosity, but only to the extent that Scripture as a whole prophesies the destructiveness of sin and the promise of man’s salvation through Jesus Christ.

In our own church body, the study of Revelation has been discouraged and there are some good reasons for its neglect. There are many passages that seem obscure and confusing. The imagery is violent and frightening and its mysterious style seems bizarre to the modern reader. Martin Luther had doubts at first about Revelation even as he had doubts about the Apocrypha (those books between the Old Testament and the New Testament). Indeed, Luther once said, “My spirit cannot adapt itself to this book.” Even though Martin Luther came to reject the Apocrypha, he accepted Revelation wholeheartedly because of its messages of warning and comfort.

Perhaps the most serious obstacle to the modern reader is Revelation’s chronology. Modern readers are accustomed to stories which progress in a linear fashion. One event follows another. Each period of time succeeds the previous in chronological order. If we were to interpret Revelation in this linear fashion (as, for example, does Hal Lindsey in *The Late Great Planet Earth*), we would find that the world is to be destroyed five different times and will endure two general resurrections! Jesus indicates in the Gospels

that there will be only one general resurrection at the end of time. Second Peter 3:10–13 is quite clear that the destruction of the cosmos will be a single event upon the coming of the Lord in judgment.

In contrast to this linear method, Revelation must be interpreted in a cyclical fashion. Have you ever bought a Christmas tree? When inspecting that tree, did you look at the tree from one side only? If we examine the tree from one side only, we may miss seeing the crooked trunk, the brown patch, or the missing branch. Revelation approaches the history of the world in the same fashion as we approach a Christmas tree; it looks at the same event from a number of different perspectives.

The Greek word from which we translate “Revelation” is *apokálypsis*. We are familiar with the word “apocalypse” and understand it to mean some sort of massive universal destruction (as in the movie *Apocalypse Now*). But what did it mean to John’s readers? The Greek *apokálypsis* means “uncovering” or “unveiling.” Besides Revelation, there are several other apocalyptic writings in existence. The most notable is Daniel 7–12. In the Apocrypha, 2 Esdras and 2 Baruch exhibit apocalyptic features.

What are some features of apocalyptic writing? First, apocalyptic writing is not given in clear, self-evident language. It uses symbolic language, that is, images which represent concepts. We do the same thing in political cartoons, for example, when we use Uncle Sam to represent the United States and a bear to represent Soviet Russia. If we were to interpret political cartoons in a straightforward manner, or if we were ignorant about the meaning of these cartoon figures, we would puzzle over the image of a bear struggling with a man wearing striped pants and a top hat. Because we recognize the symbols, we can understand the cartoon as a description of the struggle between two world superpowers. Revelation must be interpreted in a similar fashion. If we absorb the imagery in a straightforward manner, the book will appear no better than an hallucination. If we understand its imagery in the same way it was understood by the people of John’s day, the book will have significance. John’s readers were accustomed to all these symbols. We are not. Our task is to put ourselves in their shoes.

Second, apocalyptic literature focuses primarily on the end of time and to a lesser degree on the Messiah. That is why we dare not become obsessed with this book. Those who focus their Christian proclamation on Revelation alone will, by and large, skip the main message of Scripture; we are saved by the grace of God through the blood and sacrifice of His Son on the cross. In this sense, Revelation is a poor introduction to an understanding of the Christian faith.

*When he authored this book, John was growing old.  
The other apostles had already reached their heavenly  
home and John longed to be with his Lord as well.*



The author of the Apocalypse identifies himself simply as “John.” There is no reason to doubt that this is the Lord’s apostle, John, the son of Zebedee. Revelation was written during the reign of the despicable Emperor Domitian (AD 81 to 96). Domitian was the second son of the Emperor Vespasian. Vespasian became emperor through the loyalty and devotion of his army. He was politically competent with great personal integrity. For political reasons, Vespasian supported a growing emphasis on the worship of the goddess Roma, symbol of the empire and emperor. Vespasian did not persecute the Christians and never took the claim of his own personal deity seriously.

When Vespasian died, his second son, Domitian, ascended the throne. He was incompetent and succeeded only because of the loyalty of the armies to his father. The Roman aristocrats and philosophers hated Domitian. Domitian responded by emphasizing his deity and commanding that all Rome worship him. During his reign, it was the practice throughout the provinces to call a suspected Christian into court and confront him with the idol images of Domitian and Roma. The suspected Christian was asked three times about his faith. If he confessed to Christianity, the court commanded that he curse Jesus and offer incense to idols. If he refused, he was executed. It was an age in which courage became the Christian’s calling.

When he authored this book, John was growing old. The other apostles had already reached their heavenly home and John longed to be with his Lord as well. We can feel the bitter sorrow John experienced as a result of the world’s incorrigible evil, mixed with his great joy at knowing that he, too, would soon live with his Lord in eternity. May we enter these pages with the same mixture of awe and great joy.

#### **SYMBOLISM IN NUMBERS**

The recurrence of some numbers throughout the Apocalypse cannot be ignored. Most noticeable are the numbers 4, 7, 10, and 12. To the Hebrew mind of John’s day, the number seven denoted completion. Ten, being a round number, was understood as a suggestion of indefiniteness and of magnitude. Four was a symbol of the visible creation (as in “the four corners of the earth”). Twelve was an appropriate symbol for the Old and New Testament churches (twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles). By extension, we can begin to sense the meaning of other numbers to which John refers, particularly the numbers 666, 1,000, 12,000 and 144,000. We will discuss these numbers in a later unit.

Other numbers used in Revelation with varying degrees of symbolism: 2, 3, 3-1/2, 5, 6, 24, 42, 1260, 1600, 7000. Be aware of numbers! They are used for a reason!

**PERSONAL APPLICATION***REVELATION 1:1-8*

1. Through whom does God send His revelation? (1:1; Hebrews 1:1-2)

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How do we receive His revelation? (1:3; Romans 10:17)

2. John is described as the one who “testifies to everything he saw” about the Lord’s Word. Do we do the same? Why or why not?

3. John, along with his brother James, is called one of the “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). Why is he called this? (See Luke 9:51-56)

4. How is this nickname appropriate to his authorship of Revelation?

5. Verse 3 records a blessing on those who hear the words of Revelation and take it to heart. What blessings do we routinely hear at the end of our worship services?  
Numbers 6:24-26

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2 Corinthians 13:14

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In what way does the blessing of Revelation 1:3 differ from the Aaronic or Apostolic benedictions used at the end of Lutheran worship services?

6. John warns that the end of time is near (1:3). Yet, he wrote these words more than 1,900 years ago. Should we be concerned about the Lord’s delay? Why or why not? (2 Peter 3:8-9)

7. If the number seven is a symbol for completion, what does John imply when he sends his letter to the seven churches?

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How should this affect our personal response to Revelation?

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8. In verses 4 and 5, “grace and peace” come from (1) the Lord’s divine name of the Old Testament, (2) the seven spirits (or sevenfold spirit) before the throne, and (3) Jesus Christ. What name do we give this threefold source?

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9. Jesus is called “faithful witness” (verse 5). How has the Lord been a faithful witness in your life?

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10. If Jesus was the “firstborn from the dead” (verse 5), what does that mean about our own resurrection? (1 Corinthians 15:23–24)

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11. For what reason are we to be “a kingdom and priests” (1:6; Isaiah 61:6; 1 Peter 2:5 & 9)?

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12. Describe how Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection (Acts 1:9–11). How will we come again? (1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17)

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How does the description of the Lord’s return coincide with the angel’s promise of Acts 1:11?

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13. Read Zechariah 12:10 and compare it to Revelation 1:7. Who is it that was pierced? Why was He pierced?

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Of what significance is the prophecy in Zechariah that they will mourn as for “an only child,” and “a firstborn son”?

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14. What does it mean for our evangelism work when John says that at the Last Day every eye will see the Lord Jesus — “even those who pierced him” (1:7)?

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15. How would we in 21st century America translate the phrase, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8)?

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16. In verse 8, God calls Himself the one, “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” What does this mean to you?

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# REVELATION

REVELATION 1:1-8

GREETINGS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

REVELATION 1:4-8

7

PERSONAL APPLICATION – REVELATION 1:9-20

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*“The revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation” is in the singular. Be assured that it is incorrect to refer to this book as Revelations because John’s vision is comprised of one general revelation, that is, the triumph of God’s children over evil.*

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## THE PROLOGUE

### REVELATION 1:1-8

The book of Revelation is recorded in the form of a letter. Like any organized letter, it begins with some introductory remarks, indicating what the letter is about, who it is from, and to whom it is written. It sets the mood for the heart of the message to follow. Many other books in the New Testament are also in letter form. Indeed, most of the New Testament books are written this way. That is why they are called Epistles. The word originates from the Greek *epistellein*, which means, “to send to.”

## THE “REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST”

### REVELATION 1:1-3

Notice how the first verse of chapter 1 begins with this introduction: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation” is in the singular. Be assured that it is incorrect to refer to this book as Revelations because John’s vision is comprised of one general revelation, that is, the triumph of God’s children over evil.

Even though our book has been called “the Revelation of John,” notice again how the opening verse describes it as: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” Certainly, the revelation is given to John, but it is from and about the risen and ascended Lord.



The express purpose of the revelation is to show God's people the many events which, by necessity, must soon unfold. Because John is given a peek at the inevitable sequence of events, the Lord's promise of Amos 3:7 is once again fulfilled: "For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets." The revelation is "sent." The Greek word for "sent," *esmanen*, can more fully be translated "signed." This message is "signed" to John, supporting the contention that much of Revelation is in "sign language," that is, in signs and symbols. John is described as the believer who "bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw." The apostle has no hesitation about sharing his message of victory in Christ.

John promises a blessing on those who hear and read the words of the revelation and take to heart its warnings and words of comfort. The blessing (v. 3) is the first of seven blessings found in the book. It echoes Jesus' words in Luke 11:28: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" For those who refuse the message, the moment of crisis is at hand.



## GREETINGS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

### *REVELATION 1:4-8*

John's letter is addressed to the seven churches, which are in Asia. In John's day, the geographical area known as "Asia" consisted of far less territory than the continent with which we are familiar. Asia, in John's day, referred to the western third of the nation we know as Turkey. The seven cities to which John addressed his letter were located on the great circular road, which linked the wealthiest, influential, and populated parts of the territory.

The letter begins with a greeting. John calls for grace, the free gift of divine favor and peace, the state of spiritual contentment, which follows on those who heed his letter. He states that this grace and peace has a triple source.

First, it stems from “him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” Notice how this is a paraphrase of God’s name given in Exodus 3:14–15 when Moses is asked to rally God’s people for the Exodus. Moses wants to know the name of the authority commanding his mission. God answers from the burning bush, “I am who I am.” In the Hebrew this can also be translated, “I will be what I will be.” The Lord underscores His name in Exodus 3:15 by saying, “This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.” To be sure, it is the divine name echoed here in John’s Prologue.

Grace and peace also come from the “seven spirits who are before his throne.” Remember, how the number seven denotes “completion”? The “seven spirits” may be a reference to God’s complete Spirit, the one we call the Holy Spirit.

Grace and peace flow from Jesus Christ as well. John describes the Christ with a threefold title:

1. “Faithful witness” – By Jesus’ very life, death, and resurrection, He gives witness to the truth of God’s salvation. The Greek word for “witness” is *martys* from which we get the word “martyr.” Isn’t a martyr one who has given faithful witness?
2. “Firstborn from the dead” – This is the title Paul gives Jesus in Colossians 1:18. By virtue of His resurrection, Jesus is declared supreme ruler of the Church.
3. “The ruler of the kings of the earth” – A title which originates in Psalm 89:27 where the Psalmist foresees a Messiah who will establish an everlasting kingdom. John declares this “threefold Christ” has released us from our sins because of His great love for us.

As a result of the Lord’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ, believers are molded into God’s kingdom. On Mt. Sinai, God promised His people He would form them into “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) if they would obey Him fully and keep His covenant. The early church considered itself to be the true Israel inheriting the promises of its predecessors. That’s why Peter describes Christians as a “royal priesthood” and “a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). Believers in Christ comprise the kingdom promised to the people of Israel.

This is the kingdom that waits expectantly for the visible return of its king. In Daniel 7:13, Daniel has a vision in which he sees “one like a son of man” coming “with the clouds of heaven.” Zechariah 12:10 foresees the day in which the citizens of Jerusalem will “look on... him whom they have pierced” and “weep bitterly over him.” The message of these two prophets is joined by John in 1:7 to describe the Last Day on which the glorified Lord would return in Judgment.

Throughout Revelation, God calls Himself “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8, 21:6, 22:13). Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. By implication, God is not only the first and the last, but everything in between as well. He is the Lord who reigns through the entire course of human history. He is the “Almighty,” the One “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” This description is used to describe both God the Father and Jesus emphasizing their oneness in being eternal and almighty (Isaiah 9:6).

We’ve all written letters to friends or relatives. But how many of us have ever written about a vision directed from the “Alpha and Omega”? This is truly a special letter whose prologue confronts its reader with the Almighty and Eternal God.

**PERSONAL APPLICATION***REVELATION 1:9–20*

Please read Revelation 1:9–20 and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit before answering the questions.

1. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples with the power to preach. Peter boldly proclaimed that the words of Joel were reaching fulfillment. “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). Assuming John was nearly 90 years old, how does the prophecy apply to his authorship? What does this suggest about when the last days began?

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2. John was sent into exile for his faith. Did it stop him from professing the name of Jesus?

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Do American Christians suffer for their faith? Explain.

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3. We are accustomed to remembering Jesus as a “Good Shepherd,” or a “sacrificial lamb,” or a “suffering servant.” In what way does John’s portrayal of the ascended Lord affect your image of Jesus?

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4. What does it mean that Jesus has the “keys of death and Hades?” (v. 18; Matthew 10:32–33)

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Of what importance is this promise to the Church? (1 Corinthians 15:55–57)

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5. There is a school of thought that toward the end of earth’s history, Christians will be taken to heaven while unbelievers suffer a period of “tribulation.” In Revelation 1:9, John says he is already a partaker with his fellow Christians in “tribulation.” What does this suggest about the concept of tribulation? (2 Timothy 3:12; Romans 12:1)

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6. Has the Lord ever comforted you with the words, “Do not be afraid?” When?

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How is the glorified Christ speaking to you about your present troubles?

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7. Jesus’ voice is described like a “trumpet” (1:10). What sound initiates the general resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17?
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8. Describe Jesus' appearance at His transfiguration. (Mark 9:3; Matthew 17:2)

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How is He described in Revelation 1:16b?

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Why the similarity?

9. Describe Jesus' clothes in 1:13.

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What is the priest, Aaron, to wear in Exodus 28:3-5?

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What role does Jesus fulfill in Hebrews 7:26-27?

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What is the role of a prophet?

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How does Jesus fulfill this role in 1:10-11, 19?

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When Jesus holds the seven stars in His hand, what authority does He display?

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Question 132 of Luther's Small Catechism asks, "For what threefold office was Christ anointed?" The answer: "Christ was anointed to be my prophet, priest, and king." How is this threefold office demonstrated in the first chapter of Revelation? List the verses for each office.

10. To what is God's Word likened in Ephesians 6:17?

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Why is it appropriate to view God's Word in this fashion? (See Hebrews 4:12)

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How can we use God's Word in a similar manner? (See Isaiah 49:2-3)

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*John hears a great voice like a trumpet blast behind him. It is the voice of the Lord Jesus. The voice commands John to write what he is about to see and send his writing to the seven churches.*



Several major prophets began their writing with majestic visions of God’s glory. Isaiah, when he was called by God, saw a vision of the Lord “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” with angels standing guard (Isaiah 6:1ff). Or how about Ezekiel who recorded those fiery visions of God in the opening chapters of his book? John continues the tradition in Revelation, seeing and recording a vision of the victorious, ascended Lord, Jesus Christ. The triumphant Christ overwhelms John, restores him, and appoints him to write to the seven churches.

## THE COMMISSIONING

### REVELATION 1:9–11

John explains a little bit about himself and the situation into which he has been led. John calls himself a “brother” to his readers, indicating a special relationship with his fellow believers. Their common condition is described in the context of “tribulation,” “kingdom,” and “patient endurance.” Tribulation arises from faithfulness to the principles of the Christian faith, the kind of tribulation Paul writes about to Timothy: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Yet, by persevering through tribulation, Christians have the promise of God’s Kingdom.

John is on Patmos, a rocky, 16 square mile island in the Aegean Sea. Patmos was a penal colony to which Roman authorities sent offenders.



What was John's offense? He tells us, "The word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Remember, this was a time in which the Emperor demanded idol worship. Testimony about the deity of Jesus Christ was considered a criminal offense. Visitors to Patmos can still see the cave in which tradition says John lived when he saw his vision. Eusebius, an early church historian, records that John was finally released by the emperor Nerva (AD 96–98) and returned to Ephesus. Whether this is accurate or not remains questionable.

John says he was "in the Spirit" on the day of his vision. We need not conclude that "in the Spirit" meant some sort of trance-like or ecstatic state. For example, the term "in the Spirit" is used by Jesus in Matthew 22:43 as a way of describing David's state of inspiration upon composing Psalm 110. John was inspired by God to see, hear, and write the revelation. The vision takes place on "the Lord's Day," a technical term for the first day of the week, the day when Christ rose from the dead.

John hears a great voice like a trumpet blast behind him. It is the voice of the Lord Jesus. The voice commands John to write what he is about to see and send his writing to the seven churches.

### THE GLORIFIED LORD

#### *REVELATION 1:12-16*

When John turns to find the source of the command, he is overwhelmed by the vision. There, in the middle of seven golden lampstands is one "like a son of man." In Revelation 1:20, the Lord explains that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches to which John's letter is sent. Who is the "one like a son of man"? The image comes from Daniel 7:9–10, 13–15. Let's look up these verses and explore them.

In Daniel, we have a vision of God the Father (the "Ancient of Days") with clothing "white as snow

and the hair of his head like pure wool." He sits on a fiery throne above blazing wheels of fire. As the Ancient of Days holds court, one "like a son of man" ascends and is presented before the Father. This "son of man" is given a universal eternal kingdom. (Remember how Jesus often referred to Himself as "the Son of Man"?) In Daniel, we witness the resurrected, victorious, ascended Lord Jesus being given His eternal throne. Even as the disciples saw Jesus ascend into heaven amid all the clouds, so in Daniel we see the same ascension event, but from heaven's perspective!

Now, look what happens in Revelation. The appearance of the "son of man" resembles Daniel's "Ancient of Days"! His head and hair are like "white wool" or "snow." His face shines like the sun. The "son of man" has become one and the same as the Ancient of Days! The Son is reunited with the Father in eternal glory.

How else is Jesus described? He wears high priestly vestments — a full-length robe and a priestly girdle. It is appropriate to see the risen Lord dressed in this manner because His high-priestly sacrifice brought us forgiveness with God and everlasting life. He has the penetrating insight of one whose eyes are like fire. His feet have the strength and stability of burnished bronze and His voice carries the thunder of rushing waters. In His hand rest seven stars, which Jesus describes in verse 20 as the angels of the seven churches. Not only are all the churches protected by guardian angels, but the Lord Himself reigns as sovereign over the angels, holding them in His right hand. The "sharp two-edged sword" symbolizes the penetrating power of His Word — that's why the sword comes out of His mouth. Hebrews 4:12 describes the Word of God as "sharper than any two-edged sword."



*How overwhelming is the picture of the Lord Jesus Christ reigning in glory! We worry and fret about our daily problems while the most powerful force in the universe, the Creator who fashioned all things with a word, reassures us, “Don’t be afraid.”*



### JOHN’S RESPONSE

#### *REVELATION 1:17-20*

What does John do when he sees this overwhelming vision? What would you do? He falls to the ground as if dead. His knees buckle from fear. It’s the same kind of response Peter, James and John displayed at Jesus’ Transfiguration after the Father’s voice boomed, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:5). It’s the same reaction Paul experienced on the road to Damascus when the same glorified Lord thundered from heaven, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 26:14).

The terrifying vision before John intends something quite different than destruction. Jesus lays His hand on John and says, “Fear not.” The fact that Jesus has just been holding seven stars in His hand presents no problem. The entire experience is visionary and symbolic and should not be expected to fulfill literalistic requirements. The same hand that sustains and nourishes the heavens and the Church also raises and upholds the individual.

Many times John had heard His master say, “Don’t be afraid.” Jesus said that when He approached the disciples walking on the water (Matthew 14:27). John’s heart must have leapt for joy when he recognized His master’s voice. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus says. Why not? Jesus reigns supreme. He is “the first and the last.” He is the one who suffered the agony of the crucifixion but now lives into eternity. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus says. He Himself controls the keys of death and hell. He unlocks the prison of sin and damnation for those who trust in Him. Rather than being afraid, Jesus asks John to write down all that the vision will reveal.

How overwhelming is the picture of the Lord Jesus Christ reigning in glory! We worry and fret about our daily problems while the most powerful force in the universe, the Creator who fashioned all things with a word, reassures us, “Don’t be afraid.” How pitifully our problems fade before the countenance of the glorified Savior and Redeemer. No longer do we see the frail form of a man ridiculed, scourged, and crucified. Before us stands the God whose power is unlimited and whose reign is everlasting!