

The Last Word

A Bible Study on Revelation by Stan Key

SESSION 2. THE ONE WHO HOLDS THE KEYS (1:1–20).

I. Outline of Chapter 1.

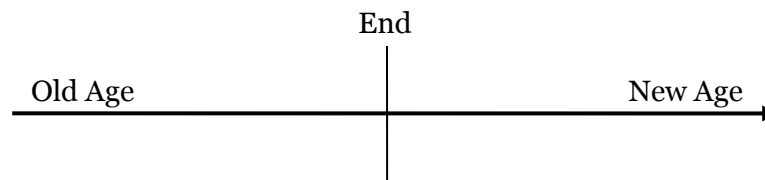
Prologue (vv. 1–3).	Pastoral Greetings to the Seven Churches (vv. 4–8).	John’s Vision Begins (vv. 9–20).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What this book is about (vv. 1–2).• Promised blessing (v. 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grace & peace (vv. 4–5a).• 7 things to know about Jesus (vv. 5:b–7).• “I am...” (v. 8).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The setting (vv. 9–11).• What he sees (vv. 12–16).• What he hears (vv. 17–20).

A. Prologue. **Read verses 1–3.**

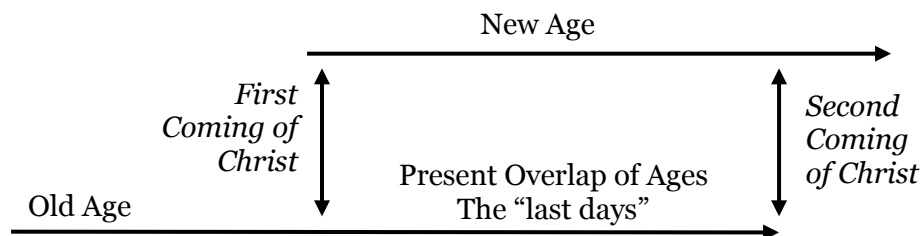
1. It’s all in the prepositions (vv. 1–2). This revelation (*apocalypse*) is:
 - **From** God.
 - Mediated **through** an angel.
 - Given **to** John (and John is to share it with the churches... and to us).
 - It is **about** the events that must soon take place.
 - And it is **of** Jesus. The revelation is not just about future events. Preeminently, it is an unveiling of Jesus: his identity and his work (past, present and future).
2. A blessing (beatitude) is promised to (v. 3):
 - The one who **reads** this book out loud.
 - The one who **hears** what is read.
 - The one who **does** what it tells us to do.
3. “The time is **near**” (v. 3). “I am coming **soon**” (22:7, 12, 20).

These statements were written some 1900 years ago! In what sense is the glorious victory of Jesus Christ and the coming Kingdom “near”? In what sense is Jesus coming “soon”? Even in the New Testament, the question “When?” was passionately asked (Mark 13:4; Acts 1:6–7; I Thessalonians 5:1–11; II Peter 3:8–10; Revelation 6:10).

Christ’s coming changed the way God’s people think about “**the end**.” During the time before Christ, time was basically conceived in two stages:



But the coming of Christ changed this perspective so that time is now conceived something like this:



Christians live in the land of **in-between**. The life of faith is the call to live victoriously in the interval between the old age and the age to come, the promise and the fulfillment, the **already** and the **not yet**. Some use D-Day and the Battle of Berlin to describe this reality.

B. Pastoral Greetings to the Seven Churches. **Read verses 4–8.**

1. The book of Revelation is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (v. 4). These churches are named in verse 11. The book is in reality a **pastoral letter** written to Christians undergoing great difficulty.

But why seven churches? Why not one? Jesus apparently wants us to see the beauty of **unity in diversity** and diversity in unity. Each local church contains part of the truth, a portion of the light. It is when they all work together (7 is the number for wholeness, completion) that the full-orbed beauty of the Gospel is best seen.

2. John tells us seven truths about Jesus Christ, the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (vv. 4–7):
 - a. Who he is (in this present moment):
 - He is the faithful **witness/martyr** (v. 5).
 - He is the **firstborn** from the dead (v. 5).
 - He is the **ruler of kings** on earth (v. 5).
 - He **loves us** (v. 5).
 - b. What he has done (in the past):
 - He has **freed us** from our sins by his blood (v. 5).
 - He has made us a **kingdom** of priests (v. 6). (The church is to be to the world what the Levitical priests were to Israel: mediators and intercessors).
 - c. What he will do (in the future):
 - He is **coming again** (v. 7).
3. As if to confirm and emphasize the truth of what has just been said, Almighty God (the Father) speaks: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come” (v. 8). He is the A and the Z and all that is in between. He is not constrained by the limits of time. He is the **Eternal Now**.

C. John's Vision Begins (vv. 9–20).

1. The setting for the revelation. **Read verses 9–11.**

In the Greek, the preposition *en* is repeated seven times in verses 9–10.

- a. I, John, your brother and partner *EN* the **tribulation**....
- b. *EN* (understood) the **kingdom**...
- c. *EN* (understood) the **patient endurance**....
- d. *EN* **Jesus**....
- e. I was *EN* the island of **Patmos** on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus...
- f. I was *EN* **the Spirit**...
- g. *EN* the **Lord's day**... (Note: it appears that the Christians were already making a distinction between the Sabbath, the Jewish day of worship, and Sunday, the Christian day of worship).

2. What John saw: the vision. **Read verses 12–16.**

a. The seven golden lampstands (vv. 12–13).

The lampstands represent the seven churches (v. 20). Thus, the church is not the light, but it is meant to **carry** the light. Yet these churches were **plagued with problems**: Ephesus had left her first love, Pergamum was dabbling in the teachings of the Nicolaitans, Thyatira was tolerating that woman Jezebel, Sardis had a good reputation but was really dead, Laodicea was lukewarm, etc. But, if John is going to see Jesus, it will be “in the midst” of these churches!

b. One like a Son of Man (v. 13).

In the Gospels, Jesus referred to himself as “the Son of Man” more than any other title. The title comes from the book of Daniel.

*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like **a son of man**, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given **dominion and glory and a kingdom**, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14).*

The one John saw was “clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest” (v. 13). The word for “robe” describes what Aaron wore as the Great High Priest. Thus, the Son of Man is not only a **King**. He is also a **Priest**; and he exercises these functions now!

John then describes the characteristics of this Son of Man. There are seven elements of his description.

- His *hair* (v. 14). As white as snow. He is **wise and pure**.
- His *eyes* (v. 14). Like a flame of fire. His gaze both penetrates and purifies. Christ doesn't just look *at* us, he look **into** us!
- His *feet* (v. 15). Like burnished bronze. His kingdom will **stand forever**. In Daniel's vision, the statue had feet that were “partly of iron and partly of clay” (Daniel 2:33). Such a statue is sure to fall. Not King Jesus!

- His *voice* (v. 15). Like the roar of many waters. Many did not hear the Word spoken at Bethlehem (John 1:1–18). But the day is coming soon when **everyone will hear** what the son of man has to say.
- His *right hand* (v. 16). He holds seven stars. Jesus is not controlled by the stars (astrology). He **controls** the stars and the entire the universe by his mighty power!
- His *mouth* (v. 16). From his mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword. This is the Son of Man’s ultimate weapon...and ours (Eph. 6:17)! His Word **penetrates, cuts** and **discerns** our deepest thoughts and intentions (Hebrews 4:12).
- His *face* (v. 16). Like the sun shining in full strength. Perhaps John was remembering the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus’ face “shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:2). The culmination of our Christian journey will be when we see him **face to face** (22:4).

3. What John heard: the word. **Read verses 17–20.**

- “**Fear not...**” (vv. 17–18). Though John’s vision is unlike anything anyone has ever seen before, there is no reason to fear because he is already **in the kingdom** (vv. 9–10) and Jesus has already overcome sin, death, hell and Satan. Jacques Ellul says that the entire book of Revelation “can be summed up in this word: *fear not*” (p. 105).
- “I have **the keys** of Death and Hades...” (v. 18). What he shuts, no one can open. What he opens, no one can shut. Nothing happens without the permission of King Jesus!
- “Therefore **write...**” (vv. 19–20). Others need to know the vision John has seen and hear the words that he has heard.

II. The Excellency of Christ.

A. Behold, the Man.

This book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1) and here in the first chapter we see both who Jesus is and what Jesus does (past, present, and future). The revelation of Jesus seems to fall into two categories:

Mercy & Grace	Justice & Law
He loves us (v. 5).	He is ruler of kings of earth (1:5).
He died for us, forgave us (v. 5).	Those who pierced him will wail (1:7).
He says “Fear not!” (v. 17).	His presence is overwhelming (vv. 13–16).

This double-reality of Jesus Christ comes through most poignantly in Revelation 5:5–6.

*And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the **Lion** of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a **Lamb** standing, as though it had been slain.... (5:5–6).*

B. The lion-like Lamb... the lamb-like Lion.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) preached a famous sermon, entitled “The Excellency of Christ,” based on the text Revelation 5:5–6. Edwards spoke of the fact that the

final revelation of Jesus Christ shows him to be both a Lamb and a Lion.... not one **or** the other but **both/and...** at the same time! The purpose of his sermon was to show forth the “admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies in Jesus Christ.” His sermon (35 pages) shows the contrasting excellencies that meet in the person and in the work of Jesus.

As a lamb, Jesus is...	As a lion, Jesus is...
Infinite in condescension	Infinite in exaltation
Infinite in grace	Infinite in justice
Infinite in humility	Infinite in glory
Infinite in meekness	Infinite in majesty
Infinite in submission	Infinite in dominion
Full of trust and reliance on God	Self-sufficient
Takes our sin on himself	Judges and condemns sin
Delivered over to his enemies	Victorious over his enemies

At his first coming, Jesus came humbly, riding on a **donkey**. But when he comes again, he will come on a **white horse**, prepared for war (Revelation 19:11–16). And yet Jesus is one Divine Person... not two. Behold, the excellency of Jesus Christ!

Perhaps the most amazing thing is this: as we follow Jesus the Lion/Lamb and allow his Spirit to transform our hearts and lives, we begin to reflect his glory and discover that his image is **recreated in us!** When we are in Christ, we too become lamb-like and lion-like **at the same time.**

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. (II Corinthians 3:18).

C. Living in the land of in-between.

Men and women today live in the time period between **the two comings** of Christ. He came as a Lamb and many did not recognize who he really was. He will come again as a Lion but this time everyone will know his true identity! But why, you may wonder, this interval? Why wouldn't Christ come to us initially in all his power and glory so that no one would mistake who he was? C. S. Lewis speaks eloquently to this question in his book *Mere Christianity*.

*Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil? Why is he not landing in force, invading it? Is it that He is not strong enough? Well, Christians think He is going to land in force; we do not know when. But we can guess why He is delaying. He wants to **give us the chance** of joining His side freely. I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany and then announced he was on our side. God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else – something it never entered your head to conceive – comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so*

*terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be **too late** then to choose your side....That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen.... Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it. (pp. 64–65).*

TABLE TALK

1. Discuss something you learned from this study that you had never really grasped before.
2. Describe what it means for you personally to live in the land of in-between, in that time period between Christ's first and second comings, between the promise and the fulfillment, the already and the not yet.
3. John saw Christ "in the midst" of the (dysfunctional) churches. Do you believe it is possible to find Christ outside of church? Explain your answer.
4. What conclusion should we draw from the fact that most (all?) of the seven churches addressed in this book no longer exist?
5. What difference does it make in our daily lives to realize that Jesus Christ is eternal and lives in the "eternal now," not subject to the laws of past, present and future?
6. When you think of Jesus, what image comes to mind, the Lamb or the Lion? Does the thought of him make you feel warm and fuzzy or does it inspire fear? Why is it so important to be fully Biblical in the way we envision Jesus Christ?

Bibliography

Ellul, Jacques. Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation. New York: Seabury Press, 1977.

Goldsworthy, Graeme. The Lamb and the Lion: the Gospel in Revelation. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984.