

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE HEAVENLY KIND

Revelation 1

Revelation chapter 1 contains another of the exceptional visions in the Bible. There's so much here that is worth studying: the beginning of the very last book of the Bible. Its themes are set out in the opening verses: revelation, testimony and blessing.

Verse 1: revelation. The revelation of things that could not be known by us unless they had been revealed by God.

Verse 2: testimony. The testimony to things that had been both seen and heard.

Verse 3: blessing. Blessing for the person who reads these words and for those who take them to heart.

Revelation: the divine source; testimony: the human channel; blessing: the spiritual benefit.

The writer is John. He describes himself as a servant, literally, a slave. Verse 9 tells us that he was on the island of Patmos, a kind of concentration camp, a bleak lonely place, a place of punishment and deprivation. But the very next verse tells us that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. On the island: in the Spirit.

As you read his book, which are you more aware of? The physical and psychological trauma or the supernatural and spiritual blessing? What about us? What are people more aware of as they talk to us, our problems or our blessings? What is your Patmos? You're on the island, but are you also in the Spirit?

The contents of the book are addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia and they are named in verse 11. They were real churches and the order in which they are mentioned is the order in which a messenger would come to them as he was delivering the message, following the main trade route of the day.

They *were* real churches and the message was for them, but the number seven has a further significance. It is used over fifty times in the book of Revelation where it is symbolic of perfection and completeness. This is a message for all the church in every age, including ourselves.

We encounter God in Revelation chapter 1, the God who speaks, the God of grace and peace, the God who is and who was and who is to come, the God who is seated on the throne of heavenly majesty, the God who is Father, Son and Spirit.

But primarily the one we encounter here is the Son, Jesus Christ. The very first words are 'the revelation of Jesus Christ'. And it soon becomes clear that the revelation is not only given through Jesus but that it is all about Jesus. The churches will be enlightened about themselves, about their enemies, about heaven, about the future. But first and foremost the revelation given to John is a revelation of Jesus Christ.

John gives us an introduction to him in verses 5 to 7.

The faithful witness (verse 5). We're all familiar with witnesses. They have to testify to what they have heard and seen. There are false witnesses and you can have unreliable witnesses but Jesus is a faithful witness. His testimony is completely true and reliable.

The firstborn from the dead (verse 5). 'Firstborn' was a special designation to indicate status and importance. Jesus was not the first person to be raised from the dead but his resurrection was uniquely different. There was an essential change in his body. He rose to live for ever and to give eternal life to those who trust in him.

The ruler of the kings of the earth (verse 5). King of kings, lord of lords, leader of leaders, president of presidents.

In a world where lies are common currency Jesus guarantees us truth. In a world where death is inevitable Jesus offers resurrection to eternal life. In a world where governments are corrupt Jesus promises peace on earth.

As John introduces us to Jesus he turns from description to doxology. 'To him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.'

'To him who loves us.' John's description becomes personal. To him who loves *us*. We matter to him. The present tense speaks of a constant attitude that remains the same now as it always was. If you feel you don't matter; if you feel you've stuffed up; if you feel miserable and worthless, then take these words to heart. He loves you.

In the stars his handiwork I see. On the wind he speaks with majesty.
Though he ruleth over land and sea, what is that to me?
I will celebrate nativity, for it has a place in history.
Sure he came to set his people free. What is that to me?
Till by faith I met him face to face, and I felt the wonder of his grace, then I
knew that he was more than just a God who didn't care, who lived away out
there, and
Now he walks beside me day by day, ever watching o'er me lest I stray,
helping me to find that narrow way, he's everything to me.

Love will always show itself in action and John tells us just how the love of Jesus has expressed itself.

He has freed us from our sins by his blood (verse 5). Sin is like a rope that ties us up. Every sin is like another coil of the rope until we are bound, powerless to escape. We cannot save ourselves. Only Jesus can free us from our sins, and that has only been made possible through his death on the cross, through the shedding of his blood on our behalf.

He has made us to be a kingdom (verse 6). How would you define a kingdom? This is how the dictionary defines it: 'a territory or country subject to a king'. Not anarchy, where we can do just as we please. Not equality, where it's up to us whether we conform or not. But sovereignty, where we are subjects to a king, King Jesus.

He has made us priests to his God and Father (verse 6). In the Old Testament only the priest had the right of access to God's presence but Christ has given us all the right to approach God as our Father. He has made us priests. His Father has become our Father.

Faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, ruler of the kings of the earth: to him be – and then John stops in mid-flow and says, 'Wait a minute. There's even more. He loves *us*. He freed us from our sins by his blood. He made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever. Absolutely.'

In verse 7 John turns from what Christ has done to what he will do. 'Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.' This verse is a mosaic of quotations from the Old Testament. 'He is coming with the clouds' echoes Daniel chapter 7 verse 13. 'Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him' echoes Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10.

This same Jesus who came to earth two thousand years ago in great humility will come again in great glory. Not this time the virgin's womb or the manger or the carpenter's shop; not this time obscurity and rejection. Not this time the cross. He will come on the clouds of the sky with an army of angels to take the government upon his shoulders and establish a reign of righteousness and peace.

We've seen a development in John's description of Jesus. He began to speak of him in terms that were objective and factual, and then, just as he was about to burst into praise

he introduced a perspective that was subjective and personal. The great Creator became my Saviour.

Wonderful as this was, nothing could have prepared John for what happened next. It sounds ordinary enough. Verses 10, 11: 'On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches."' Verse 12: 'I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands.'

And still, for all the splendour of those magnificent objects, there's nothing to prepare him – or us – for what's coming next. Verse 13: 'and among the lampstands was someone...'

John knew all about Jesus. He had walked with him and talked with him during the years of his earthly ministry. He had witnessed an amazing transformation on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured. He had stood at the cross when Jesus committed his own mother into his care. He had stood in the empty tomb and wondered at the evidence so clearly displayed there. He had seen the risen Lord and watched him ascend into heaven. He had heard the voice of Jesus again in the promptings and promises of the Holy Spirit following the Day of Pentecost.

He knew all about Jesus and it was no exaggeration to say that he knew Jesus personally. But nothing had prepared him for the glory which he saw now as he encountered Jesus in all his heavenly glory.

'Among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead' (verses 13–17).

I wonder how the Junior Church leaders will explain this to the children. Let's imagine. They'll bring in the purest gold, the whitest wool. They'll take them to a mountain top in Wales and show them the whitest snow. They'll hold the children in front of a blazing fire. They'll bring them to the mouth of a red-hot furnace. They'll take them to Niagara Falls. They'll launch them into outer space. They'll hand round the sharpest sword they can find. And finally they'll lead them outside and ask them to look straight at the mid-day sun.

Don't worry, parents, it's not happening. But it's a frightening scenario. No wonder John said, 'When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.' 'Then,' he says, 'he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."' I love that verse that says, 'he placed his right hand on me' – the same hand that holds the seven stars resting gently and reassuringly on my shoulder.

In this amazing account we have six perspectives on Jesus. First there is the objective description, who he is, how great he is. Are you there yet? Then there is the doxology, the expression of praise. Are you there? In the third place there is the note of personal experience, what he means to us. Are you there? Then there is the awful cry of pain at his second coming as those who rejected him discover that it is now too late. Will you be there? Then there is that blinding vision of Jesus in the full extent of his heavenly majesty and power, before which no one can stand. One day all of us will be there. Finally, there is the right hand of comfort and the voice of reassurance. 'Do not be afraid.' Will you hear those words? Will you be there?