

# Revelation One (vv.9-20)

## The Christ of the Prophecy [vv.9-16]

**v.9.** “John” mentions himself by name *five* times in Revelation. In his *gospel*, he is the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (also *five* times, cf. 13.23). In his *epistles* he refers to himself as the “elder”, and in Revelation as a “servant” (v.1). John also writes as their spiritual “brother” – one who belongs to the same family, shares the same Father, and possesses the same life. Brotherhood is important to John (1 John 3.14; 4.20-21). As a “companion” (partner), John shared three things in common with the saints because of their standing “in Jesus” [JND]. 1. “Tribulation” describes the pressure of general persecution that believers experience. 2. A “kingdom”. Notwithstanding v.6, John probably has in mind the future reign of Christ in which we will all share (3.21; 5.10). 3. “Patience”. Whilst the kingdom will come in *power* at the return of Christ, in the meantime we wait with *patient* endurance. The Christians to whom John wrote were in affliction [*thlipsis*]. They were looking and longing for the kingdom [*basileia*]. There was only one way from *affliction* to the *glory* of the kingdom, and that was through endurance [*hupomonē*]! This is not merely a *passive* submission to persecution, but an *active* remaining steadfast in persecution with a spirit of courage.

John was “in the isle” of Patmos, a small 10-mile long, 6-mile-wide island in the Aegean Sea which served as a penal colony for political prisoners of Rome. According to the writings of several early church fathers (like Irenaeus), the Romans imprisoned John on the island in AD94/95 where he was subjected to hard labour in the mines. On the death of Domitian, his successor, Nerva, allowed him to return to Ephesus in AD96. God used John’s persecution for good. “*If Joseph had not been in prison, he would never have been the revealer of secrets; if David had not spent time in the dens of the earth he would never have been the sweet psalmist of Israel; if Paul had never spent time in prison, we would never have received some of the epistles; if John had not been in Patmos, we would never have received the Revelation.*” (Smith). John’s exile was because he had faithfully proclaimed the “word of God” and “testified” (witnessed) to the Lord Jesus in the preaching of the gospel. Christians who bowed the knee to Jesus Christ rather than Caesar were persecuted by the Romans.

**v.10.** John was in the right *place* and the right *condition* to receive the revelation of God’s mind. In Romans 8.9, every believer is described as “in the Spirit”, meaning, in the sphere of the Spirit’s influence as those indwelt by Him. However, John’s experience would seem to be a particular and unique event, not the normal condition of a believer. FB Hole says John was “carried outside himself by the special energy of the Holy Spirit of God, and so he was brought into a condition in which he was enabled to see and hear heavenly things”, and, we may add, receive divine revelation (Ephesians 3.5). The “Lord’s day” describes Sunday, the first day of the week, not the Tribulation. The word “Lord” [*Kyriakos*] is an *adjective* – this is a day belonging to, in honour of, and characterised by the Lord Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 11.20). That the Lord’s day was the first day of the week when the Lord’s Supper was kept is confirmed by the *Didachē*, an early Christian document containing much of the apostles’ teaching, and written no more than 25 years after Revelation.

John hears a voice *behind* him which sounded like a “trumpet” blast. Ezekiel had a similar experience (3.12). The sound provides a dramatic method of arresting attention. The simile implies a voice which is clear and unmistakable and that speaks with commanding authority (cf. Exodus 19.16). This is an important message! **v.11.** Though this *could* be the voice of a conducting angel, it is more likely to be the voice of Christ commanding John to write what he sees (the whole of the Revelation) in a “book”. Good manuscript authority omits the statement “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last” (see JND & NET). The “book” [*biblion*] would have been a papyrus scroll of 15-16 feet in length. The whole book (one complete unit) was sent to the seven churches. The churches are described here in a clockwise, geographical arc of approximately 280 miles. A messenger from each city would present the scroll to his own church who would read, and probably make a copy, before the remaining messenger(s) moved on with the original to the next city (RL Thomas).

**v.12.** John “turned” as did Abraham (Genesis 22.13) and Moses (Exodus 3.3). God was looking for an interested response from His servant. As John turns to see the Person who is speaking – “one like unto the Son of man” (v.13) – he first sees “seven golden candlesticks [*lychnia*]”. These lampstands symbolise the seven churches and teach important lessons:

- These are not wax candlesticks (which are self-consuming) but lampstands – pedestals on which oil lamps were hung. The only lamp in Revelation is the Lamb (21.23) thus the responsibility of every local assembly is to hold Christ aloft.
- **Separation.** Unlike the tabernacle, this is not a single lampstand with seven branches (complete witness). Rather, there are seven, distinct, individual lampstands. Though each church had a common role and function, they were separate and independent. Each local church was accountable to Christ alone. The Bible does not teach a *federation* of local churches, though there will inevitably be *fellowship* between churches of like mind.

- **Substance.** The lampstands are “golden” symbolising what is valuable. Every local church, whether *cold* (Ephesus), *corrupt* (Thyatira), *complacent* (Sardis) or *conceited* (Laodicea) is precious to Christ. In addition, gold speaks of divine glory and righteousness – local churches should be the very expression of divine nature and character.
- **Supply.** The lamps are fuelled by oil, a symbol of the divine energy of the Spirit without which no local church can be a bright light of testimony.

**v.13.** The Saviour walks “in the midst” of the lampstands. This is a place of *pre-eminence*, and *proximity* to each local church. He is not remote or distant but intimately close and available to each, despite their condition. From here He will scrutinise each company. Now begins a wonderful description of the glorified Lord Jesus. He is presented as a figure of power, majesty, and nobility. In John 1, the Son is the revelation of the Father. Here, the Father reveals the Son in symbols that speak of His character. The over-arching thought is of one who is supremely qualified to judge, as the book of Revelation will prove. All judgment has been committed into the hand of the Son of man (John 5.22, 27). The title “Son of man”, therefore, does not merely imply humanity, but links Christ to earth, and universal administration and authority over the earth (cf. Daniel 7.13-14). The title is only used on one other occasion in Revelation where the same Son of man has a golden crown on His head, for the perfect Man is about to reign (14.14; cf. Hebrews 2.5-9).

- His **Clothes.** He wore a “garment down to the foot” [*podērēs*]. The Greek word is used of the long robes of the *High Priest* (Exodus 28.4; 29.5), Jonathan the *prince* (1 Samuel 18.4), and a *judge* (Ezekiel 9.2, 3, 11). The garment is therefore symbolic of rank and dignity and presents the Lord Jesus as the divine Priest-Judge. He is not girt about the waist for service, but “girt about the paps (chest) with a golden girdle” suggesting that His judgment is governed by divine glory (gold) yet tempered by mercy and compassion (chest). Thus, He says to Laodicea, “*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten*” (3.19).
- His **Comprehension (v.14).** The “hairs” of His head were “white like wool” and “as white as snow”. This is suggestive of one who is eternal (cf. Daniel 7.9, “the Ancient of days”) and the maturity of judgment and wisdom that comes with age. Given the words of Isaiah 1.18, linking together the whiteness of wool and snow may also suggest His purity. “Eyes as a flame of fire” describes the penetrating discernment of one who cannot be deceived (cf. 2.23). Thus, to each of the churches He could say, “I know”.
- His **Control (v.15).** His “feet” were like unto “fine brass” (polished bronze) as if glowing in a fire. This indicates the power with which He will crush His enemies and trample them under His feet (19.15). He is implacable, dealing with all that is opposed or contradictory to divine righteousness.
- His **Communication.** In Daniel 10, His voice is described as the “voice of a multitude” and here as the sound of “many waters”. These are sounds that cover a multitude of frequencies, that roar above every other voice. Thus, the Lord Jesus speaks with absolute authority (cf. Matthew 7.29). His words are not confined to one note but can speak reproof or correction, instruction or encouragement.
- His **Countenance (v.16).** The “seven stars” will be explained in v.20 (see notes). Out of His mouth “went (continuously) a sharp twoedged sword [*rhomphaia*]”. The Greek signifies a large broadsword used as an instrument of war to destroy one’s enemies (19.15, 21). Being “twoedged” is a reminder of the discerning power of the word of God (Hebrews 4.12). The Lord Jesus will use this double-edged ministry with the churches, *commending* where He can, and *condemning* where He must (cf. 2.12, 16). The word “countenance” can refer to the face (John 11.44), or the whole of a person’s external appearance (John 7.24). Here the latter is in view as the vision of Christ fills John’s gaze like the dazzling splendour of an unclouded, noonday sun.

#### The Course of the Prophecy [vv.17-20]

**v.17.** After a vision of such glory, it is no surprise John falls to the feet of the Lord Jesus. Isaiah (6.5), Daniel (10.7-9) and Peter (Luke 5.8) did the same. Human beings cannot stand in the presence of divine majesty – they must prostrate themselves in worshipful adoration. There is certainly no ‘handling’ of the Word of life now! John “fell at His feet as dead” describing total prostration. He was as one from whom life had gone (Allen). The Lord “laid his right hand” upon John, something he had experienced before (cf. Matthew 17.5-7). “*The hand of Christ is strong enough to uphold the heavens and gentle enough to wipe away our tears.*” (Barclay). The touch of the hand is calculated to reassure John and remove his fear. Both the first and last mentions of the phrase “fear not” are linked with the “I am” title of Jehovah (cf. Genesis 15.1). The reason for not fearing is what **He** is and what He has done, rather than what we are or can do! With John assuming the position of a dead man, the Lord Jesus makes three assurances in relation to death:

- First, He is the “first and the last” – a title of deity (Isaiah 44.6). He *precedes* and *succeeds* all things, including death. Time is but an interlude in His eternity. He is *unoriginated* and *underived*, in supreme control of every issue of life.
- Second (**v.18**), He is “the living one: and I became dead (voluntarily), and behold, I am living to the ages of ages” [JND]. Christ has experienced and defeated death. Now He lives eternally on the other side of death.

- Third, He has “the keys of hell [*hadēs*] and of death”. Hell is a place; death is a state. Hell and death are here pictured as a room or realm to which the Lord Jesus has the keys. He controls entrance and exit to the realm of death – it is under His control. This was of special encouragement to those who were facing martyrdom for their faith (2.10).

**v.19.** “Therefore write” [NET]. The command to write (from v.11) is repeated and made even more essential by the glory of the risen Christ. The *threefold* divine structure of the book is: “the things which thou *hast seen*” (Revelation 1), “the things which *are*” (Revelation 2-3) and the “things which *shall be* hereafter” (Revelation 4-22).

**v.20.** The use of the word “mystery” suggests truth is being revealed which hitherto was unknown. This could refer, in a restricted sense, only to v.20 and the explanation of the symbols – the stars and the lampstands. But stars representing angels is nothing new (Job 38.7). The “mystery” may therefore be taken in a wider sense to include the next two chapters. This would suggest that the messages to the churches contain some deeper revelation of truth, perhaps even a complete prophetic panorama of Church testimony through the ages. This ‘prophetic’ view does not mean that every local church in the apostolic era was of Ephesus character, and every local church today is of Laodicean character. Rather, every ‘type’ of church (represented by the seven) is present in every period, but one type tends to be dominant. This kind of revelation is not surprising – the *feasts* of Leviticus 23 are similar, giving a complete prophetic panorama of Israel’s history.

The seven “lampstands” represent the seven churches (for which see notes on v.12). The “seven stars” which “are the angels [*angelos*] of the seven churches” is a little more complicated! In v.16, these stars were held in his “right hand” speaking of His authority and sovereign control over the angels, and the churches they represent. The thought of care and protection is evident too (John 10.28). Who or what these angels represent has created endless discussion which cannot be rehearsed in these notes. As the word *angelos* merely means ‘messenger’, some believe these angels are *human* – and represent the *pastor* or *presbytery* (elders) of each church, or even the *postman* (messenger) of each letter. This, however, makes a symbol of a symbol. If the stars represent angels, it is difficult to then say the angels represent something else (though see 17.9). It is better to see these angels simply as ANGELS for the following reasons:

- Though *angelos* can mean ‘messenger’ it is only translated as such in 7 of 185 occurrences in NT, and never in John.
- The word “angel” appears x76 in Revelation, and apart from these disputed references it *always* refers to an angel.
- In Daniel, similar apocalyptic literature to Revelation, angels *represent* earthly nations (and their people) in heavenly realms. See Daniel 10.13, 20. The Lord Jesus also spoke of children having representative angels in heaven before the “face” of the Father (Matthew 18.10). When Rhoda reported Peter’s presence at the gate, the believers said “it is his angel” (Acts 12.15). They clearly believed Peter had a representative angel.
- In conclusion, as the lampstand represents the church and its testimony on *earth* (manward), so the (literal) angel represents the church and its true spiritual condition in *heaven* before God. These angels are so closely identified with the churches they will be addressed as responsible for its condition and behaviour.