

## VISIONS OF THE GLORIOUS CHRIST

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*Arguably, the two greatest biblical portraits of the Lord Jesus Christ both appear in the apocalyptic gallery of John's Revelation. They introduce a magnificent study in contrast. The first (1:9-20) casts the Savior as the comforting Lord of the church bringing encouragement to John and timely reminders to the churches during troubling times. The second masterpiece (19:11-16) pictures the King of kings as Lord of the earth coming to forcefully and permanently reclaim His kingdom from unbelieving rebels. These two scenes do not present an either/or approach to understanding the real Jesus; rather, they reveal the both/and person of Christ. The former still comforts the church today, while the latter terrifying moments still await fulfillment in the future.*

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One of Dr. Thomas' noblest efforts to date has been to write a definitive and comprehensive two-volume commentary on Revelation.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting years of exegetical labor, he painstakingly made his way through the text with apt consideration for all the issues of interpretation as concisely and thoroughly as any commentator on Revelation. This extensive work shows his love for the Apocalypse and the glory of Christ. Dr. Thomas also directed much of his effort toward pursuing the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ against liberal attacks on His deity. This essay is a tribute to his love for Revelation and for the truth regarding the Lord Jesus.

The Apocalypse of John presents the glory of Christ with the most dramatic and powerful imagery. Two visions of Christ dominate Revelation—one at the start and one near the end. Both are terrifying visions, yet in the first all fear is dispelled; while in the second, the fear is undiminished. They show the same glorious Christ in relation to His church and in relation to His enemies. One

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) and *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995).

is a vision of encouragement, the other a vision of sheer terror. Together, they present the undiminished glory of the divine Son of God.

By the close of the first century, Christianity had become a hated and despised religious sect in the Roman Empire. Writing to Emperor Trajan early in the second century, Pliny the Roman governor of Bithynia scorned Christianity as a “depraved and excessive superstition.”<sup>2</sup> He went on to complain that “the contagion of this superstition [Christianity] has spread not only in the cities, but in the villages and rural districts as well.”<sup>3</sup> The Roman historian Tacitus, a contemporary of Pliny, described Christians as “a class hated for their abominations,”<sup>4</sup> while Suetonius, another contemporary of Pliny, dismissed them as “a sect of men adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition.”<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the natural hostility of fallen men toward those who embraced the gospel, Christians were hated for several more reasons. Politically, the Romans viewed them as disloyal because they refused to acknowledge Caesar as the supreme authority. That disloyalty was confirmed in the eyes of the Roman officials by the Christians’ refusal to offer the obligatory sacrifices of worship to the emperor. Also, many of their meetings were held privately at night, causing the Roman officials to accuse them of designing anti-government plots.

Religiously, Christians were denounced as atheists because they rejected the Roman pantheon of gods, and because they worshiped an invisible God, not an idol. Wild rumors, based on misunderstandings of Christian beliefs and practices, falsely accused them of cannibalism, incest, and other sexual perversions.

Socially, Christians were generally from the lower classes of society (cf. 1 Cor 1:26) and thus despised by the Roman aristocracy. The Christian teaching that all are equal (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), the Romans saw as a threat to undermine the hierarchical structure of Roman society and topple the elite from their privileged status. It also heightened the Roman aristocracy’s fear of a slave rebellion. Christians did not openly oppose slavery, but the perception was that they undermined it by teaching that master and slave were equal in Christ (cf. Philemon). Finally, Christians declined to participate in the worldly amusements that were so much a part of pagan society, e.g. avoiding festivals, the theater, and other pagan events.

Economically, Christians were seen as a threat by the numerous priests, craftsmen, and merchants who profited from idol worship. The resulting hostility, unforgettably seen in the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:23ff.), deepened as Christianity became more widespread. In his letter to Emperor Trajan cited above, Pliny

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<sup>2</sup> Pliny, *Letters II*, Loeb Classical Library, 405.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals XIII-XVI*, Loeb Classical Library, 283.

<sup>5</sup> Suetonius, *Book II*, Loeb Classical Library, 111.

complained that the pagan temples had been deserted and that those who sold sacrificial animals found few buyers.<sup>6</sup>

In that superstitious age, many Romans feared that natural disasters resulted from the neglect of the pagan gods. The third-century Christian apologist Tertullian remarked sarcastically, “If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn’t move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once, ‘Christians to the lion!’ What, all of them to one lion?”<sup>7</sup>

During the first few decades after the death of Christ, the Roman government considered Christianity merely a sect of Judaism (cf. Acts 18:12-16). Eventually, it was the hostility which the Jews displayed against the Christians that led the Romans to recognize Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism. That identified Christians as worshipers of an illegal religion because Judaism was a *religio licita* or legal religion. Yet, there was no official persecution by the Roman authorities until the time of Nero. Seeking to divert public suspicion that he had caused the great fire in Rome (July 19, A.D. 64), Nero blamed the Christians for it. As a result, many Christians were executed at Rome (including both Peter and Paul, according to tradition), but there was as yet no Empire-wide persecution.

Three decades later, Emperor Domitian instigated an official persecution of Christians. Little is known of the details, but it extended to the province of Asia (modern Turkey). The Apostle John had been banished to the island of Patmos, and at least one person, a pastor, had already been martyred (Rev 2:13). The persecuted, beleaguered, and discouraged believers in Asia Minor, to whom John addressed the book of Revelation, desperately needed encouragement. It had been years since Jesus ascended, Jerusalem had been destroyed, and Israel ravaged. The church was losing its first love, compromising, tolerating sin, becoming powerless, and distasteful to the Lord Himself as described in Rev 2-3. The other Apostles were dead and John had been exiled. The whole picture looked very bleak; so that is why the first vision John received from the inspiring Holy Spirit is of Christ’s present ministry in the church.

John’s readers took comfort in the knowledge that Christ would one day return in glory and defeat His enemies. The description of those momentous events takes up most of the book of Revelation. However, the vision of Jesus Christ that begins the book does not describe Jesus in His future glory, but rather depicts Him in the present as the glorified Lord of the church. In spite of all the disappointments, the Lord had not abandoned His church nor His promises. This

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<sup>6</sup> Pliny, *Letters II*, 405.


<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 47.

powerful vision of Christ's present ministry must have provided great hope and comfort to the wondering and suffering churches to whom John wrote.

### **CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH – A VISION OF COMFORT**

I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, 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." And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. "Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things. "As for the mystery of the seven stars which 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 (Rev 1:9-20).

#### **The Setting of the Vision (1:9-11)**

John humbly identified with his readers by describing himself as their fellow partaker, sharing with them first of all in tribulation. Like them, John was at that moment suffering severe persecution for the cause of Christ, having been exiled with other criminals. He could thus identify with the suffering believers to whom he wrote. John was part of the same kingdom as his readers— in the sphere of salvation, the redeemed community over which Jesus reigns as Lord and King (cf. v. 5). He shared a kinship with them as a fellow subject of Jesus Christ. Finally, John identified with his readers in the matter of perseverance (ὑπομονή, *hupomonē* ) which literally means "to remain under." It speaks of patiently enduring difficulties without giving up.

When he received this vision, John was in exile on the island called Patmos. A barren, volcanic island in the Aegean Sea, Patmos is at its extremities about ten miles long and five to six miles wide and located some forty miles offshore from Miletus (a city in Asia Minor about thirty miles south of Ephesus, cf. Acts 20:15-17). According to the Roman historian Tacitus, exile to such islands was a common form of punishment in the first century. At about the same time that John was banished to Patmos, Emperor Domitian exiled his own niece, Flavia Domitilla, to another island.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Flavia Domitilla, whose banishment was politically motivated, John was probably sent to Patmos as a criminal, i.e. as a Christian, he was a member of an illegal religious sect. If so, the conditions under which he lived would have been harsh. Exhausting labor under the watchful eye and ready whip of a Roman overseer, insufficient food and clothing, and having to sleep on the bare ground would have taken their toll on a ninety-year-old man. It was on that bleak, barren island, under those brutal conditions, that John received the most extensive revelation of the future ever given.

John's only crime was faithfulness to "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus." Those two phrases appear to be synonymous references to his faithful, unequivocal, uncompromising preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

John received his vision while he was in the Spirit; his experience transcended the bounds of normal human comprehension. Under the Holy Spirit's control, John was transported to a plane of experience and perception beyond that of the human senses. In that state, God supernaturally revealed Revelation to him. Ezekiel (Ezek 2:2; 3:12, 14), Peter (Acts 10:9ff.), and Paul (Acts 22:17-21; 2 Cor 12:1ff.) had similar experiences. John received his vision on the Lord's day. While some argue that this refers to the time of eschatological judgment called the Day of the Lord, it is best understood as a reference to Sunday. The Greek phrase translated the Lord's Day, τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ, (*tῆ ῥη kuriakῆ ἡ ἡμέρα*) is different from the one translated "the Day of the Lord" (cf. Acts 2:20; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10) and appears only here in the New Testament. Further, the vision John received had nothing to do with the eschatological Day of the Lord; it was a vision of Christ's present ministry in the church. Finally, in the second century this phrase was widely used to refer to Sunday.<sup>9</sup> "The Lord's Day" became the customary way of referring to Sunday because Christ's resurrection took place on a Sunday.

John received his commission to record the vision in dramatic fashion. The loud voice (cf. Ezek 3:12) was that of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. vv. 12-13, 17-18), sounding to John in its piercing, commanding clarity like the sound of a trumpet. Throughout the book of Revelation, a loud voice or sound indicates the

<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Galilee, 1980) 413.

<sup>9</sup> R. J. Bauckham, "The Lord's Day" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, D. A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 221f.

solemnity of what is about to be revealed (cf. 5:2, 12; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:2, 15, 18; 16:1, 17; 19:1, 17; 21:3). The scene is reminiscent of the giving of the Law at Sinai (Exod 19:16).

The sovereign, powerful voice from heaven commanded John, “Write in a book (or scroll) what you see.” This is the first of twelve commands in the book of Revelation for John to write what he saw (cf. v. 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5); only on one occasion was he forbidden to write (10:4).

After writing the vision, John was to send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea. These churches were chosen because they were located in the key cities of the seven postal districts into which the Roman province of (modern Turkey) Asia was divided. They were thus the central points for disseminating information. The seven cities appear in the order that a messenger, traveling on the circular road that linked them, would visit them. After landing at Miletus, the messenger or messengers bearing the book of Revelation would have traveled north to Ephesus (the city nearest to Miletus), then in a clockwise circle to Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Copies of Revelation would have been distributed to each church.

### **The Unfolding of the Vision (1:12-16, 20)**

Having described the circumstances in which he received it, John then recorded the vision itself. This revealing and richly instructive look at the present work of the glorified Son of God discloses seven aspects of the Lord Jesus Christ’s constant ministry to those who belong to Him in His church: He empowers, intercedes for, purifies, speaks authoritatively to, controls, protects, and reflects His glory through His church.

#### **Christ Empowers His Church (1:13a, 20a)**

At the outset of the vision, John had his back to the voice, so he turned to see the voice that was speaking with him. As he did so, he first saw seven golden lampstands, identified in verse 20 as the seven churches. These were like the common portable oil lamps placed on lampstands that were used to light rooms at night. They symbolize churches as the lights of the world (Phil 2:15). They are golden because gold was the most precious metal. The church is to God the most beautiful and valuable entity on earth—so valuable that Jesus was willing to purchase it with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Since seven is the number of completeness (cf. Exod 25:31-40; Zech 4:2), these seven churches may symbolize churches in general.

In the middle of the lampstands, John saw one like a son of man (cf. Dan 7:13)—the glorified Lord of the church moving among His churches. Jesus promised His continued presence with His church, “I am with you always, even

to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). Matthew 18:20 promises Christ’s presence during the difficult work of confronting sin in the church. On the night before His death, Jesus promised His disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you . . . . If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him” (John 14:18, 23). Hebrews 13:5 records His promise, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.”

The living Christ indwells His church to empower it. Believers personally and collectively have the inestimable privilege of drawing on that power through continual communion with Him. Paul wrote of the Lord’s Supper, “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16). The presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in His church empowers it, enabling believers to say triumphantly with the apostle Paul, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

### **Christ Intercedes for His Church (1:13b)**

The first thing John noted was that Christ was clothed in a robe reaching to the feet (cf. Isa 6:1). Such robes were worn by royalty (e.g., the kings of Midian, Judg 8:26; Jonathan, 1 Sam 18:4; Saul, 1 Sam 24:4; Ahab and Jehoshaphat, 1 Kgs 22:10; and Esther, Esth 5:1) and prophets (1 Sam. 28:14). But the word translated robe was used most frequently (six of its seven occurrences) in the Septuagint to describe the robe worn by the High-Priest. While Christ is biblically presented as prophet and king, and His majesty and dignity emphasized, the robe here pictures Christ in His role as the great High-Priest of His people (cf. Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 7:24-25; 9:11-12). That He was girded across His chest with a golden sash reinforces that interpretation, since the High-Priest in the Old Testament wore such a sash (cf. Exod 28:4; Lev 16:4).

As High-Priest, Christ offered once-for-all the perfect and complete sacrifice for sins, and now permanently, faithfully intercedes for His own (Rom 8:33-34). The knowledge that their High-Priest was moving sympathetically in their midst to care for and protect His own must have provided great comfort and hope to the struggling and persecuted churches.

### **Christ Purifies His Church (1:14-15a)**

Having described Christ’s clothing in verse 13, John described His person in verses 14 and 15. The first few features depict Christ’s work of chastening and purifying His church.

The New Testament clearly sets forth the holy standard that Christ has established for His church. “Therefore you are to be perfect,” Jesus commanded, “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). Paul wrote, “I betrothed you to

one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor 11:2). He reminded the Ephesians that “Christ . . . loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27). Paul explained that Christ “has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (Col 1:22). Peter reminds believers that God expects them to “like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16).

To maintain that divine standard, Christ will discipline His church (Matt 18:15-21; John 15:2; Heb 12:5ff.)—even to the point of taking the lives of some impenitent, sinning Christians (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:28-30). Even Peter, who well understood the power of temptation, warned, “It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Pet 4:17).

John’s description of Christ’s head and hair as white like white wool, like snow, is an obvious reference to Daniel 7:9, where similar language describes the Ancient of Days (God the Father). The parallel descriptions affirm Christ’s deity; He possesses the same attribute of holy knowledge and wisdom as the Father. “White” translates *λευκός*, *leukos*, which has the connotation of “bright,” “blazing,” or “brilliant.” It symbolizes Christ’s eternal, glorious, holy truthfulness.

Continuing his description of the glorified Christ, John noted that His eyes were like a flame of fire (cf. 2:18; 19:12). His searching, revealing, infallible gaze penetrates to the very depths of His church, revealing to Him with piercing clarity the reality of everything there is to know. Jesus declared, “There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known” (Matt 10:26). In the words of Hebrews, “There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:13). The omniscient Lord of the church will not fail to recognize and deal with sin in His church.

That Christ’s feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace continues the obvious sequence by making a clear reference to judgment on sinners in the church. Kings in ancient times sat on elevated thrones, so that those being judged would always be beneath the king’s feet. The feet of a king thus came to symbolize his authority. The red-hot, glowing feet of the Lord Jesus Christ picture Him moving through His church to exercise His chastening authority, ready to deal out remedial pain (if need be) to sinning Christians.



### **Christ Speaks Authoritatively to His Church (1:15b)**

When Christ spoke again, it was no longer with the trumpet-like sound of verse 10. To John, His voice was like the sound of many waters (cf. 14:2; 19:6), like the familiar mighty roar of the surf crashing on the rocky shores of Patmos in a storm. The voice of the eternal God was similarly described in Ezekiel 43:2—yet another parallel affirming Christ’s deity. This is the voice of sovereign power, the voice of supreme authority, the very voice that will one day command the dead to come forth from the graves (John 5:28-29).

When Christ speaks, the church must listen. At the transfiguration God said, “This is My beloved Son...listen to Him!” (Matt 17:5). “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,” wrote the author of Hebrews, “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb 1:1-2). Christ speaks to His church directly through the Holy Spirit-inspired Scriptures.

### **Christ Controls His Church (1:16a, 20b)**

As the head of His church (Eph 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18), and the ruler of the “kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son” (Col 1:13), Christ exercises authority in His church. In John’s vision, Christ is holding in His right hand the seven stars (cf. 2:1; 3:1), identified in verse 20 as the angels of the seven churches, thus symbolizing those authorities. That He held them in His right hand likely does not picture safety and protection, but control. The common New Testament word for “angels” is ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*, leading some interpreters reasonably to conclude that angels are in view in this passage. But the New Testament nowhere teaches that angels are involved in the leadership of the church. Angels do not sin and thus have no need to repent as the messengers, along with the congregations they represented, are exhorted to do (cf. 2:4-5, 14, 20; 3:1-3, 15, 17, 19). Dr. Thomas notes a further difficulty with this view: “It presumes that Christ is sending a message to heavenly beings through John, an earthly agent, so that it may reach earthly churches through angelic representatives.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, *angeloi* is better rendered “messengers,” as in Luke 7:24, 9:52, and James 2:25. Some suggest that these messengers were representatives from each of the seven churches who came to visit John on Patmos and take the book of Revelation back with them. But since Christ is said to hold them in His right hand, they were more likely representative leading elders and pastors (though not the sole leaders, since the New Testament teaches a plurality of elders), one from each of the seven churches.

These seven men demonstrate the function of spiritual leaders in the church. They are to be instruments through which Christ, the head of the church,

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 117.

mediates His rule. That is why the standards for leadership in the New Testament are so high. To be assigned as an intermediary through which the Lord Jesus Christ controls His church is a call to a sobering responsibility (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9 for the qualifications for such men).

### **Christ Protects His Church (1:16b)**

The Lord Jesus Christ's presence also provides protection for His church. The sharp two-edged sword that came out of His mouth is used to defend the church against external threats (cf. 19:15, 21). But here it speaks primarily of judgment against enemies from within the church (cf. 2:12, 16; Acts 20:30). Those who attack Christ's church, those who would sow lies, who create discord, or otherwise harm His people, will be personally dealt with by the Lord of the church. His word is potent (cf. Heb 4:12-13), and will be used against the enemies of His people (cf. 2 Thess 2:8), so that all the power of the forces of darkness, including death itself (the "gates of Hades"; Matt 16:18) will be unable to prevent the Lord Jesus Christ from building His church.

### **Christ Reflects His Glory Through His Church (1:16c)**

John's vision of the glorified Lord of the church culminated in this description of the radiant glory evident on His face, which John could only describe as like the sun shining in its strength. John borrowed that phrase from Judges 5:31, where it describes those who love the Lord (cf. Matt 13:43). The glory of God through the Lord Jesus Christ shines in and through His church, reflecting His glory to the world (cf. 2 Cor 4:6). And the result is that He is glorified (Eph 3:21).

### **The Effects of the Vision (1:17-19)**

The overwhelming vision John witnessed dramatically altered him. Initially, his response was devastating fear, which the Lord removed by assurance and then by giving John a sense of duty.

### **Fear (1:17a)**

In a manner similar to his experience with the glory of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration more than six decades earlier (cf. Matt 17:6), John was again overwhelmed with terror at the manifestation of Christ's glory and fell at His feet like a dead man. Such fear was standard for those few who experienced such unusual heavenly visions (cf. Judg 13:22; Isa 6:5; Ezek 1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 43:3; 44:4; Dan 10:8-9).

### **Assurance (1:17b-18)**

As He had done so long ago at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:7), Jesus placed His right hand on John and comforted him with a touch of reassurance. Jesus' comforting words "Do not be afraid," (lit. "Stop being afraid") reveal His compassion for the terrified apostle. Similar words of comfort are God's response throughout Scripture to His own who are overwhelmed by His majestic presence (e.g., Gen 15:1; 26:24; Judg 6:23; Matt 14:27; 17:7; 28:10).

The comfort and assurance Jesus offered was based on who He is and the authority He possesses.

Jesus identified Himself as the first and the last (cf. 2:8; 22:13), a title used of God in the Old Testament (Isa 44:6; 48:12; cf. 41:4). When all false gods have come and gone, only He remains. He existed before them, and will continue to exist eternally, long after they have been forgotten. Jesus' application of that title to Himself is another powerful claim to deity.

The second title of deity Jesus claimed is that of the living One (cf. John 1:4; 14:6). That also is a title used throughout Scripture to describe God (e.g., Josh 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26; Ps 84:2; Hos 1:10; Matt 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; Rom 9:26; 2 Cor 3:3; 6:16; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Tim 3:15; 4:10; Heb 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; Rev 7:2). God is the eternal, uncaused, self-existent One. In John 5:26 Jesus said to His Jewish opponents, "Just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself," thus claiming full equality with God the Father.

The One whose presence struck fear into John's heart, the first and the last, the living One, the One whose death freed him from his sins (Rev 1:5), is the very One who comforted and reassured John. In the words of the apostle Paul, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom 8:31).

Christ's seemingly paradoxical declaration, "I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore," provides further grounds for assurance. The Greek text literally reads, "I became dead." The living One, the eternal, self-existent God who could never die, became man and died. As Peter explains, Christ was "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18). In His humanness He died, without ceasing to live as God.

Christ lives forever in a union of glorified humanity and deity, "according to the power of an indestructible life" (Heb 7:16). "Christ, having been raised from the dead," wrote Paul "is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him" (Rom 6:9). That truth provides comfort and assurance, because Jesus "is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). In spite of his sinfulness in the presence of the glorious Lord of heaven, John had nothing to fear because that same Lord had paid by His death the penalty for John's sins (and those of all who believe in Him) and risen to be his eternal advocate.

As the first and the last, the living One, Jesus holds the keys of death and of Hades. Those terms are essentially synonymous, with death being the condition and Hades the place. "Hades" is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament term Sheol and refers to the place of the dead. "Keys" denote access and authority. Jesus Christ has the authority to decide death and life for everyone. And John, like all the redeemed, had nothing to fear, since Christ had already delivered him from death and Hades by His own death.

Knowing that Christ has authority over death provides strong confidence, since believers need no longer fear it. Jesus declared, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies...because I live, you will live also" (John 11:25; 14:19). Jesus conquered Satan and took the keys of death away from him: "through death [Christ rendered] powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and [delivered] those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Heb 2:14-15). The knowledge that Christ "loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood" (Rev 1:5) provides the assurance of eternal life that is the balance to the reverential fear that His glory and majesty evoke.

### **Duty (1:19)**

The astounding vision John saw inspired in him a healthy tension between fear and assurance. But to that was added a reminder of his duty. Christ's earlier command to write (v. 11) was expanded, as John is told to record three features. First, the things which you have seen, the vision John had just seen and recorded in verses 10-16. Next, the things which are, a reference to the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 which describe the present state of the church. Finally, John was to write the things which will take place after these things, the prophetic revelations of future events unfolded in the remainder of Revelation (Rev 6-22).

### **CHRIST AND THE UNGODLY – A VISION OF TERROR**

"I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called the Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." (19:11-16)

From that glorious vision of the Lord Jesus Christ in which all fear is dispelled by the One who died and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of the sins of His beloved saints, we move to the vision in which the glories of the Lord also are frighteningly vivid, but in which there is unrelenting and unmitigated terror unrelieved on those who reject the gospel. These verses may be divided into four parts: 1) the return of the Conqueror; 2) the regiments of the Conqueror; 3) the rule of the Conqueror; and 4) the royalty of the Conqueror.

Background for this passage is found in Isaiah 11. As the chapter begins, the prophet writes that a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse. This refers to the Messiah coming from the line of Jesse through David, Jesse's son. "A branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD and He will delight in the fear of the LORD, and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear" (vv. 1-3). In other words, He will make no superficial judgments. "But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with a rod of His mouth and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. And righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist" (vv. 4-5). There is the promise of the Messiah and of His reign.

Isaiah 63 also provides background to this vision. "Who is this who comes from Edom, with garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, this One who is majestic in His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength?" (v. 1). This, too, is a messianic portion of Isaiah's prophecy. "It is I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save" (v. 1). The mighty saving one is coming in garments of brilliant colors, (Heb. "crimson colors," red as the color of blood). Verse 2 says, "Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like the one who treads in the winepress?" The answer comes: "I have trodden the wine trough alone, and from the peoples there was no man with Me. I also trod them in My anger and trampled them in My wrath; and their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments, and I stained all My raiment. For the day of vengeance was in My heart, and My year of redemption has come. And I looked, and there was no one to help, and I was astonished and there was no one to uphold; so My own arm brought salvation to Me; and My wrath upheld Me. And I trod down the peoples in My anger, and made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth" (vv. 3-6). The blood-splattered Messiah comes and by Himself tramples people under His wrath. Both Isaiah 11 and 63 provide parallels to the vision of Revelation 19.

The glorious vision of Christ in His return has already been anticipated in Revelation 14:14 where John "looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head, and a sharp sickle in His hand." Then using the analogy of grapes being harvested

and crushed in a winepress, John recorded that an angel took another sharp sickle and was told to put it in and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth because the grapes were ripe (vv. 17-18). They were then to be thrown into the winepress of the wrath of God and the winepress was trodden outside the city and the blood came out from the winepress up to the horses' bridles for a distance of two hundred miles (v. 20). Here is another devastating scene where blood is splattering up as high as the height of a horse, as the Messiah Himself executes the wrath of God with His angelic cohort.

Revelation 16 presents another vision of Christ's return. "I am coming like a thief" (v. 15). And when He comes, verse 16 adds that they gather them together to a battlefield which, in Hebrew, is called Armageddon.

So the vision in 19:11-16 has been anticipated both by Isaiah and by John in this very book.

### **The Return of the Conqueror (19:11-13)**

Again, heaven was opened (cf. 4:1) so that John could receive this glorious vision of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is obviously coming in fiery, flaming vengeance, with a sword of judgment, wearing blood-splattered garments. This is the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus Himself, "For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (Matt 24:27-28). It will be a time of unequalled destruction and carnage immediately after the Tribulation. The sun will be darkened; the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky; and the powers of the heavens will be shaken (Matt 24:29). In other words, the whole universe goes pitch black. "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (vv. 30-31). That is the same event being described in Revelation 19.

Jesus, the One who ascended to heaven (Acts 1:8-11), the One who has been seated at the Father's right hand (Heb 1:3), is seen returning. He is coming to receive the kingdom which the Father had promised to Him, the kingdom to which He was entitled. Revelation 5 recorded that the Father was seated on the throne in heaven and His hand held a book which was the title deed to the universe. No one in heaven or on earth, or under the earth was able to open the book or look into it. No one had the worthiness or the right to take possession of the universe. No one had the authority to open this sealed scroll and take possession. And so John recorded: "I began to weep greatly, because no one was found worthy to open the book, or to look into it" (5:4).

Then one of the elders said to John, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has overcome so as to open the

book and its seven seals” (5:5). And John saw between the throne with the four living creatures and the elders, a Lamb standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out unto all the earth (5:6).

“And He came, and He took it out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne” (5:7). The Lamb, the Messiah, having the privilege and the right to take the title deed out of the hand of God, did so. And everyone sang a new song, “Worthy art Thou to take the book, and break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou has made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (5:9-10).

He had the right to take possession of the world and to establish His Kingdom. And so the One who is pictured on the edge of heaven is about to come and does so. A wonderful anticipatory prayer for this event comes from Isaiah, “O that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at Thy presence – as fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil – to make Thy name known to Thy adversaries, that the nations may tremble at Thy presence!” (64:1-2).

John sees Jesus no longer as a Lamb, no longer as He was portrayed in Zechariah 9:9, coming in humiliation, riding on the colt, the foal of an ass. But, in this case, he sees Him as the conqueror. Now white is not only the color of war chargers in the ancient Roman world, but it is the symbol of purity, of unblemished holy power. In contrast to the humble foal of a donkey which Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem in His first “triumphal entry,” He will come as the conqueror, the warrior King, to destroy the wicked, to overthrow the Antichrist, to bind Satan, to take control of the earth and the universe, and to establish Himself as KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. The horses are symbolic. The sword out of His mouth is symbolic. The rod of iron is symbolic. The crowns are symbolic—all portraying the reality of His return.

As a point of comparison, it should be noted that there is nothing in this scenario that matches descriptions of the Rapture of the church as portrayed elsewhere in two New Testament passages. One is John 14:1-3 and the other is in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Jesus said He would prepare a place for the disciples and “I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). That was not a warning, that was a promise. Our Lord was not describing a judgment to be feared, but a blessing for which to be longed. This is an event believers look for, love, anticipate, and hope for because the Lord will take them to the heavenly home He is preparing for them.

But when He comes to judge, He comes to pour out wrath on the earth; then He will remain on the earth to establish His earthly kingdom. John 14

describes a very different event. It's a taking away of the church into heavenly homes that have been prepared for the believers.

At the Rapture, Christ doesn't come all the way to the earth, He meets believers in the air and takes them to heaven. At His return to judge, He comes all the way to the earth and He doesn't come to meet His saints, but rather He brings them with Him. In the Second Coming, He comes to earth with His saints and establishes His millennial kingdom on earth (20:1-4). There's nothing in the Rapture texts of John 14 or 1 Thessalonians 4 to speak of judgment; but in Revelation 19 everything is judgment. The Rapture event is one of blessing. This is an event of cursing.

Furthermore, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is preceded by blackness, the darkened sun, the blackened moon, the stars falling, smoke filling the universe, lightning and blinding glory then introducing the arrival of Jesus Christ. Such aspects are not associated with His coming for His saints in John 14 or 1 Thessalonians 4. For these reasons, I believe in the removal of the church to heaven before the breaking out of the terrible judgments of His wrath (Rev. 6-19) culminating with His return to earth later, after the great tribulation, with His previously raptured saints to participate in His Kingdom and to reign with Him.

Verse 11 records that He who sat upon the white horse, is called "Faithful and True" (cf. 3:14), indicating that He is faithful to whatever He promises and He speaks only the truth including this promise to return.

Verse 11 adds that, "in righteousness He judges and wages war." If He is faithful and true to His word, He has to act in righteousness. He has to have a holy and righteous reaction against sin, and He does. Faithful to His righteous character, faithful to His holy nature, true to His word, He comes to do what He promised to do, what righteousness demands He do, to judge with wrathful vengeance.

Once He came as Savior; here He comes as judge. When He was here the first time, wicked men judged Him. When He comes the second time, He will judge wicked men. He will not only be the judge, but He will also be the executioner as He makes war. As Isaiah 63 indicates, He treads the winepress of the wrath of God alone (v. 3). Angels are not executioners. But He alone treads the winepress. He alone has the power to execute judgment (cf. Acts 17:31).

This is a different Jesus than people are used to seeing. He is usually ministering to the needy, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, casting demons out of people, and giving peace to troubled hearts. He is seen here quite differently from the vision of Revelation 1; He comes on a war mission to search and to destroy.

This is not a new character for God, nor is it a different personality than the God of the Old Testament. At the Red Sea, when Jehovah destroyed Pharaoh and his hosts, Israel said, "The LORD is a warrior" (Exod 15:3). The Lord has always been a warrior. So is His Son.



Alexander Whyte commenting on John Bunyan's masterpiece, *The Holy War*, wrote: "Holy Scripture is full of wars and rumors of wars, the wars of the Lord, the wars of Joshua and the Judges, the wars of David with his and many other magnificent battle songs, till the best known name of the God of Israel in the Old Testament is the Lord of hosts. And then in the New Testament we have Jesus Christ described as the captain of our salvation. And then the whole Bible is crowned with a book, all sounding with battle cries, till it ends with that city of peace where they hang the trumpet in the hall and study war no more."<sup>11</sup>

The Lord is a man of war. In righteousness, He judges and makes war. Frankly, the judging has already been depicted in Revelation as described in the breaking of the seals, in the blowing of the trumpets, and the pouring out of the bowls. But here He makes a final war. He for long centuries has endured the rejection and scoffings patiently, the insults of men who contemplated Calvary and, as it were, spit on Him, who displayed human hatred and contempt, who through millennia have rejected the peace that He made through the blood of the cross. Such people then will find Him a warrior King. That's not to say that there will be any fighting on their part; rather, the end will come in a split second.

Heaven cannot be at peace with sin. God is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look upon iniquity. God's patience has an end. He will not always tolerate iniquity. Justice will not always live with injustice. Truth will not always live with lies. Rebellion will not always go on. And when sin is finally incorrigible and man is incurable, then will come the destruction. Mercy abused will bring the executioner. Then will come the sword of insulted majesty, the wrath of rejected grace.

Furthermore, this Conqueror comes not as other conquerors out of covetousness, ambition, pride, or the love of power. This Conqueror comes in utter righteousness, in perfect holiness, in strict accord with every holy interest.

In the fearsome description, verse 12 adds, "And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself."

He has eyes like a flame of fire (cf. 1:14), in that nothing escapes His notice. He has penetrating knowledge. He can see into the recesses of every human heart with vision that sees everything.

"Upon His head are many crowns," many king's crowns, ruler's crowns. The idea is that He has collected all the crowns from all the world's rulers and put them on His head. Nobody else rules anyplace. Here is the ultimate symbol of sovereignty and the Kingdom has come in its fullness. Even Satan will yield his crown, as will the Antichrist.

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Whyte, *Bunyan Characters, vol. 3: The Holy War* (London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1902) 2.

This reflects a custom in the ancient world. When David, for example, conquered the Amorites (cf. 2 Sam 12), he put the crown of the vanquished king on his own head in addition to his own crown. When Ptolemy conquered Antioch, he set two crowns on his head, the crown of Asia and the crown of Egypt, signifying the comprehensive nature of his rule.<sup>12</sup> The dragon had seven crowns; the beast had ten crowns; but Jesus will wear all crowns. Thus, verse 16 indicates that He is the King of Kings. There will be no crowns for anyone else in that hour.

In Revelation 11:15, we hear the same thought, put a different way. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.” This refers to unassailable sovereignty.

Revelation 19:12 says about Him, “He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself.” John could see a name there, but either he couldn't read it, or he couldn't comprehend it when he did read it. It was unintelligible to him. It was beyond human comprehension. With all that we know of Jesus Christ, we will not know the fullness of the mystery of His person. John couldn't know it. There are realities that we will know in eternity that we can't know now, but the full mystery of His being may well never be known to us. We will know as we are known, to some degree, according to 1 Corinthians 13:12. But here was John in an exalted vision in heaven and there was a reality about Jesus that he could not comprehend. There is an incomprehensibility to the character of God that perhaps even an eternally glorified human will never completely know. The full incomprehensibility of God will always be incomprehensible. John is saying that there are realities about Him beyond anything we can ever comprehend.

Then in verse 13, further describing the returning King, John writes, “He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called the Word of God.” This is not the blood that He shed on the cross since this is not a picture of redemption, but a picture of judgment. Clearly, the imagery here is of a conquering King with the blood-splattered garments of war.

How are we to understand that He will come with a blood-splattered garment, though the battle hasn't started? Where did the blood come from? This is not His first battle, this is His last battle. He has worn His battle clothes before. Who but He has fought the dragon? Who but He fought for Israel in the days of Joshua? Who but He fought the kings of Canaan and Taanach by the waters of Megiddo? Who but He vanquished six world powers past and all the nations that have by this time fallen? His garments have been splattered with blood for a long time. Who but He battled Pharaoh ending in the triumph of the Exodus? It is the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. 1 Maccabees 11:13. See also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. in NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 353.

Almighty Conqueror who has His war clothes on and His war clothes bear the stains of the blood of the vanquished from all His prior battles.

These battle clothes are to be stained again and the stains will be greater than ever before, as He treads the winepress of the wrath of God and blood splatters in every direction in the holocaust of fearful and comprehensive world judgment (cf. 2 Thess 1:7).

Verse 13 indicates that, “His name is called The Word of God.” Just in case there is any question about who He is, we know who the Word of God is. John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Word of God is none other than the second member of the Trinity, Christ, the incarnate One who is also the Creator. He is the One with the blood on His garments; He is the warrior King, who comes in judgment.

God chose to call Him “the Word of God” because He is the exact expression of God, He is the revelation of God (cf. Heb 1:1-3). He is the declaration of God. He is the One in whom we hear God speak and see God act. He is the full expression of the mind, the will, and the nature of God.

So the sum of His names really is a glorious picture. He has a name which no man knew, which expresses His essential deity. He has a name, the Word of God, which expresses His incarnate deity. And He has a name, King of kings and Lord of lords, which expresses His sovereign deity. Interestingly, the gospel plan is in those three names. He is God who revealed Himself to man, who some day will come to judge the ungodly and reign over the universe.

### **The Regiments of the Conqueror (19:14)**

The armies which are in heaven are clothed in fine linen, white and clean, and are following their King on white horses. Who are these glorified troops? Verses 7-8 help to answer that question since the fine linen is the righteousness or the righteous acts of the saints. They must include glorified saints already with the Lord in glory.

Prior to this event, the church will have already been raptured and now will return with Him. This would also encompass Tribulation saints who had been glorified. Revelation 7:9 portrays them standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes. One of the elders says they are the ones who came out of the Great Tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (7:14).

So the church, the Tribulation saints, and the Old Testament saints will also be coming with the Lord. Another group must be added, namely, the angels. Matthew 25:31 notes that when He comes, all the angels will come with Him. Ten thousand times ten thousand of the angels. All the saints of the Old Testament, all the saints of the church age, all the saints of the time of the

Tribulation, and all the holy angels will come blazing out of heaven with the conquering King.

The regiments of heaven come with the Conqueror. Psalm 149:5, “Let the godly ones exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their mouths. And a two-edged sword in their hand, to execute vengeance on the nations, and punishment on the peoples; to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; to execute on them the judgment written; this is an honor for all His godly ones. Praise the LORD.”

### **The Rule of the Conqueror (19:15)**

The sharp sword is a symbol of His slaying power in 1:16. In that particular vision, the sword was a defending sword, protecting the church against the onslaught of Satan and his powers. Here, it is the sword of judgment, the sword of fury, the flaming sword of death, the sword out of His mouth with which He expresses the death-dealing power that comes in His words. Though the saints return with Christ to reign and rule, they are not executioners; believers are not those who carry out the vengeance. That will uniquely be His task. The angels may help in the gathering process (Matt 13:41-42, 49), but He treads the winepress alone. John wrote, “The Son of Man appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Paul added, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom 12:19).

None of the saints who come with Him have any weapons. His word is enough. He will smite the earth with the rod of His mouth and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked (Isa 11:4).

“With this sword He will smite the nations.” By then, Israel will have been purged. The elect out of Israel will have been redeemed and Gentiles saved in the Tribulation time will be preserved into the Kingdom. The rest of the world He will then slaughter in an instant with His word. Then, He will set up His Kingdom and rule as King of kings. Through that Kingdom, He will rule those nations with a “rod of iron” (cf. 12:5; Ps 2:8-9). What does that mean? It means instantaneous judgment; it means swift punishment of those who violate His law.

### **The Royalty of the Conqueror (19:16)**

So He comes in fury and in judgment. He will trample all the ungodly in an instant. Out of the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ comes the sentence and the execution. That puts Him in a position to establish His glorious earthly Kingdom as King of kings and Lord of lords. It's written on His robe and on His thigh; that indeed is His name. “Gird Thy sword on Thy thigh, O Mighty One” (Ps 45:3). And on that same thigh is the name “King of kings and Lord of lords” (v. 16).

The vision pictures the King as having a banner that sweeps across and goes down on His thigh, indicating that He is ultimately the sovereign so that all

foes are vanquished. While the slaughter is a fearful, frightening, and terrible thing, mercy abused and grace spurned provoked this point. When He came the first time, they preferred a murderer over Him; so they crucified Him, killing the prince of life (Acts 3:15). Openly blaspheming God, they became more and more wicked as time went on. Finally in the end, their wickedness reaches irredeemable proportions and the executioner returns to render the righteous judgment.

The psalmist saw that He was going to come with a rod of iron and warned, “Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning, O judges of the earth. Worship the LORD with reverence, and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!” (Ps 2:10-12).

God’s grace to believers has delivered them all from the fearful judgments to fall on the world. Praise be to God that the believer’s Lord is the Lord of Revelation 1, ministering faithfully and peacefully to His beloved church—and not the vengeful destroyer of Revelation 19.