

## **“Fear Not” (Revelation 1:9–20)**

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**Brian Watson**

There is a great amount of anger in our country at this time. And there’s a great amount of fear. On the one hand, there were people afraid of Joe Biden winning the election. And, when he won, there was a fear of losing Republican control of the Senate, which also came to pass last week. On the next day, some of those people who were angry and afraid were in our nation’s capital. Some of them decided to make their way into the Capitol building, which created a great amount of anger and fear on the other side. So, the right is afraid of losing power, just as the left was afraid when President Trump won the election four years ago. We’re afraid of what will happen when politicians that we didn’t vote for, and politicians that we think may make terrible decisions, assume power.

Politicians use our fear to get our votes. Businesses use our fears when they market products. News media use our fears to get our attention, to keep us watching television and reading headlines, so they can sell airtime and print space to advertisers. Fear has a way of distorting our vision of reality. And fear keeps us from trusting in God.

Christians living at the end of the first century in the Roman Empire might have experienced some fear, and this fear would challenge their ability to trust in Jesus. At that time, Christianity was a fairly new religion that was regarded with suspicion. Christians didn’t have political power. They didn’t have institutions—no colleges or universities, which didn’t even exist, no official church denominations, no church buildings. Most Christians wouldn’t have been wealthy people or influential people. And, occasionally, persecution against Christians arose. In the mid ‘60s, during the reign of Emperor Nero, some Christians in Rome were killed after Nero blamed a great fire in the city on them.

When John wrote the book of Revelation, likely around the year 95, there was another cruel man who was the emperor. This time, the man was named Domitian, the emperor from 81 to 96. How cruel was he? Well, he had several Roman senators killed, one for making a joke and another for observing the birthday of a former emperor.<sup>1</sup> According to the Roman historian Suetonius, “After his victory in the civil war he became even more cruel, and to discover any

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<sup>1</sup> Suetonius, *Suetonius: The Lives of Caesars, The Lives of Illustrious Men* VIII.X.2–4, trans. J. C. Rolfe, vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 361.

conspirators who were in hiding, tortured many of the opposite party by a new form of inquisition, inserting fire in their privates; and he cut off the hands of some of them.”<sup>2</sup> He also took to himself the title “Lord and God.”<sup>3</sup> He had one of his cousins killed,<sup>4</sup> and he seduced his own niece after she married another man. Later, he “became the cause of her death by compelling her to get rid of a child of his by abortion.”<sup>5</sup> He also persecuted Christians, though the details of this persecution aren’t clear. The Christian historian Eusebius wrote, “DOMITIAN, having shown great cruelty toward many, and having unjustly put to death no small number of well-born and notable men at Rome, and having without cause exiled and confiscated the property of a great many other illustrious men, finally became a successor of Nero in his hatred and enmity toward God. He was in fact the second that stirred up a persecution against us.”<sup>6</sup>

If you think we have it bad in terms of politicians, you simply don’t know history. Christians, knowing exactly who the emperor was, had reason to fear. They didn’t have religious freedom. In fact, their religion was illegal. And they were expected to perform some token acts of worship to the emperor and to other so-called gods that were worshiped throughout the Empire.

It was at this time that John received the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Today, we’re going to continue our study of the book of Revelation by looking at chapter 1, verses 9–20. We’ll start by reading verses 9–11:

<sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. <sup>10</sup> I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup> saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”<sup>7</sup>

I didn’t say much about John last week, other than that the author of this book of the Bible is a man named John. This John is probably the apostle John, one of Jesus’ disciples who

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., VIII.X.5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., VIII.XIII.2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., VIII.XV, 372–73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., VIII.XXII, 383.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria, “The Church History of Eusebius” 3.17, in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 147.

<sup>7</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

also wrote the Gospel of John and the three letters in the New Testament: 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John. This was the view of many early Christian writers.<sup>8</sup> Some have said the author couldn't be the same John because the style of language is so different from his other writings. But there are two reasons why the language could be different: one, this is a different type of writing, as we talked about last week; two, John continually refers to the Old Testament, and his writing style seems to be very much in line with Old Testament language. To put it another way, Old Testament language and images are the building blocks of Revelation. It is possible that another man named John wrote the book, but it makes sense that the apostle wrote it, since this John calls himself a witness to the word of God (Rev. 1:2), something similar to what we find at the beginning of 1 John (1 John 1:1–3). But, at the end of the day, we can't be entirely sure.

What we can be sure of is that John is on an island called Patmos, which is in the Mediterranean Sea, off the western coast of Turkey. And early Christian tradition is that John was there not to preach the word of God, but because he was exiled for having preached the word of God elsewhere. It seems he had already faced some persecution for witnessing to who Jesus was, what Jesus taught, and what Jesus did in his death and resurrection. Notice that he says that he is our “brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.” Jesus told his followers that they would experience tribulation (John 16:33). Paul said that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Christians, if they really live out their faith, will face some level of persecution, and they need patient endurance. John knew what this was like.

We're also told that John was “in the Spirit on the Lord's day.” The Lord's day is Sunday, the day of the week when Jesus rose from the grave, when some of his followers found that the tomb in which he was buried was open and empty. Christians began worshiping together on this day in honor of the resurrection of Jesus. Christians still worship together on this day. Today is the Lord's day.

John was “in the Spirit” in the sense that the Holy Spirit, the third person of God, was influencing John in a powerful way. The Holy Spirit dwells in all Christians, but he can also fill or move Christians in unique ways. And the language of being “in the Spirit” recalls something

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<sup>8</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 81.4; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.14.3; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.108; Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.10; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.18.1.

the prophet Ezekiel wrote about when he saw powerful visions that God gave him (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 11:1; 43:5). The Spirit is preparing John to see something amazing.

While in this state of worship on the Lord's day, John hears a voice. He doesn't see who is speaking yet, but the voice is like a trumpet, probably loud and calling him clearly to attention. The voice tells him to write what he sees to churches in seven cities in the province of Asia Minor, a part of the Roman Empire that is now part of western Turkey. We find messages to these churches in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation.

So, John hears this voice telling him what to do. But who is speaking? Let's read verses 12–16:

<sup>12</sup> Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup> and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. <sup>14</sup> The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, <sup>15</sup> his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. <sup>16</sup> In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

There are several times in Revelation when John hears something and then looks to see a vision. Often what he sees when he looks is a surprise. Here, he sees a mysterious person. And at this point, we begin to read about all kinds of symbols that find their meaning in the Old Testament.

This person is Jesus. We know that because he is referred to as “a son of man,” and later we will see that he died and is “alive forevermore.” Jesus appears in the midst of seven golden lampstands. In the Old Testament, we read about the furniture of the tabernacle and temple. This was the place that represented God's presence among the Israelites, where God met with them and was worshiped by them. It seems that the lampstand, with its seven lamps, could represent Israel. Jesus in the midst of his people, the church, a reconstituted Israel, a true Israel that consists of people who trust Jesus, know him personally, have the Spirit of God in them, and who have been forgiven of all their sins because Jesus died to pay the penalty for those sins.

This passage is full of references to the Old Testament. And it would take a long time to unpack all the details. But I'll try to give us the important information by stating up front that this passage shows that Jesus is a priest, a king, a judge, and God himself.

Let's start with Jesus as priest and king. Jesus is wearing a long robe and a golden sash. That resembles the clothing of a priest, though it also resembles something else in the Old Testament. In Daniel 10, a mysterious man appears to Daniel wearing a linen robe and a golden belt. This man has a face like lightning, limbs like bronze, and a loud voice (Dan. 10:5–7). In that passage, the mysterious man is perhaps a messenger sent from God, an angel, or perhaps an appearance of God himself.

But the clearer reference to Jesus as priest and king comes from the lampstand imagery in Zechariah. In that prophetic book of the Old Testament, an angel shows Zechariah a lampstand of gold with seven golden lamps. This seems to represent the temple, which had been destroyed and was being rebuilt. But the temple could also represent Israel, the people of God. And it seems that God's Spirit is associated with these lamps, which are also called the "eyes of the Lord" (Zech. 4:10). The idea is that God's Spirit extends everywhere, including the churches. And God's Spirit empowers God's people. This was a low time for Israel. Israel had fallen from her previous glory. But God promised a future glory, not one brought about by politics or human power. God said, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6).

In that vision in Zechariah, the lampstand is next to two olive trees. I think the idea is that lamp is fueled by olive oil, which comes from the olives of those trees. Oil is often representative of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers and fuels churches. But in that vision in Zechariah 4, we're told that the olive trees represent God's anointed servants, the high priest Joshua and the governor of Judea, Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of King David. Joshua and Zerubbabel represented the priest and the king, and it seems that Jewish people thought there would be two future anointed servants, two types of Messiahs, who would empower Israel and her worship of God. But the true Holy Spirit-anointed servant, the true Priest and King, is Jesus.

Now, that's a lot of detail, I know. But here is the main point: Jesus is the one who stands in the midst of the lampstands, which are called the seven churches (in verse 20). These seven churches in Revelation are representative of all churches, true churches of God in all places and at all times. Jesus is in the midst of those churches. Jesus is the High Priest and King of those churches. Jesus sustains them by the power of the Holy Spirit. If those churches depart from being faithful, Jesus could trim their wicks. The churches belong to Jesus.

Jesus is also a judge. The clearest reference to his being a judge is the double-edged sword in his mouth. As I said last week, the visions of Revelation are not meant to be taken

literally. Jesus is not going to perform some kind of circus trick, a reverse sword-swallowing. The sword is often associated with judgment. Those who are condemned receive the sword. The image also comes from the Old Testament. In Isaiah 49, a servant of the Lord says that God has made his mouth like a sharp sword, and he is also called Israel (Isa. 49:2–3). Jesus is the true Israel of God, the true faithful servant and worshiper of God. And he is the one who will judge the world with his mouth, with his words (Isa. 11:4). At the end of this age, Jesus will judge everyone who has ever lived. Jesus sees all things—which is probably what the eyes of fire suggest. Jesus knows whether we love God or not. He knows whether we have centered our lives upon God. He knows whether we have obeyed God’s commandments, whether we have tried to live all of life according to God’s design. Jesus also knows whether we have come to trust him or not. And if we have failed to put our trust in Jesus, we will be condemned by his word of judgment.

No one likes to talk about judgment and condemnation. Many Christians even are afraid of talking about such things, because we don’t want to be seen as being harsh and judgmental. I think that Christians shouldn’t be judgmental in the sense of making determinations about who will be condemned or not. That is God’s business. But Christians should faithfully communicate this message. God will judge. That is a reality. It is going to happen. And those who have rebelled against Jesus, failing to trust him, to accept the forgiveness he offers, to pledge their ultimate allegiance to him, will be condemned by God. The apostles were not afraid of preaching that reality. They didn’t condemn people, but they did warn them of a coming condemnation. God is gracious. He is kind, he is patient, he is merciful, he is love. That is why God gave us Jesus, who is not only a High Priest, offering sacrifices, but is also the Lamb of God, the one who was sacrificed in order to take away our guilt. But he’s more than that. He’s also a judge who will condemn those who fail to receive his offer of forgiveness.

And Jesus is also God. There are many times in the New Testament when Jesus is described as being God. In our desire to have the Bible speak in ways we want it to speak, we often miss these descriptions. We want clear verses that say, unambiguously, “Jesus is God.” There are a few of them (John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1). But more often than not, the references are subtle.

Here, we see some subtle references to Jesus’ deity. We’re told that Jesus is “like a son of man” who has white hair. That language comes from Daniel 7. In that chapter, Daniel is given a

vision of a heavenly throne. The “Ancient of Days,” who is clearly God, has white clothing and white hair, and his throne appears as fiery flames. Here, Jesus has that white hair, white like wool, white like snow. The fact that his hair is white probably represents his purity, as does the bronze of his limbs, bronze that has been refined in a furnace. Jesus is morally perfect. His powerful voice is like the sound of many rushing waters, the same description of God’s voice found in Ezekiel 43:2. Again, the same descriptions of God are applied to Jesus.

It is important that we understand the meaning of these symbols. It is important not to read them as literal descriptions of Jesus. If we miss this, we might go to some very weird places. I know a person who is a Facebook friend, and she has posted some strange things about Jesus. She happens to be black, and she seems to have bought into the strange belief that Israel was actually a nation of black people, and that the true Israel is black people, and that Jesus was black. Now, I don’t care what color Jesus was. It really doesn’t matter. But I highly doubt he was black, just as I highly doubt that he was white like me. I’m sure his skin tone was somewhere in between. At any rate, one of the supposed evidences that Jesus was black is that his white hair was like wool. Some people seem to think this refers to the texture of his hair, like the hair of someone from Africa. And he had bronze feet. Well, the whole passage cannot be taken literally. That would be to misunderstand what kind of writing this is. Also, if his hair is wooly, then it is also snowy. But that is ridiculous. The point is that the whiteness of his hair resembles the whiteness of snow and the whiteness of wool. And the color bronze isn’t quite the color of African skin. Bronze refers to strength, and the refined bronze probably refers both to great strength and moral purity. My friend seems to think that black people are the people of God, based in part on her misreading of this passage. But that is just as false as saying white people are the true people of God. The true people of God are those who trust in Jesus, those who are born again of the Holy Spirit, and they will come from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

So, it matters how we understand these passages. If we misread them, then we’ll go to some pretty wild places.

If we understand this passage correctly, we’ll see that Jesus is not just the leader of the church, who is in the midst of the church. He is also God who dwells among us. He is present here right now by means of the Holy Spirit. In body, he is in heaven. But through the Holy Spirit, he is here with us right now. And this would have been a great comfort to John and the early

generations of Christians, who were living with a real threat of persecution by men like Domitian. Even though Christians were weak and poor and sometimes persecuted, Jesus was still with them. He had not abandoned them. He would not abandon them. And even though Christians were in a sense being judged by everyone around them, Jesus is the true Judge, and he will judge everyone who has ever lived. Though people often do wicked things now, they will not escape condemnation. Those who do evil will stand before Jesus someday.

John's vision of Jesus doesn't end there, however. Let's read verses 17–20:

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

<sup>19</sup> Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. <sup>20</sup> As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

When John saw this amazing vision of Jesus, he fell to the ground like a dead man. This, too, is something similar to what we see in the book of Daniel, when Daniel saw great visions (Dan. 8:18; 10:15). If we saw Jesus as he really is, we would drop the ground in awe, in wonder, and in fear.

But Jesus tells John not to fear. Perhaps he meant that John shouldn't be afraid of his appearance. But I think he means, "Don't be afraid of the tribulation you're experiencing. Don't be afraid of the emperor or other non-Christians who might say bad things about you, take away your job, hurt you, and even kill you." Why shouldn't John fear? There are two reasons: One is that Jesus died and rose again. Jesus' enemies couldn't stop him. They did the worst that they could. They killed him. But Jesus rose from the grave. If death can't stop Jesus, death can't stop Christians and Christianity.

The second reason we shouldn't fear is because Jesus is in control. He says that he is the first and the last. Last week, we saw that that language is applied to God (Rev. 1:4, 8). God has always existed and always will. God has control over everything that happens, past, present, and future. I'm reading a massive commentary on Revelation by Greg Beale, who says, "God is transcendent over time and governs the way history proceeds because he is in control of its



inception and conclusion.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus is in control of history. And Jesus knows the end of the story. A major part of Revelation is this: The end of the story is that God wins. God triumphs over Satan. Good triumphs over evil. God’s people will be raised from the dead and live forever with him. They may be low in society’s eyes, persecuted and oppressed, but one day they will be exalted.

Another aspect of Jesus being in control is that he has the keys to Hades and death. He has the keys to the kingdom of God. He has the keys to hell. He has the keys to a new creation, a renewed world without evil, where only God and his people live. If you want to get into heaven, to get into God’s kingdom, and to get into that new creation where there is no evil, no pain, no wars, no diseases, and no death, you must go to Jesus. You must trust that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done. You must entrust your life to him. You must be willing to follow where he goes. If you do that, Jesus opens the key to God, to heaven, to eternal life. If you refuse Jesus, stubbornly trusting in yourself, or foolishly putting all your trust in politics and power, money and technology, or whatever else you think will rescue from all the ills of life, he will open up hell for you.

What do we do with today’s message? For anyone who reads Revelation, we need to see that this introduction helps us to understand all that follows. It introduces the symbolic language of the book. It tells us that John is writing to the church in the midst of tribulation. John is told to write “the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.” The things that John sees relate to the present and the future. They apply to all Christians throughout this age. They also deal with the end of this age and the eternal age that is to come. It tells us that this book is about Jesus, who is present among his churches, who is the Priest, King, and Judge, because he is the Son of God. He is the beginning and end. All things were made through him and for him (Col. 1:16).

When we see that this book is about Jesus, and when we see Jesus as he truly is, it should change us. If you are not yet a Christian, understand the claim of the Bible: Jesus is not just a great man, not just a wise teacher, not just someone who had followers. He’s also not just a man who died and was seen by others. Jesus is those things. But he is also God. More specifically, he is the Son of God. And his power is great. Not even execution could stop him. His fiery eyes see

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<sup>9</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 213.

everything that has ever happened. And he will judge everyone with his word. How will you fare when you stand before Jesus? When your dark thoughts, desires, and deeds are brought to light and measured against the blazing, holy moral purity of Jesus, how will you look? When all is revealed, where is your hope? Where will you find security, comfort, safety? Whom will you trust?

My strong encouragement to you today is this: if you are not a Christian, turn to Jesus. Yes, he is a King and Judge. But he's also a Savior. Jesus isn't just one who will condemn. He is one who was condemned already. He willingly took the condemnation that we deserve when he died on the cross. Though he is the only one who never sinned, he was treated like a sinner. God made him who knew no sin to become sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that sin could be crushed on the cross. If you trust in Jesus, your condemnation is taken away. It is transferred to Jesus, who already paid the penalty of condemnation. He can forgive you of everything, all the dark things you've ever thought, said, and done. Put your trust in him today.

If you are a Christian, here is the message: Fear not! Do not be afraid of tribulation. Do not fear politicians. Do not be afraid of suffering and even death. This does not mean that we like suffering and death. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't work to make our lives better or the world better. We should do that as we have opportunity, as long as that work is done according to God's word. We must faithfully obey God even when it hurts. But we have no reason to fear. If Jesus died and lives forever, we will die and live forever. If Jesus has the keys to Hades and death, and the keys to God's kingdom, we don't need to fear death. If you're a Christian, Jesus has already opened up the keys to his kingdom and to life. Jesus knows the end of history and he is the Lord of history. He is telling us that all is going according to plan, and that all things will end well. He is with us. He is our brother and partner in tribulation. And he will not fail us.