

Revelation 1:17-20 (& 2:1a)

Jesus Speaks to John

John is Encouraged and Told What to Write

<p>[17] When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.</p> <p>Then he placed his right hand on me and said:</p> <p>"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.</p> <p>[18] I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!</p> <p>And I hold the keys of death and Hades.</p> <p>[19] "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.</p>	<p>A. John's Terror</p> <p>B. Jesus' Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is preeminent and sovereign over all. • He is self-existing and eternal. • He has conquered death. Because of this, he has sovereign authority over death and everything that happens after death. <p>C. John is told what to write about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What he saw (Jesus' appearance). • Things related to "now." • Things related to "later." 	<p><u>Why was John afraid?</u> Because he was overwhelmed with the glory, majesty and purity of the one whose righteousness is like a consuming fire.</p> <p><u>Why shouldn't John be afraid?</u> Because this same Jesus, who is terrifying in power, is also gentle to those who humble themselves before him.</p> <p>"Therefore" = because of who Jesus is and what he has done. What John writes will have the authority of God.</p>
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Jesus Explains the Mystery

<p>[20] The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this:</p> <p>The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.</p>	<p>A. His People - symbolized</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mystery - to be explained • The stars • The lampstands 	<p>(Seen in the description of v. 12-16.)</p> <p>"Mysteries" in the Bible are meant to be revealed.</p> <p>Jesus is among his people (lampstands); he protects and directs their representatives / leaders (stars).</p>
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The seven lampstands - These were olive oil lamps on individual lampstands. These lampstands represented the seven churches that originally received this book; yet they, in turn, represent all of us who belong to Jesus, down through the ages. Jesus, the majestic king of the universe, stands among his people; he is willing to associate with them.

The seven stars - These are the churches' representatives. The word "angel" also means "messenger," (the same New Testament Greek word is used for both), so many believe that the focus is on the leadership of the church (as a "messenger"), rather than on some heavenly being (an "angel"). Jesus holds them, suggesting protection and guidance.

Jesus examines the churches

[2:1 (etc.)] "To the angel of the church ... write..."	B. His People - judged/evaluated (chapters 2 and 3)	Jesus fully understands his people - both their strengths and weaknesses. He knows what they need.
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Lamps are supposed to give off light - here representing the way the churches are to reflect the glory of Christ. Jesus is going to examine these lamps (his people). Just as oil lamps need trimmed and maintained, in order to give off a bright light, so also the churches need Jesus' examination, judgment and exhortation, in order that they can properly reflect his glory in a "dark" world. (Compare to Matthew 5:14-16.)

What types of things does Jesus tell them?

When we compare these seven letters, we discover that there is a pattern in what Jesus says to them. With few exceptions, each of the letters follows approximately this same outline:

1. Something about Christ
2. Commendation, praise (their strengths)
3. Rebuke (their weaknesses)
4. Exhortation (their duty)
5. A promise (applicable to *all* of Jesus' followers)

What Do These Seven Churches Represent?

- **Seven historical churches** that existed in John's day. This would include all the Christians who lived in that specific city. (Having multiple "churches" in one town was unheard of.) These churches are arranged in an irregular circle (see map). Other nearby towns also had groups of Christians ("churches"), but Jesus selectively picked the churches of these seven specific cities, probably because of their significance to the rest of us.
- **Seven representative types of churches**, which may exist at any time. (Note that the number "seven" is often used in Scripture to signify completeness, or the totality of something.) A present-day church could be described as having characteristics similar to one (or more) of these seven churches. Each of these seven letters has an exhortation for *individuals* - "*whoever* has an ear" - to "hear" what is being said to the "churches" (plural). This indicates that their application goes beyond the specific church that the letter was originally addressed to.
- **The history of the church?** It has been suggested that there may be some correlation between the order in which these seven churches are described, and the historical progression of the church as a whole, down through the ages. This view would claim that the church of the first century was predominantly characterized by the strengths and weaknesses of the church at Ephesus; that the church in the next couple of centuries was characterized by the strengths and weaknesses of the church at Smyrna, and so on. The church at the end, just prior to the return of Christ, would be similar to the church at Laodicea. (At any one point, *all* of the seven types of churches could be present, but one type would tend to be more predominant than the others.) We will have to wait until the end, after all has been accomplished, to know the extent to which this view is accurate, for Scripture does not give us any objective means to determine where we are, in such a time line. Attempting to interpret the churches in this manner is very subjective, with one's preconceived notions influencing his conclusions. Regardless of one's opinion of this view, we must remember that Scripture's *primary* focus is for us to examine *ourselves* - to have "ears that hear" - and to determine the extent that the critiques given to these seven churches are applicable to *us*.



Revelation 1:17-20 (and 2:1+) Supplementary Study Information

Verse 17

WHEN I SAW HIM

John had never before seen Jesus in *all* his glory. During Jesus' life on earth, his glory was veiled, hidden from sight. (John and two others did get a small glimpse of Jesus' glory, on a mountain near Galilee - Matthew 17:1-8; 2 Peter 1:16-18.) What John now saw was so stunning in majestic greatness, that it totally overwhelmed him. It probably "overloaded" his senses of hearing and sight, the same way that fire might "overload" one's sense of touch.

John responded the same way we would have, if we found ourselves suddenly face-to-face with something so extreme. It took Jesus' strengthening encouragement, for him to recover.

PLACED HIS HAND ON ME

The seven stars would have been seven points of light, not large, fiery luminous bodies, such as we view them today. Jesus doesn't necessarily have to move them from one hand to the other, in order to place his right hand on John. They wouldn't even have to be shining at the moment he did so.

[JESUS SPEAKS (words of assurance and encouragement)]

In the book of Revelation, Jesus' words are found only in chapters 1-3 (perhaps also 4:1) and chapter 22. The rest of the book is a record of John's eyewitness account of the things he was shown.

In chapter 1, Jesus is seen as both king and friend; as both terrifying and gentle. Verses 5-8 focus on Jesus as the coming King, and verses 12-16 describe to us the awesome, almost terrifying, appearance of this King. Verses 17-18 reveal Jesus as a friend, as he encourages John.

FEAR / BEING AFRAID

Why *shouldn't* John be afraid? Because of who Jesus is, and because of his relationship to Jesus. (If John had been an *enemy* of Jesus, then he would have *plenty* of reasons to be afraid.)

Everyone is going to fear God. The issue is whether it will be the *terror*-type of fear, or the *reverence*-type of fear. Other verses, such as Revelation 19:5, focus on the reverence-type of fear. [The context of the verse will normally show which type of fear it is.]

- Note that the right type of fear will result in a *desire* to obey God. His commands will bring *joy* to such a person - Psalm 112:1.

FIRST AND LAST

A focus on his pre-eminence and his presence, in the past, the present and the future - compare to "Alpha and Omega" - v. 8. [This fact should be a comfort to the righteous, but a terror to the wicked.]

- Attributed to God in the Old Testament: Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12
- Attributed to Jesus in the New Testament: here, as well as in Revelation 2:8; Rev. 22:13

Verse 18

THE LIVING ONE / DEAD / ALIVE

Note the verb tenses in the three parts of the sentence:

- I (AM) THE LIVING ONE: Present tense (the word "am" is in v. 17), focusing on his continuous existence; a continuous, ongoing life. Jesus is self-existing: compare to John 5:26.
- I WAS DEAD: For a short time, he *became* something that he wasn't.

- I AM ALIVE: Note the change in verb tense: He *was* temporarily dead, but *is* permanently alive. In him, we also will overcome death and will live. (In some respects, it has already happened - John 3:36, "whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life.")

Because of this, Jesus is sovereign over *both* life and death. It is because of this, that he is qualified to have the "keys" (etc.), mentioned later in the verse.

John 1:1 and 1:14 show the contrast between "to be" (or "to exist") and "to become."

- Jesus *was* (or *existed* as) "with God" and at the same time *was* (or *existed* as) "God" - verse 1:1. This is what he originally was (and continued to be). It was an ongoing, permanent condition; it was never different.
- Jesus *became* human - verse 1:14. He became something he originally wasn't.

KEYS

Emphasizing his authority or control over death and life after death. Because of this, Jesus is the one who has the power to release us from death's grip. He has conquered death, so he is *no longer able* to die.

- Jesus, the victorious one, is the one who is associated with the lampstands/stars.
- Because we are "in him," we also will share in his victory. (Compare to Hebrews 2:14-15.)

Verse 19

Two main views about verse 19:

- 1) Some (perhaps most) view it as an outline of the book of Revelation:
 - (a) "what you have seen" indicating the vision of Jesus (chapter 1);
 - (b) "what is now" indicating the condition of the churches (chapters 2-3); and
 - (c) "what will take place later" indicating future events (chapters 4 to end).
- 2) Others see it as simply an expansion of the command given in verse 11, without a focus on a specific time line.

According to this view:

 - (a) John was to write what he saw ("what you have seen" simply indicating that the writing would come after he saw the visions), and
 - (b) John's writings would include both present ("now") and future ("later") events. [Some with this view do not necessarily see a clear-cut break in time, between chapters 3 and 4.]

WRITE

Because of who Jesus is, what he says about the future is trustworthy and reliable (guaranteed to happen). The letters were for the people (the "churches"), but were delivered to their representatives.

- Jesus knows what *is*. Nothing is hidden from his eyes. [Because of this, he is qualified to give us chapters 2 and 3.]
- Jesus knows what *will be*. What he tells us is *certain*; it will come to pass and will not fail. (See Revelation 22:6.) [Because of this, he is qualified to give us chapters 4-22.]

WHAT WILL TAKE PLACE AFTER THIS / LATER

Also translated as "after these things," this phrase occurs in Revelation 4:1. Many believe that this indicates a break in the account, separating present-day events ("what is now," described in the letters to the seven churches) and the future events directly related to Jesus' second coming. Those who hold to the view that Christians will be taken out of the world before a seven-year period of tribulation often place that event at the beginning of chapter 4. (There is no *direct* statement that indicates the exact relationship between the two events.)

Other people see less significance in the occurrence of this phrase ("after these things") in chapter 4:1, believing that it only indicates that John saw something *after* he saw something else, and that it does not necessarily imply a sequence in the "prophetic timetable." [This phrase occurs several other places, too - Revelation 1:19; 4:1; 7:9; 9:12; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1; and 20:3.]

Verse 20

MYSTERY

In the New Testament sense, this word normally indicates something we can't understand on our own, but which must be revealed to us by God.

CHURCHES

In the New Testament, this term refers to *all* the Christians who live in a specific locality. It does *not* have the modern-day connotation of a building, or of small groups of "believers" that isolate themselves from each other, each calling themselves a "church."

ANGEL or MESSENGER

In the original New Testament Greek language, the same word means *both* "angel" and "messenger."

- Normally, the context influences which word should be used in a translation. Verses in which most translations use the word "messenger," instead of "angel," include: Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52; 2 Corinthians 12:7; and James 2:25.
- In Revelation 2-3, it is not so clear as to which English word is the best choice. Most translations use the word "angel." However, they often will have a footnote that tells us that the "angels" of the seven churches could be "messengers."

LAMPSTANDS and STARS:

It is significant that Jesus tells us that we are the *light* of the World, and that we are to reflect *his light!*

The lampstands are a reminder of the golden lampstands that were in the temple, in God's presence. The difference is this: In the temple, there would be one lampstand holding seven lamps (Exodus 25:31-40). In this vision, each of the lamps has its own stand.

Verse 2:1 "To the church... write"

Jesus is going to expose the churches for what they really are.

In chapters 2 and 3, we will see what Jesus says to the churches. Interestingly, in each instance, he ends his words with the injunction, "Listen to what the *Spirit* says." (Jesus' words and the Spirit's words are the same words.)

Some General Comments about the Letters to the Churches

THE WORD "ANGEL"

This word can mean either "angel" or "messenger."

- If this has reference to a heavenly being (an angel), it may suggest a hidden (heavenly) reality that corresponds to the visible earthly reality called "church." The two would be related in some manner. Perhaps "behind the scenes" events would have some type of relationship to events we can clearly see. (Compare to Daniel 10:12-11:1, which focuses on spiritual realities that were related to various kingdoms during Daniel's day.)
- The alternate interpretation would be that this word refers to a leader in the church - someone who was responsible for the guidance of the people. This leader would exhort the people to pay attention to what Jesus said.

A STATEMENT ABOUT JESUS

In each of the seven letters, Jesus mentions something about himself. In each case, he mentions a characteristic that has special application to their situation.

"I KNOW"

Jesus has sovereign knowledge of everything about them.

PRAISE of their strengths (for five of the seven churches)

There is to be a "solidarity" between Christ and his church. Their life and character should be a reflection of his. He knows the extent to which that is true, and to that extent, he gives them praise.

CONDEMNATION of their weaknesses / sins (for five of the seven churches)

Where condemnation occurs, it is because they have broken a prior commitment. They are not doing (or being) something they were supposed to do (or be).

- He needs to point out these issues, because we have a tendency to deceive ourselves into thinking we are *not* doing anything wrong. We must follow Jesus' example by learning to *accurately* distinguish between what is true and what is false.
- The individual, the leader, the group - we are all responsible for each other. None has a "right" to close his eyes to sins committed by another, for in Christ, we are all *one* body.

A CALL TO DUTY

Each church is told to do something. It may range anywhere from encouragement to continue in the way they are going, to a command to totally turn around.

HAVING EARS; HEARING WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS

This goes beyond merely having a body part called an "ear." We must *pay attention* and let what is said impact our thoughts and actions. In order for the proper change, the Spirit must *speak* and we must *listen*.

- This separates the "church" (referring to the whole number of those who *claim* to be part of the church) into two groups: Those who pay attention, who understand and accept what the Spirit says; and those who don't. The one group is "in the faith" (as in 2 Corinthians 13:5); the other isn't.
- The verbs are *present tense*, indicating we must test ourselves *now*. We must deal with our problems *now*.

HE WHO OVERCOMES

This does not refer to a "special class" of Christians. The one who overcomes is the *genuine* follower of God; the others are *false* believers or fakes. [This phrase also can be translated, "he who is the victor" or "he who has the victory."]

- Compare to 1 John 5:4-6: Everyone who is born of God has victory over the ways of the world. Our trust in Jesus is the foundation that makes it possible.
- Seven different promises are given to the to the seven churches. However, it is *one* victory, expressed in *seven* ways.