

Revelation - Commentaries by William John Hocking

John's Vision of the First and the Last, John's Vision of the First and the Last: 1

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This afternoon reference was made to the comfort afforded at the present time to God's people by the book of Revelation, and this use of the Apocalypse is an undeniable fact, which might be better recognized than it is. The book was written for this very purpose at a time of great distress and tribulation in the history of the church.

There is much in the special features of the book of Revelation which at first sight is apt to deter people from reading it and studying it. But there is undoubted help as well as comfort to be obtained by the simplest, if they only approach it in the right manner. And indeed there is but one suitable manner in which properly to approach any part of scripture, and that manner is to have an earnest, reverent, and consuming desire to see in that particular scripture some special communication concerning the Person of Jesus Christ.

The great lesson of the holy scripture and the great subject of God's teaching by His Spirit throughout all the ages is that there is but one Person who can adequately help the youngest and oldest, the feeblest and strongest of His people, and that Person is Jesus Christ. Now it was particularly for John and for the saints who were tried like John that the vision of Jesus Christ which we have in the first chapter of the Revelation was given and recorded.

JOHN AS AN EXILE

Let us think for a moment of John and the circumstances in which he was found. It is fairly clear from scripture that John was the last survivor of the Apostolic band. He was a young man as a disciple of Christ in Galilee; he was an old man in Patmos. He had seen many changes in the interval, and had suffered many vicissitudes since he first saw the "Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."

Let us suppose that this vision was granted to John toward the end of the first century. Now think of some of the important events of the first century. Let us for simplicity's sake take it that in the year 30 our Lord was crucified; thirty years after that would be the year 60, when the apostle Paul came to Rome as a prisoner, and all the work of the Spirit of God of which we read in the Acts had then been accomplished. During that period the gospel had gone abroad in its fullness and power all over the known world, and people came into the church of God by myriads. Ten years later, in the year 70, Jerusalem, the city of the great King, the earthly center of Israel's hopes, was destroyed, and was left a heap of smoking ruins by the Roman army. About the year 90, John, the old apostle, wrote those three tender letters that we still have, full of affection and truth, and applicable to the family of God everywhere and at all times.

Here, when those crowded years had all passed, we read of him as a lonely exile. He had seen so many divine wonders, seen the church of God arise, develop, and spread, seen also evil creep into that holy church, seen men giving up, turning aside, becoming corrupted by the influence of evil doctrine, seen, moreover, the persecuting power of Rome devastating the church of God, as it had done the Jewish nation, and now he himself in his old age is banished to the Isle of Patmos. How full that hundred years was to him of sorrow, regret and disappointment! What had looked so fair in prospect had now withered; the gospel which went out to conquer the whole world was now as it were a failure, he himself was held prisoner by the civil power of Rome, exiled from the society of his friends, and of his children in the faith, left to die alone in Patmos, forsaken of all.

John's was a sad experience for an old man of piety and of such repute in the church. When he was young and impulsive he had said to the Master, I can drink of Thy cup, Lord, I am able to be baptized with Thy baptism. The Lord had said to him in effect, Thou shalt indeed drink of My cup. As thou wilt see, I shall go to Golgotha, My service a failure, what I have labored for producing nothing; the years of My ministry all barren to human sight; and I Myself forsaken, given up by My nation, handed over to the power of Caesar to be crucified. Thou too shalt drink of that cup, and see thy service a failure too, thyself a prisoner of Rome unable to testify for thy Master. Did John in Patmos recall the words of Jesus? (Matthew 20:22, 23).

But the Lord knew that when He was at Calvary, when His nation had turned away from Him, and delivered Him to the Gentiles to be crucified and spit upon, when many of His disciples feared, and forsook and even denied Him, there was one who came near Him that day; there was one that did not utterly forsake his Master; there was one found at the lonely cross, upon whom He looked, and to whom He spoke, and that disciple was John, come there to drink, if he might, of his Master's cup.

The Lord does not overlook any act of faithful adherence to Himself, and so years afterward when John was banished from Christian intercourse and society, with no earthly friend to solace and comfort, the Master, according to promise, did not leave nor forsake him. The Master came to visit His servant in the Isle of Patmos. He came, but what for? Why does He come to those who are cast down? He comes to illuminate the hearts of those who are, as it were, shrouded in darkness, those who are feeling the cruel power of the world, and the pressure of adverse circumstances. He came to John to lift up, to reveal Himself, to stand before this sorrowing disciple and to reveal afresh to him His glories, and His unchangeable Person. Beloved friends, it is so that He will come to us also in these hours of stress and sadness which have come upon the world and the church.

We are today face to face with the great ruin in the church of God. By the ruin I mean that the power of the evil one has invaded the church of God; the companies of Christians are not everywhere pure and holy; sin is present and permitted in many companies, and in the conduct of individual confessors of Christ it seems to have its sway. We know from scripture that this must be so because the terrible declension was

foretold from the beginning. But there are many who are cast down because of these unhappy conditions. There are many also who even say it is now time that we let things take their course. But it is never too late to make a bold stand for Christ, and those who are cast down should remember what the Spirit of God has recorded here for our instruction, help and comfort.

THREE VISIONS OF CHRIST

The vision given to the apostle was a glorious one. And since it was placed on record we are privileged to spend that Lord's day with John in the Isle of Patmos. We can as it were hear what he heard, and see what he saw.

It is a way of God to reveal Himself at the great epochs of man's history suitably to the occasion. You will find in the Revelation that there are three visions of Christ given in connection with the three great divisions of the book, for the Apocalypse is divided into three parts. First, there is the part which deals with present things, that is, with the church conditions which began at Pentecost, and which will continue until the rapture of the church, and in the first three chapters we have the way in which Jesus Christ is revealed in connection with these present things. Secondly, there is the considerable part relating to the providential judgments falling on men when the church is gone. Accordingly, we find in the fifth chapter the vision of Christ as the slain Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, prevailing to open the sealed roll. Thirdly, there is the part dealing with the epoch of Christ's appearing and reign. This begins with the nineteenth chapter, containing as it does the introduction of the day of the Lord's personal judgment. There you have a vision of Christ in heaven upon a white horse, displayed as coming to the world as the Warrior-Judge.

You will see on study that in each of these cases Christ is revealed in a character suitable to God's dealings with the world portrayed in the particular vision. What we have to consider briefly for our special comfort and help at the present time is the vision of Christ as He appeared to John on that Lord's day in the Isle of Patmos.

THE TRUMPET VOICE

I think, as I said just now, that John's thoughts must have been very sad ones, as he looked across the sea, probably to the coast of Asia Minor. There he could see, with the mind's eye at any rate, that portion of the country where so great and grand a testimony had been given of Jesus Christ, and where the power of God's Holy Spirit had gathered many to worship the Father and the Son. There before him were the seven churches in Asia. John might, as was said, almost have seen them. And he thought what a difference had come about since the day when they first heard the sound of the voice of Jesus in the gospel call. How sadly different they now were in faith, in zeal, and in holiness! And while he thought in sadness of this declension, John heard a voice behind him as of a great trumpet.

There was One who had heard his thoughts; One knew what was passing in his soul; and that One had now drawn near to him and spoke with him. While John listened to what the Lord had to say, he found He had something for His servant to do. The apostle was to write; but he was first to write in a book what he saw, and send it to each of the seven churches. The first communication to the assemblies was not a matter of doctrine or exhortation, but the vision of the living Person of the Son of man in His power and glory. For we must not omit to observe that the seven epistles as contained in the second and third chapters were additional communications, one for each assembly. The first communication was concerning the vision which John saw for his own personal comfort and instruction (verse 11).

Beloved friends, I would that I might impress upon myself and you the same great fact, this vision of the Christ of God. Young men and women, old men and women should for their spiritual strength see before the soul this vision of the living Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Should we not? Is it not a fact that Christ makes Himself known, that He makes His voice to sound as a trumpet in our ears? But often it is with us as it was with John that He speaks behind us.

John heard a voice behind him While he was looking, as we have supposed, at the seven churches, Christ was behind him. He was looking at what most depressed him. Is it not so with many of us today? When we look around, what leanness, what carelessness, and what indifference we see

Then we begin to be sad. We say Christian effort is of no further use. Let us give it all up, for as we look at the churches and the world we see nothing but sorrow, strife and sin.

But there comes a voice behind us as of a great trumpet. There is One who is speaking to us. He has a special message for us. Let us then do as John did. He turned to see the voice that spake with him; until he turned he could not see the Speaker. Are you looking in the wrong direction? Are you looking at circumstances, or at Christ? There was a man and an apostle who walked on the waves; but he looked at the waves and sank immediately. And so John, looking away from Christ had no strength, no power. He was simply a prisoner in Patmos, while decay was spreading in the Christian assemblies he loved so well.

THE LIGHT AND THE LAMPSTANDS

It was a marvelous revelation that the Lord made here of Himself. When John turned he saw seven golden candlesticks or lampstands. They were grouped in this manner for a purpose. A lampstand is evidently for use as a light bearer. There were seven of them, and they were golden, indicative of the holy work they had to do in divine ministry. Theirs was a sacred office; they had to diffuse the light of grace and truth in this world; and John saw that there were seven. The lampstands refer, as we learn, to the seven churches of Asia, but figuratively they refer now as then to the church in this world as the medium through which the sevenfold activities of the Spirit of God are expressed in witness to Christ during the night of His absence.

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In the Epistles of Paul you have the church spoken of in its unity as being associated with Christ in heaven. This heavenly calling of the church is most important for us to know. But although in the purpose of God the church is even now in heaven, in daily practice the saints are here in this world and constitute the assembly of God. And His people are sent here and there on divine service as it pleases Him.

Of course, the number seven is figurative, but still in broad significance we may be sure it represents among other things that God in His gracious purpose has taken various companies of believers, and has set them where it has pleased Him, for the express purpose that they should shine for Him in a united capacity in the darkness of an evil age. And in their representative character they are linked with the seven Spirits of God spoken of in the earlier part of the chapter (verse 4).

A golden lampstand is clearly of no use whatever without its light. John saw seven candlesticks, but the light of the seven churches of Asia was dim. They did not shine well for the Master, and their faint flickering would cause the apostle sadness and grief. But he saw more in his vision. In the midst of the seven golden candlesticks there was One like unto the Son of man.

THE SON OF MAN IN THE MIDST

It is to this central feature of John's vision that I would direct your special attention this evening. The apostle's eyes were opened to see who was among the lampstands. The same fact is true now. In the midst of the professing church of God on earth today, there is standing One like unto the Son of man. You may say the church is in the heavenly places, and it is true, and Jesus Christ is revealed to us there, glorified before the eyes of faith. But He is equally here also as the glorified Son of man. He is in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, which are all united in this respect, that they surround the adorable figure of Christ as the Son of man.

We are reminded by this title of John's testimony in the fifth chapter of his Gospel concerning the Lord and His teaching about Himself. A great deal is revealed there, but there are two things especially prominent, to which I now refer. The Lord is there shown to be the Life-giver and the Judge. Jesus exercises divine functions. God quickens-gives life; the Son also quickeneth whom He will. Thus the Son of man is the Life-giver. Moreover, He is the Judge of all the earth. The Father Himself judgeth no man; all judgment is given unto the Son (John 5:21, 22). Now in Patmos John sees the blessed Jesus among His churches as the Son of man, as the Life-giver, the One who bestows life, and the One who sustains life. But more than this, He is also the One who marks that which is wrong, discerning and condemning all that is evil.

And He appears, moreover, to the eyes of the apostle as One clothed with a garment down to the feet. This flowing vestment would indicate the grace and dignity of His person in repose rather than in active service such as would be set forth by girded robes. John might recall His active service on that last passover supper when Jesus arose from the table, and having girded Himself with a towel, took a basin, and cleansed His disciples' feet. Now He appears again in the midst of His own, not as One to cleanse their feet, but in the calm dignity of His Person who is Lord of all the saints, clothed with a garment down to the feet. As Priest and Advocate He serves on high, but in the midst of His own assemblies He is an object to look upon with wonder and delight, and an object to worship and to adore with fervent and unceasing praise.

GIRDLED FOR LOVE

Further, we are to mark that the Son of man was girt about the breasts, not the loins, with a golden girdle. This feature of the vision has an important significance, especially as we remember that the Lord is revealed in this chapter as the Judge. We learn that His repression of evil in the churches is exercised in the energy of His love. To a person who does not know the love of Christ, His aspect may seem a little forbidding.

Years ago I was speaking to a Cingalese barrister, who was a Buddhist. The subject of our conversation was the truth of scripture. He had imbibed the infidel notions which are so rife in this Christian country. He had visited England and had learned them here. At the time he was returning to Ceylon fully persuaded that Great Britain was rapidly giving up its national religion. One of the objections he raised to the Christian faith was the subject of this very chapter. He said with scorn, "You speak to me of your Jesus! The Bible speaks also of your Jesus, and how does it speak of Him? It presents Him as a Great and Awful Judge, as One clothed with a long garment and His eyes as fire, with a sharp two-edged sword in His mouth. This terrifies me; Buddha is so calm." I might have said to him that the same Jesus whom he feared suffered little children to come to Him, and they were not terrified.

But the Buddhist had a bad conscience, and hence arose his thought that Jesus was One to terrify a man. I do not, however, see that aspect in this scripture. Jesus is in the midst to oppose evil, but He is girt about the breasts with a golden girdle. In the midst of His assemblies His breasts are girded for activity. He is there to exercise His love, and the energy of His love has not failed throughout the centuries. There is One still in our midst who is girded to love us, and the bond of His love is the bond of righteousness, for His is the golden girdle of Divine righteousness. We cannot exhaust the love of Him who has saved us and washed us from our sins in His precious blood.

HOAR HEAD AND HAIRS

But further, His head and His hairs were white as wool, as white as snow. "The hoary head is a crown of glory." White hairs are significant of wisdom, such as was associated in Daniel's vision with the Ancient of days (Dan. 7:9). But do you ask what poor distracted churches want with One such as this? Did not the Lord say to His disciples I send you forth as sheep amongst wolves, and are we not His sheep? Weak, silly, wayward? We are fond of our own way, we are without the wisdom we require. But when we look at the Lord Jesus we see Him endued with all power and wisdom. The hoar hairs tell us of that wisdom which comes from above and is first pure. He it is who is made unto us wisdom. James says, If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God who giveth liberally to all men. The treasures of wisdom are in Him who passed through this world as the Son of man, and suffered as no man ever did nor could suffer. Look then at Him who is in our midst full of wisdom to

guide and control the assemblies.

EYES OF FLAME AND FEET OF BRASS

Moreover, His eyes are as a flame of fire, discerning and criticizing our thoughts, words and actions, looking upon us and searching us through and through. Do we not need this scrutiny? There is no more necessary devotional service for us than to be at the feet of Jesus, and to ask Him to search us thoroughly, as the Psalmist did of old (Psalm 139:23, 24). Let His eyes of flame search us to discover and consume every hateful motive. We are apt to deceive ourselves, but when we feel that His eyes are upon us we make no mistake, for the search-light of His presence shows us truth in the inward parts, or error.

And His feet too, of what do they speak? John saw that they were like unto fine brass as if they burned in a furnace. Did I not say just now that the church of God at that period was passing through a furnace of affliction and persecution? There were Christians shortly before who had been made into bonfires in the pleasure gardens of Rome, and where was Christ amid those horrible sufferings which His servants endured? His feet were walking with His own. in the furnace, as it were. Did not the same One walk in the furnace of old with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego? When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace he said, "Did not we cast three men bound into the furnace? Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and the fourth is like the Son of God." As it was with the faithful witnesses in Babylon so it is true that when the church of God passes through the hour of trial, there is One who walks with the saints, His feet burning as if in a furnace.

I would ask you whether you personally believe that the Lord veritably walks in the midst of the persecuted and suffering church, and also walks with each tried and sorrowing individual. Sometimes we find we must go through the furnace of affliction. The fire is before us and we must go forward, but here we learn that there will always be One with us, sometimes behind us, sometimes before us. When He is before us, happy are we, for we know by joyful experience how His power and strength work for us.

SEVEN TWINKLING STARS

John saw then in this vision that the church of God was not forsaken. The feet of the Master were walking with the saints in their fiery trials. But there was something further. The seven golden lampstands were there, but John's eyes left these. His eyes were turned upon the Lord Himself, and he saw in the right hand of the Master the seven stars which are the representatives of the seven churches. The fact thus illustrated made all the difference between defeat and victory. The seven stars, despite the feeble and broken condition of the assemblies, were held and maintained in the right hand of power, in the right hand of Jesus. Was not this a comfort to the beloved apostle, grieving in that last time when there were many antichrists? Should it not be a comfort to us also?

In the darkest days God will have a light to shine for Him. There is One, the glorified Son of man, who takes care that the light of testimony is shining in this world all the time. We need not, therefore, be cast down, beloved friends. The Lord Himself holds the complete testimony, the seven stars, in His own hands, and therefore the matter of light-giving is perfectly secured. What you personally have to be careful about is that your own light is shining. If your light is not shining, the Lord will use someone else. If one man does not shine, another will be chosen to shine. Happy the man who shines for Christ in the world and the church. Sad the man who is dark and dead so far as testimony for Christ is concerned: Let us then see to it that we are letting our lights shine, while for our comfort we also see that a perfect testimony is maintained in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ, where are the seven stars.

THE SOUNDING WATERS

The voice John heard was as the sound of many waters. In this figure I think we may have a reference to the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is the sound of His name going out into all the earth. As the wind blowing where it listeth represents the activities of the Spirit, so the many waters may set out the activities of the Son. We hear the sound of the Spirit of God at work testifying of Christ. The mighty waters are the multitude of those potent agencies which give eternal life. By the living water of the word men are born again. In the sound of the gospel, in the sound of the revelations of scripture spreading abroad everywhere in the earth, men hear the voice of Jesus.

That voice heard by the apostle in Patmos was to him like the voice of many waters, majestic in its might, calling back to his mind perhaps that night long past when he heard the voice of Jesus rising above the roaring storm on the sea of Galilee. There was then power in His voice over the raging deep. The power is such that still the dead hear the Son of God, and they that hear live. Most certainly this is so for both body and spirit. There are dead souls now as well as then who hear the voice of the Son of God and live.

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THE SUNSHINE IN ITS STRENGTH

After observing that out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, symbol of the penetrating power of His word, John saw that His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. In this all-glorious Lord we have the glory that excelleth. Think of the golden lampstands, think of the seven stars, and then of the mid-day sun. Where is your torch-light, and where is your star at noonday? Think how everything

fades in the exceeding brightness of the meridian sun. Is it not so also in the face of Jesus Christ where shines the glory of God? There, for men of faith, is the great power of testimony in this world today. There is the one thing which makes the man of God calm and peaceful in the presence of tremendous odds. In the radiant glory of the face of Jesus Christ we find a ground of confidence and assurance, while we ourselves are transformed thereby.

Did not Saul of Tarsus see that glory? It shone down upon him while the madness of persecution was still filling his soul. He saw the face of Jesus, and he was at once blinded to all else in the world. He felt himself a lost soul in the presence of the Lord of glory, whose voice like a double-edged sword, penetrated his conscience and heart. Long after, Paul wrote "Have not I seen Jesus Christ the Lord?"

Many are walking in the light of a vision of Christ today, and I think this experience worth cultivating. There is no greater power for testimony and service to be found in this world than that which emanates from the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking at Him with that earnestness which Paul enjoined upon himself and the Philippians we catch something of His glory. On reflection you will remember that this was so in Old Testament days with Moses in the mount. He came down from the mount a singular man in the eyes of the people, and his singularity was that there was heavenly glory shining in his face.

It is possible now for us to reflect the glory of the unseen Lord and Savior. Those who in the privacy of their chambers look upon the effulgent countenance of the Son of man, shine themselves with a glory which is unmistakable in this dark world, being changed into the same image from glory to glory. There is nothing like it in this evil age, nothing whatever to compare with it. Every child of grace can in this manner be a witness for Christ, for every child knows what it is to draw near to the Person of the Lord Jesus, to speak with Him and to hear His word. By this means the stamp of long-suffering, meekness and grace characteristic of Jesus is imprinted upon the follower of Christ, and the men of the world say, "There is something about this man that is different from us all." They own in effect that you have been with Jesus and have learned of Him. May we know more of the transforming power of His presence!

JOHN PROSTRATE AND POWERLESS

The effect upon John of this vision of Godhead glory was surprising, and yet as we consider further it is not surprising. The aged apostle fell down at the feet of his Master as dead, and that attitude was proper and right. It was just the posture that he ought to take under the circumstances.

When John thought of the glories of Jesus as they were thus unveiled before him he said, What am I before Him?

John, no doubt, may have thought of that time at the Lord's supper when he had reclined on the bosom of Jesus, and tasted of the sweetness of His love on that night of His betrayal. He had long known the Master's care for him, and he remembered often those gracious words of farewell that then came from His lips. But now he was looking at the glorified Christ with the eyes of flame, and so he fell down and worshipped Him to whom belongs all power and wisdom and glory and dominion

When the apostle fell at the feet of brass as dead he acknowledged that in himself there was no life, but all life was in the Son. John took a position of utter powerlessness before the Lord. This is of the essence of true service, for when a person is in a condition to say, "I can do nothing at all," he is just the very person the Lord will use. We stand in our own light when we think something of ourselves, and forget that we can do nothing at all except He is pleased to take us up as empty vessels and make us of some service for Him.

THE LORD'S HAND AND WORD

The Lord did not leave the humble and helpless servant at His feet. He had come not only to unveil His glories to the exile as of old they had been unveiled to other men of God, but to be in personal contact with the disciple whom He loved. He laid His right hand upon him. I ask you to consider what is meant by the Lord of glory laying His right hand upon John, the right hand of power that held the seven stars. It means that He conveyed power to him. He bestowed new strength upon this poor faint and weary pilgrim by laying His right hand upon him.

But more than this, the Son of man spoke to the prostrate man, and the very words He uttered, "Fear not," were just those He had more than once spoken on earth. The glorified Man of the vision was Jesus, Jesus Christ who "is the same yesterday, and today, and forever."

How often during the course of His ministry had the Lord said, "Fear not!" I think very little of persons who never tremble. They are bold, ignorant people, who think they are always right. We ought to feel our weakness, and to tremble because of it. And the blessing of trembling is that we shall then get the word of Jesus coming to us, saying, "Fear not," and His word in this case, as always, carried effective power with it.

And then in addition to this word of comfort, He revealed Himself as the First and the Last, for He is the Self-revealer.

If you look in the prophecies of Isaiah you will find that on three occasions (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12) God speaks of Himself in this particular way, indicating His Godhead and His sovereignty as being over all. Jehovah is the First and the Last, the all-supreme One. Jesus said to John, "I am the First and the Last," and three times also in this book (Revelation 1:17; 2:8 22:13) this phrase occurs in connection with our Lord Jesus Christ—once in the first chapter, once in the second, and once in the last.¹

Do not think of "First" as meaning just the commencement. The earliest is not always the most important, and the elder may serve the younger. "First" often in scripture means the chiefest. Thus it is applied in this sense to men, Mark 6:21; Luke 19:47; Acts 13:50; 28:7; to Philippi, Acts 16:12; to Paul as a sinner, 1 Timothy 1:15. And when the Lord Jesus Christ speaks of Himself as being the First, He sets Himself forth as the Supreme One. There is none higher than He. He is the First-born from the dead, and of all creation, both old and new; for in all things He must, by inherent right, have the pre-eminence.

I think we may note here in passing the frequent reason of failure in Christian life and testimony. The Lord is not given the first place, that is, the chiefest. You may put Him first, but not chief.

There was a servant who said "I go," but went not. The Master's will to him was not predominant. You may put the Lord first, and yet give Him the second place. He must have the chiefest place, and be supreme in everything. Let Him be to you the First and the Last, as He is called in scripture.

All is the Lord's. There is none and nothing worthy beside Himself. All is summed up in Him. The beginning and the ending, first and last, all is wrapped up in the glorious and blessed Christ of God. He is the living One who became dead; He has the keys of death and of hades, and all things are in His hands.

Beloved friends, why need we fear because of the enmity of the world and the frailty of self? The Lord says to us as to John, I am He who has supreme power. I am the One who is looking after assembly and national affairs. I am the One who will see things through to the end. Every true disciple shall be brought safely home. Not one member of the body of Christ will by-and-by be missing. There will be a perfect church in glory.

THE LORD'S KNOWLEDGE AND THE LORD'S REWARD

I have two other things to mention before closing. They arise out of the communication to the seven churches. The Lord said to John: "Write the things which thou hast seen and the things which are" (verse 19). The things John saw were comprised in his personal vision. The things which "are" were in contrast with the things which should be hereafter or "after these" (verse 19). Of the latter we read in chapter 4.

The things which "are" refer to the things of that present time which are in view in the epistles which follow, addressed to the seven churches. The messages to the seven churches present among other special features two which we may now briefly consider.

The first is the revelation that the Lord is in the midst of His church as the silent Scrutator, continually surveying the works of His people.

Just read through these seven letters, and over and over again you find a recurrence of the words, "I know thy works." Individually and collectively, the glorified Son of man knows your works and mine. Our works yesterday, our works today, He knows them all. He knows them in the manner of their execution; He knows the object that we had in them. I ask, Is the plan and operation always such as would satisfy the eyes of fire? We are dealing with the living Lord, that One at whose judgment seat we have to give account. His message through John is that He knows our works already. Therefore in this sevenfold message to the assemblies the Lord calls to us to have a care as to what we say and do.

Time is short, for the Lord surely is at hand. Our testimony here cannot last much longer. Therefore let our works be such as will shine for His glory who is ever with us, and knows our works.

The second predominant feature I would now mention is that the Lord in these epistles holds out the promise of a reward to those who conquer in the strife. The reward is promised to the individual victor. In every case, "he that overcometh" is addressed (Revelation 2 and 3.). We each have our responsibility for earnest and faithful effort, and we are each pledged to victory and not to defeat. A Christian need never be defeated in his testimony. There are truly powers that seek to destroy your testimony and make you a weak thing without influence and energy for the truth, but it is for you to claim the victory. And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.

We have personally to overcome evil with good. It is for you to gain a victory. According to the Lord's promise you shall have a reward in the day that is coming, but you must conquer. There is the evil one to overcome by the word of God. You have to meet him. There is also the world that is saying all manner of evil things about the name of Christ. What do you do if they are said in your hearing? Stand by and say nothing, or act as a loyal disciple? Will you deny Him by a guilty silence, or will you speak for Him? Will you in other words be the overcomer? Having an Omnipotent Savior to strengthen us in our weakness, we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loves us. W. J. H.

(Concluded from page 368)

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Our Living Lord, Living Lord, Our: Part 1

Article from <https://bibletruthpublishers.com/bible-truth-study-bible/btbs>

An Address on Revelation 1:17, 18 (June 1st, 1914)

"And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not: I am the first and the last, and the living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (R.V.).

We have had before us the great hope of the New Testament—the blessed anticipation of our Lord's return; and it is unnecessary for me now to remark how essential it is that we should keep this hope before our hearts. There is, however, another truth connected with it, which will have its due weight and help for us if we keep it before our souls. I refer to that aspect of the truth which assures us of the present concern of our adorable Lord and Master with our own particular welfare individually, as well as with the welfare of the whole of His church collectively.

We are sometimes so borne down with our own crosses and difficulties, and by the distractions that we find coming upon others personally and ecclesiastically, that to a certain extent the spirit of despair takes hold of us; and, looking at things within, and our own inefficiency, our own lack of competency, our own inability to clear away the things that oppose our onward march, and then again, counting the foes that encounter us, and the strength of the difficulties which surround us, we feel that all these things which are against us are too many for us. We

bow our heads and think that we must give up. And so we might well give up if we had to fight the battle in our own strength, if we had to hold fast by our own energy, if there was none to stand by us, if there was none to impart to us the needed grace for the moment.

But the scripture shows that the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior, Whom we know was at the cross for us, and Who we believe and know also left this earth and ascended up in glory, and Who is coming again to receive us into that place which He has gone to prepare for us—this blessed person never relaxes in His present interest in us, and in His continual and sufficient supplies of what we require.

The Lord Jesus Christ never, forsakes His saints; and He never forsakes His church. We cannot count up the members of that body, but He knows them every one. We do not know all that are His, but he knows every one, and they are all in His hands, and His love is upon each of them. Is this not, something to lift up our hearts, and to enable us to go forward with increased confidence, assured that we shall reach that goal to which we are hastening, and having gained that goal, we shall then look back and praise the grace that has brought us safely through.

The apostle John received this revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Isle of Patmos. I am not about to say anything as to the prophecies recorded in this book, but I wish to draw your attention mainly to the fact that in this island of Patmos, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared unto the apostle John, and He appeared to him as to a follower of His—one in tribulation—one who had been, and was, a faithful witness to His name. And I think that if we could transport ourselves to that island, and if we could in any degree enter into the feelings of that holy man, we should find that he had abundant reason to be depressed and cast down because of the circumstances of his time.

Consider the great changes John had witnessed since the departure of the Lord. You know that when the church commenced at Pentecost there was a glorious work here on the earth. There was a power that gathered men and women together to a new center, united them as one, bound them up closer together, and, as such, they were all moving along the path of discipleship to their Lord and Master, and the world looked upon them with distrust.

And, at first, it seemed as if that new power in the earth, a power which spread itself by preaching, would revolutionize the whole world, and that men everywhere would quickly be brought to call on the name of the Lord.

Men in high places received the gospel as little children; they abandoned their former pursuits and occupations, and confessed the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It looked as if the world as a system without God, was to be overthrown by the gospel, and that the millennium, to use the word in the common sense, would be seen very soon upon the earth.

But Scripture history shows us that a change came over this aspect of things very rapidly. It shows us that the power of the world which seemed paralyzed at first, awoke to a spirit of energy of persecution against the gospel and those that followed Christ. The world arose in its might; determined to stand out against the name the Lord Jesus Christ. Persecution began, and that was evil enough to bear.

But there was more than this. There was within the church itself that which corrupted. There was the shameful fall of some men from the truth of the earliest days. Do you realize what this meant to the apostles? Oh, how they loved to see men receiving the gospel, to see them walking in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then—to see the same men divided, turned aside, abandoning the very name of the Lord Jesus Christ! It was a trial to these men, to see the leaven of evil doctrine, working for the corruption of the saints, while at the same time the power of the world was such that the mouths of the apostles were stopped, and they could not testify when we might think the truth most needed such testimony. It was possible for wicked men to take holy servants of the Lord Jesus Christ and put them to a shameful and ignominious death!

These apostolic men were surely following Christ: where, then, was their Christ? He had gone away and left them, and they were fighting in a losing battle, and dropping out of the ranks one by one; and here is John, the last of them, a prisoner in Patmos, his mouth closed to all intents and purposes. How much he would long to see His Master as of old; but there he was, alone. Had the ascended Christ forgotten? Was He there, and had He forgotten His struggling saints here upon the earth? Was He leaving them alone to battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil?

Perhaps John's thoughts went back to that night long before on the sea of Galilee. He would remember how the Lord Jesus Christ, in a strange way, hurried them from the shore, after He had fed the multitudes, and constrained them to get in the boat. He bade them push off, and He was left alone on the shore. They rowed out on the waters, and the storm gathered, and they were tossed and buffeted with the waves. They wanted to go in one direction, but the winds and the waves drove them in the other direction. All this while their Master was absent. Once before they had experience of a storm on the lake, but He was there. He was in the boat; He was asleep, but still He was there. Now the question arose, why did He command them to go away from Him? The long hours crept by; the watches passed; the first watch, the second watch, and the third watch, found them bending to the oars. Everything seemed to be against them; that night went by, and Jesus was not there. How refreshed their hearts were when, in the fourth watch of the night, they beheld Him walking on the waves, making His pathway over those circumstances which were so adverse to them, and against which they were fighting and struggling in vain!

Oh, how they reproached themselves for then mistrust; but no, their hearts at first were filled, with fear. They thought they saw a phantom, but they were brought to recognize His power and His love which they had never seen before just in that way. And perhaps it was at this point in His recollection that a voice fell upon John's ear. It was a familiar trumpet sound, but it came from an unexpected quarter. He had to turn to see the vision that was behind him. His eyes, were directed away from his beloved Master. Oh, beloved friends, is this not a lesson to us? Do we not so often look at the storms, the billows, the trials, perplexities; and we say, where can He be? Where is the One that has told us, "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world?" The world seems so strong against us, and we are so weak.

Why do we feel like this? Why cannot we be certain of the One that loves us? We are then, surely, looking in the wrong direction. Yet He never fails to come to us. The disciples were downcast and in despair, but the Lord came to them on the waves—the very thing that was so distressing to them—to their relief. Amid those tangles in which we find ourselves, and those foes that are with us day by day, we too shall not fail to see the Beloved coming to us across the waves of trouble.

It is also true that He comes in the way that we do. not always expect, and often it is to our shame that we have to turn and seek the voice of that One Who speaks for our comfort. He will never. fail; He is faithful, draw ye nigh; let it be written on our hearts—the glory of our Master that He provides a faithful and true witness—a faithful and true one to those, whom He loves, and we passing through this world to the home above.

But the vision before our eyes of the apostle John was a vision of the Lord in His glory, and I wish to draw your attention especially to this feature. We have brought before us very vividly, the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ in His exit, as it were, from, his world, left it in the attitude of benediction. He was dispensing a parting blessing to those left here, and a cloud received Him out of their sight (Luke 24:50, 51).

Let it not be thought that there is ever a cloud between us and Him. He comes to us, He who is the pre-eminently glorified One comes to us. He who is the brightest and supremest in the heaven, of heavens comes even now.

He comes to us here. You find in the 14th chapter of John, that the Lord first speaks of coming, personally, to receive unto Himself those whom He is loving in the world. He said, I go away, I am coming again. "If I go away, I will come again and receive you unto myself." But if you continue the reading of that chapter, you will find that He speaks again of His coming. He then says, "I will not leave you orphans in this world; I will come to you" (verse 18). Does this refer to His coming in the day for which we are all waiting when He will receive us unto Himself? No. There He had been speaking about the advent of the Holy Spirit, and it was in connection with His advent that the Lord said, "I will come to you," "I will be with you." And the Spirit who was sent, is the one given for the very purpose of making the presence of the Son known and felt here in this world. Just as no man knew the Father but the Son, who was here upon the earth and who spoke those illuminating words that set forth the Father Himself, so the Holy Ghost is here at the present time to give every believer to know the close companionship of the One in the glory.

Do we not remember that other promise of the Lord before His departure, Lo, I am with you alway, every day, all the days, all the bright days and all the dark days, the days of happiness and the days of sadness?" "Always" means that in an uninterrupted way He is, with us. Beloved friends, ye often speak about the Lord Jesus as if He was an absent friend. It is good to talk of one whom we love but who is far away. It is good to hold intercourse concerning such a one. It is good to receive communications from him, but much better when he is present with us. And the Lord Jesus is equally dear, whether He is with us or not, but if we can see Him and hear Him by faith— if we are conscious of His presence all the day, it is blessed indeed. Is it too much to expect that when the Lord Jesus said, "Lo, I am with, you alway" that you and I in the experience of our souls day, by day may be enabled to realize that He is with us? Did He not mean this when He said "Lo, I am with you alway?" Did He not mean also that we should delight to have, the experience of it? and that we should see to it that we are standing in the light and power of His promise?

But how often the Lord's voice has to come to us like the voice of a trumpet. Now, a trumpet is to awaken the dead. The trumpet is used in Scripture as an indication of authority and summons; and the Lord had to speak to the beloved apostle, the one whom He loved, with a voice like thunder. And John turned and saw Him. Boanerges saw His love, His matchless pity, but He also saw that wondrous Person transfigured now. Once he beheld a glorious vision on the holy mount; but that was for a moment only. John was not prepared for it, he was afraid of it then; but now it was the Lord's day in Patmos, and He was in the Spirit. The Spirit gave him to witness the glory of his absent Master, and as he looked on Him, he saw His power. He also saw the dignity with which He was invested, His purity, His holiness. He saw that everything bespoke power, and administrative strength, and that the living Lord was in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.

The whole church of God was represented by this symbol of the candlesticks, and Jesus was seen in the midst, the place that He must always have. If there are but two or three gathered to His name, He will come to be in the midst. So there He was seen in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. Had He forsaken them? Was He up there in the glory, and was He in unconcern suffering His church to be buffeted by the winds and waves of persecution? No, He was in the midst. And look in His right hand—there are seven stars. There is a star for every church, and a star for Laodicea. He will not be content with six, He will have seven. He holds in His hand of power the seven stars.

Beloved friends, do not let us lose heart, do not let us lack courage, do not let us be overborne with despair by the distracting things. Look at that glorious Man of power and what He has in His right hand. He will maintain the seven stars to the very end. And in this manner the apostle saw Him. The effect upon the exile was remarkable. It was what might not have been expected from John, who was so attached in heart to his Master. When he beheld Him he fell at His feet as one dead. Why was this prostration? We may rather ask how could he keep himself in an erect position in the presence of such glory? He must go down.

Beloved friends, it is always when in the power of the Spirit of God we by faith have a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we assume a right attitude of worship. There is many a person, both old and young, who strives in vain to work himself up to a frame of worship. Worship is not forced, but spontaneous. It springs up like a well. What causes it to spring up? The power behind it, of course. You gather together, two or three of you, and there is an unseen Person present there. It is for you to see His glory. Do not let any distractions annoy you. Do not let the noise disturb your heart. No, see to it that all these things are lost upon you, and that when you are together you have vividly before you the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. All will be well then, because you are in line with the operations of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is here to display the perfections of the Person of Christ, and I cannot see Him unless the Holy Spirit so works in my heart that I do see Him by faith: then I must worship Him. Hence there arises worship in spirit and in truth, and there is a needful preparedness of heart for this, which is expressed in this way. [W.J.H.]

(To be continued).

Our Living Lord, Living Lord, Our: Part 2

Article from <https://bibletruthpublishers.com/bible-truth-study-bible/btsb>

John tells us he fell at His feet "as one dead." I do not know whether it was so, but perhaps he had been too self-confident. Perhaps he had been thinking, like Elijah, that everyone else had gone wrong, and he was the only one right. It was I, I, I, with him. He says, "Here am I in the Isle of Patmos, and what is the church going to do without me? It will go to rack and ruin because I, the last of the apostles, am not there to care for it." And the Lord says, "You have forgotten Me; you have left Me out." John felt what a blunder he had made, and felt himself to be no more than a helpless corpse, so far as life and power were concerned.

It is in the posture of dependence that we know what it is to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is then that the love of the Lord Jesus Christ is manifestly in us. John took his right place before the Lord. Had he wronged Him? Who has not done so in his heart? Who has not thought unholy and improperly of Him? How often we approach His person, and even discuss what He is, and what He became; and how little we know of these things and of the wondrous mystery of His death! Who shall understand them? Let us walk softly in the presence of His glory. The Spirit has spoken of Him in His word, and we must regard that word, but let us beware of inquisitive thoughts which would seek to penetrate beyond the revealed word. One day we shall be in the Father's house, and better able then to comprehend the glory of that One whom we now believe.

But we here see that the Lord laid His right hand upon that recumbent one before Him, and He spoke definite words to him. It was not now with a voice of a trumpet, nor as the sound of many waters, but it was the same voice that he had heard so long ago, the voice of Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever.

But we may also recall again that night on the Sea of Galilee, when the disciples were so weary and worn, just before the morning broke, and the bright and morning star appeared. The first thing that the apostles heard was the voice of the Lord speaking to them, but fear took possession of their hearts, and the Master knew this. Fear often misleads us, as it misled them, so that they mistook the Lord for a phantom. But love casts out fear.

We ought to have the spirit of trust continually, but, if we have not, He still comes. He does not forsake us, but He comes, and, with His right hand upon us, dispels the gloom of our hearts. This loving action was characteristic of Him when He was down here. It was not a matter of the mere exercise of power with our Lord. He took hold of the weak and suffering ones. He lifted them up, putting Himself in touch, as it were, with them in their circumstances. And so it was with the shrinking fear-stricken apostle. The Lord came to him, laying His right hand upon him, and I think there must have been a power which then thrilled through John at the touch of his Master. I think the helpless man felt at that moment transformed with power. The touch of the loving One was upon him, and the word in his ear was, "Fear not."

I think it is not an exaggeration to suppose that we ourselves may be sometimes afraid of Him, particularly if we have done Him some slight wrong, if we have abused His grace to us, and if we have failed in our responsibilities to Him. There is then just a little feeling of fear, a distrust, an anxiety lest His heart may be turned away from us, and that when He opens His mouth that sharp sword will smite us. We feel we shall be judged and doomed. He does not, however, come to us in this way. He comes truly as the all-powerful One, but His words are, "Fear not." "You need not tear Me. I am still the One who cares for you. I am still the One who stands by you. I am still the One that will never leave nor forsake you!"

Here is comfort for us, beloved friends. We may be fearing the world. We may be fearing the powers that are against us. This word, "fear not," comes to us with soothing power again. If He is for us, who can be against us? And the Lord went on to amplify this to John, setting Himself before him in the power of His Person and of His resurrection. "Fear not," He said to the apostle, "I am the first and the last. I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. And I have the keys of death and of Hades."

Now the Lord here speaks of Himself as "the First and the Last," expressions which we shall find several times in Isaiah, and there the phrase is connected with the being of God Himself. He only is the First and the Last. Who else is there that could be the Beginning and the End? While this term applies to the Son, may we not look at it here in connection with the church of God?

With whom did the church begin? The church began with a risen and glorified Savior; so the apostle Peter explained the wonderful things that happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. He explained very clearly that God had made Jesus, whom the Jews had crucified, both Lord and Christ. He was invested on high with dignity and glory beyond all heavenly principalities and powers, and so mighty things were done. Men and women were convicted of their sins, and when they looked away in faith to Him they found peace for their consciences and hearts.

Moreover, the Holy Ghost possessed their souls, and they were thus united to Him on high. He is the first so far as the church is concerned, and He is the last. It is He that binds that church into one invisible and indivisible unity. He it is that makes the center and the circumference of the church of God.

In view of the security afforded by the Lord Himself, we need not be over-anxious to prevent the apparent downfall of the church of God. There is One in the midst of the church who will care for it. The power of Christ shall never be lost, never be lessened nor destroyed. The unity of the church especially shall be made plain, and its beauties shall shine through the endless ages of eternity to the praise of Him that loved the church and who loved us, and who gave Himself for it and for us. Its final perfection and glory do not depend upon us, but upon Him who is the "First and the Last."

Of course, we have our responsibilities; but my subject is this, that the Lord has pledged Himself to present us before God without spot and blemish. He can and will do this, for He has said, "I am the First and the Last."

Then He speaks of Himself as the living One. "I am He that liveth," and again, "I am alive for evermore."

Put this truth in an abstract way. We believe in the living Christ. Of course we believe that Christ died also. We know that He came forth from the tomb in the power of the Spirit of God, and by the glory of the Father, and rose up as the One who had vanquished death. We know that He arose. Death has no more dominion over Him who is alive for evermore.

Put it now practically. He is continually and constantly watching over us, and is interested in our welfare. He is with us always. The living Christ can never die. My eye may be set upon earthly things, but my Christ can never die. "I am He that liveth and was dead. And behold, I am alive for evermore." Here we are to walk in the power of this truth day by day. The living Christ, where is He? He is here to keep us continually, and to carry us safely through. Do not let us doubt or distrust Him. He will not fail us. He lives; and when He speaks of living, this means activity. It does not imply that He has not died, but it means that He is living on our behalf, that He lives for us in glory, that He claims us for Himself, and that He carries us through, supplying everything that we require.

You will say that I am speaking of things that you know perfectly well, and I am aware of this. But we may know the power of them still more, if we can only in our hearts see and know and realize something of the value of the living Lord to us. You may say, "I have proved that for many a year," and it may seem a long time as you look back. But think of the long-lived apostle John. The Lord appeared in Patmos to him. It was necessary that His right hand should be laid upon him, and that the familiar word should come again to that aged disciple of Christ, "Fear not," and that he should receive the reminder, "I am He that liveth and was dead, and am alive again, and have the keys of death and of Hades."

What was it that the Lord promised when He spoke of building His church? Was it not that the gates of Hades should never prevail against this church. Here was the strong assurance, "I have the keys of Hades." The continuance of the church of God is therefore the proof of the power and love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us then remember that while the Lord is living for us there, He is also with us here. Did not the apostle Paul confess, that when he was in grave peril and had to stand before his enemies at Jerusalem, the Lord stood by him? He felt that glorious Person was by his side, and he felt strong in His strength, and confident in His word.

The Lord stood by Paul. Let us see that we do not miss the unseen presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. This marvelous revelation of His word is needed, that we may think of that One who has passed up through the heavens and into whose hands all the power in heaven and earth has been committed, of that One before whom the celestial hosts do homage. Yet from that resplendent glory, where He orders the government of innumerable worlds, He comes to bear the sorrows of His saints. He singles out an individual from some sixteen hundred million inhabitants of the earth, and lays His right hand upon one lonely exile in Patmos! Beloved friend, you may know and feel something of this fine Christian experience. It is within the reach of each one of us. We may have in our apprehension day by day, and hour by hour, the immediate presence of the Lord and Master for whom we wait. It will be good for us if this is so. It will be good for us if the mists can be removed, as it were, and our dim eyes of faith be strengthened to see Who is with us continually. Let us therefore ponder this revelation of Himself that the Lord made. See how the Lord is endeavoring to impress upon those who are still in the world that He will not leave them alone. He is going to be with us just as really as when He was walking here, that is, in the world. When He went away He said, "You believe in God, believe also in Me." And, beloved friends, I ask "Do we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as we believe in God"? He is the One who is ever present with us; and if we have Him whom need we fear?

W.J.H.

(Concluded from page 112)

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