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The First and the Last

Please read Revelation 1

It seems that everyone loves a conspiracy story. Whether the event is the death of JFK or of Princess Diana, the Apollo moon landings, or even the tragic outrage of the Twin Towers, there is always a ready market for theories that involve undercover government agencies, mysterious figures lurking in unexpected places, bizarre coincidences and, especially, official cover-ups on a grand scale. The bigger the supposed cover-up, the more respectable the organization that has managed it and the longer the truth has been successfully concealed, the more popular the theory is likely to be. And when the truth finally emerges—assuming that it ever does, or that there is any truth to emerge at all—the greater will be the delight.

All this, of course, explains the monumental success of a book like *The Da Vinci Code* (published in 2003). The book works on two levels. On one level, it is a thriller, the familiar genre of page-turner, with each short chapter ending with a fresh cliffhanger. Throughout the book you are pursuing a mystery,

and only on the final page is the answer fully revealed. But it is on the second level that it really catches the attention of the reader, with its claims to unlock deep secrets and unmask the truth. Inside the front cover is inscribed the claim that although the work is a novel, all the descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals are *true*. The fact that the alleged cover-up concerns no less a subject than the origins and founder of Christianity, the notion that the culprit is the mighty Roman Catholic Church and the idea that this conspiracy has been running for two thousand years all combined to make this book the phenomenon that it is. Never mind that it is not great literature, never mind that, if you know even a little of the history of the early church, the story has holes big enough to drive a tractor through—this tale is compelling. People are still hooked by the big conspiracy story, still fascinated by keys which claim to be able to unlock the mysteries of the world.

But the greatest exposé of them all is not to be found in some modern blockbuster, but in the book that I hope you have open in front of you now. The book of Revelation (Greek *apocalypsis*) does precisely what it says: it *reveals* a story, a great, sweeping narrative that embraces the whole of history, and above all it reveals a person, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the First and the Last. John is in exile on Patmos, and one day he sees a series of amazing visions which he is told to write down and send out to seven churches, including his home church, Ephesus. The point of all this is explained right at the start: it is to show us what is going to take place—to *show* us, not to confuse us! It is expected that we will understand what is going on!

The man who is coming back (1:1–8)

The focus of the book is not some long-suppressed secret, not some great conspiracy that has kept the truth underground for two millennia—quite the opposite. It is no secret at all.

The focus of this book is the man Jesus Christ—the man who is coming back. Look at verses 1–2. It is all about him and it all belongs to him. This is not ‘the Revelation of John’, as some have titled it, for John merely saw and recorded. It is truly ‘the revelation of Jesus Christ’. Jesus’ story doesn’t end with Easter—certainly not with the cross, not even with the resurrection. After his resurrection, Jesus doesn’t simply fade away or disappear. He ascends to his Father and he is enthroned in heaven—we shall see much more of that heavenly throne-room scene in later chapters. But this is the point: history has not finished with Jesus. It never will; history really is ‘his story’.

The word ‘soon’ here may refer to the fact that all times are ‘soon’ to God (see 2 Peter 3:8–9), but equally it suggests that the events that John is about to see will start to happen immediately, rather than being reserved for the end of time. Furthermore, verse 1 makes it clear that God both knows *and determines* the future—contrary to what some Christians are teaching in our own days.

The opening verses give us our first glimpse of the great themes of the book, as Jesus Christ is introduced—not as someone who can be dismissed as an irrelevant figure from the distant past, but as a character who is *now*, the man we cannot ignore. As early as verse 3, there is a call to respond. This verse contains the first of the seven blessings to be found throughout the book. The blessing, we note, is not for those who manage to solve Revelation’s puzzles, or to construct clever charts of the end times, but for those who heed and obey the Word of God that is found here. As if to reinforce this message, a very similar blessing appears in the final chapter (22:7).¹

We should also note that the book is described as ‘prophecy’, a word with a wider meaning than simply ‘predicting the future’. In the context of Scripture, it refers to speaking words

which God has given. These are not merely John's personal speculations.

Look now at verses 4–6. John is told to write 'to the seven churches in the province of Asia', or western Turkey, as we know it today. There were more than seven churches in that region, actually—the New Testament mentions several others, including Colosse—but the seven symbolize completeness. The seven churches, which will be named later on, are here to represent the whole of God's people; this message is not confined to a select few, but is for everyone to hear, as verse 3 makes clear.

The message comes from the Three-in-One God himself. It comes from God the Father, 'him who is, and who was, and who is to come', the one revealed in the Old Testament as the 'I AM', the one who *is*, past, present and future.² It comes from God the Holy Spirit, the 'sevenfold spirit before his throne' (see NIV footnote)—seven again standing for completeness, but probably also stressing his presence in each of the seven individual churches. Unusually, God the Son, Jesus Christ, is mentioned last, no doubt in order to lead into what John will now say about him. *This* is the man at the centre of history. He is 'the faithful witness', the one whose words and character are utterly reliable as he reveals the true nature of God to us. He is 'the firstborn from the dead'. He is risen himself, for death could not hold onto him, but, more than that, he is the 'firstborn', meaning that there will be many others who rise from death after him. Christ's resurrection is just the beginning, the guarantee of our own. And he is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth'. He is the King of Kings and, whether they acknowledge it now or not, everyone who holds power on the earth will one day be made to realize that.

With these staggering claims, then, Jesus Christ is introduced. In a world full of deceit and lies, he is in fact the one source of reliable truth. In a world that is dominated by death and that fears it more than anything else, he is the one who has overcome

death and can do the same for us. In a world full of tyrants and many other abusers of power, he is the true ruler who holds the ultimate power. We can see what a huge encouragement this would be to the scattered little churches of Asia Minor, under such pressure from the mighty empire. What an encouragement this is too for persecuted Christians today, in North Africa and the Middle East, in Iran and Pakistan! Their Lord Jesus is the real ruler, and every authority will one day be giving an account to him. This is quite an introduction!

But Jesus Christ is not just the central character; he is the one who gives us our own place in the story. The great story of history is about him, but he offers us the chance to take our own little, mixed-up stories and make them part of his own (1:5-6). This majestic character, this leading player, offers us a place in his story. He offers us his love, by setting us free from the sins which condemn us, all the accumulated rubbish of our own private stories, all that we regret and all that we ought to regret. He offers us freedom from all of that by dying for us, by shedding his blood for us. This King has been slain to purchase his own subjects; he is the Lion who is also the Lamb, as we shall see in chapter 5.

This story, then, is not a puzzle that we have to solve. It is not some enticing mystery, or a thriller which we can put down once we reach the final page, amusing us for a while but leaving us untouched. No, this is a drama for us to join. As chapter 5 will show us, the script is written, and Christ is centre stage. Our lives take on meaning and purpose only as we join this drama, as he makes us 'a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father'. What is this 'kingdom'? It is the extent in time and space where Christ's kingly rule is freely accepted and acknowledged. For now it is limited, even hidden, as many of Jesus' own parables teach us, but the day is coming when the kingdom will be universally recognized and enforced. We are also 'priests', those

who represent God and speak his words to the world (a pale reflection of what Christ himself has done) and who intercede with him for the world.

There is a sense of urgency, for the story is moving on (1:7). This is the man who is coming back! In themes which are drawn from Daniel 7 and Zechariah 12, John paints a picture of the day when Jesus Christ will return to the earth where he once walked. The ‘clouds’ that accompany him represent the majesty and authority of the Son of God. He will come so that *everyone* will see him. Some will be excited, thrilled to see the Jesus they have loved and longed for, the one ‘who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood’. Others will be devastated when he appears, realizing in that dreadful moment exactly what it means to have rejected the Son of God. All over the world there will be people mourning when Christ returns to claim what belongs to him.

This theme will be greatly expanded as the book unfolds, but this section concludes with a solemn affirmation by God, the ‘Alpha and the Omega’, the almighty A and Z of all creation (1:8). This is the weight of authority which lies behind the book. Now the visions begin, and now comes the first of many messages of strength and support for God’s embattled people.

The Lord among the lampstands (1:9–20)

In Britain, when British politicians talk about the church, they like to applaud us for our ‘values’; but they stop at that. They rarely mention Christ, let alone suggest his uniqueness. It is as if a Christian were simply someone who has decided to adopt a set of values—which are, in any case, ‘shared by all the major world religions’, as it’s sometimes expressed. That is how our culture, our world, wants to understand Christians. It cannot cope with what the *Christian* faith really is. It is safer to lump us together with all the world religions and call it ‘faith’. Thus

Prince Charles can say he wants to be defender of *'faith'*, so that he does not have to suggest that there is only *one* faith that is worth defending.

With that in mind, look at verse 9! John is quite clear as to why he has been sent to Patmos. It is certainly not because he has 'religious values'. The Roman soldiers did not come knocking on his door in Ephesus saying, 'John, we understand you are a man of faith and you have values which are shared by all the world's major religions—so we are consigning you to hard labour on Patmos!' John is on Patmos 'because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus'—the very same message that this book itself will bring (1:2). In other words, he will not stop talking about Christ. He refuses to keep quiet about that name. At a time when it is dangerous and difficult to be an outspoken Christian, John is precisely that.

He is not the only one. He addresses his readers as his companions in 'suffering', in the 'kingdom' and in 'patient endurance'. Christians everywhere are suffering; they must all be patient and endure, because they belong to the kingdom of God. Being part of the kingdom of God means that the kingdoms of this world may well not like us. There is a conflict between the two. It will not be our values that offend them; it will be the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

So here on Patmos John's visions begin. Here, 'on the Lord's Day'—on Sunday, that is—it seems that he has the chance to be alone for a time (it is very unlikely that any believers would have been allowed to organize a regular meeting in such circumstances!). No doubt he is thinking about the people that he loves back in Ephesus; he is longing to be back in the meeting they will be having at this moment, probably gazing out to sea, straining to catch a glimpse of the mainland thirty miles away, when something very unexpected begins to happen.

John says he was 'in the Spirit' (1:10), which may mean that

he went into some kind of trance. But the visions he is given are not the sort of mystical religious experience that people sometimes talk about. One of the strongest features of this passage is that the amazing vision is accompanied by so many *words*. It is the same throughout Revelation—in almost every case, even when the visions are at their strangest, we are given at least some explanation. We are expected to understand what is going on.

Here, at the beginning, John is twice instructed to write down what he sees (1:11,19); verse 19 in particular embraces the whole of the rest of the book,³ reiterating the message of verse 1 that the future is already fixed as far as God is concerned, and that it is in his hands. This is not a book that John ever intended to write, but it *can* be written down! The language he uses may be very strange—only some of that comes over in translation, but at times it is *very* strange—yet it is still human language that makes sense. This is God speaking to us, not through vague sensations or mystical religious feelings, but through words with a meaning. John is to write it all down and send it to the symbolic number of seven churches, which although they represent the whole church of Christ, including us, are also the *real* churches of Ephesus, Smyrna and the rest. Before the next vision begins in chapter 4, each of these churches is sent its own individual letter.

The vision begins with a voice speaking, a loud voice like a trumpet call (1:10). Verses 12–16 describe what John sees. The heart of the vision is a human figure, majestically dressed in a sweeping robe. As the description unfolds, it is the stunning brilliance of the scene that dominates all. It is well worth pausing to imagine it. He sees a head and hair that are pure white. Here is dignity; here is wisdom. We speak of eyes that sparkle, eyes that flash, but these eyes *blaze* like flames. If white hair suggests great age, it is old age with no loss of dynamic

power. The feet are like some hot, glowing metal, its exact nature unknown; the face is like the full power of the midday sun; a sharp sword emerging from his mouth is the powerful words that he will speak. And as he does speak, his voice is, literally, 'as the voice of many waters'. The pounding of the sea that John has come to know so well in his island prison is drowned by the voice of this awesome figure.

As is so often the case, the key to understanding these visions is found in the Old Testament, and in this case in one of the visions already alluded to in Daniel 7 (see 1:7). The figure of one 'like a son of man' recalls Daniel's picture of the one who comes 'with the clouds of heaven' into the presence of Almighty God, the Ancient of Days. He is given authority, power and majesty, so that everyone will worship him, and a kingdom that will never end. That name, 'Son of Man', is one that Jesus Christ took for himself. John's vision is of Jesus Christ, the same Jesus who walked the earth, the one who was spat upon and hung up to die on the cross; this same Jesus, risen from death and ascended to heaven, is the figure who appears to John on Patmos. Even today, the man Jesus Christ is in heaven. He is glorified; he is awesome—but in the vision he is still recognizably human, with hands and feet, face and hair. He is still the Son of Man, God in human flesh. This is the Christ the world has to reckon with.

John reacts to what he sees with sheer terror (1:17). Remember who this is, collapsing to the ground! This is John the apostle. He well knows who is standing in front of him. Sixty years ago he was living with this man. He camped out in the countryside with him, ate and drank with him, went fishing with him. On one occasion they went up a mountain, along with a couple of others, and there was a vision of Jesus then, shining and glorious. Yes, he remembers that they were afraid *that* day. John has followed him to the cross, looked on as he died, met him after he rose from death, watched as he ascended into the

clouds. John knows Jesus better than anyone; he was Jesus' closest friend when he was on earth, and since then he has spent his whole life following him. But even John falls flat on the ground when he meets the glorified Christ—like a dead man.

It is not that John is naturally hysterical, nor even that he is especially sinful, to be so disturbed by Christ's appearance. It is simply the way that every human being would respond. If we had a brief glimpse of the glory and the purity of God revealed like this in Christ, we too would collapse in terror, because in that moment, like John, we would become horribly aware of our own sin and of his purity, his majesty, his greatness. I would see what I am like; I would see what God is like—and I would react just like John.

So John lies there at the feet of Christ, and there he hears his words: 'Do not be afraid.' *Why* should he not fear? Again, it is not that John's reaction was wrong in some way. No, it was fully appropriate. Look at what Christ says about himself (1:17-18). He is 'the First and the Last', echoing the words of God himself in verse 8—he is the Lord of time, the one who is there from before creation to the very end of days. He is the Lord of history, the one with authority. He was dead and now is alive again, living for ever and ever. He has triumphed over death. Already for John, sixty years have passed since Jesus' resurrection. Today that has become almost two thousand years. In the light of eternity, that is the blink of an eye, but from then until now Christ holds 'the keys of death and Hades'. 'Hades' here does not refer directly to hell; it means more generally the home of the dead—and Christ has the keys to that place.

These are awesome statements, yet Christ makes them to reassure John, not to terrify him even more! The message is that John need not fear, because, with all his authority, Christ Jesus speaks to him as his friend. John is the friend of the man who is running the show from beginning to end, the man who has

power over death, who can lock us *out* of death. If Jesus speaks to us as a friend, we have *nothing* to be frightened of—not physical death, because that will be followed by resurrection, and not what the future on earth may hold, for the Lord of time and history is our friend. But we can also plainly see that anyone who is *not* a friend of Christ has a great deal to fear from this vision. Those keys can lock someone into death as well as out of it. The man who is the First and the Last is the man who will pass the final verdict on you and me. He has the authority to do that—and he will.

Did you notice what John sees first in the vision? Surprisingly, it is not that glorious, dazzling figure that he notices first; it is ‘seven golden lampstands’ (1:12). And Christ is holding in his right hand seven stars (1:16).⁴ Now look on to verse 20. Think what that vision would mean to the persecuted churches to whom John is writing. Think of the comfort of knowing that they were held in his right hand! But then think what it means to us now. Why is the church significant? Why is the church important in the world? It is not because it is ruled by important leaders like popes and archbishops, nor because it has money and buildings, nor because politicians are sometimes polite to it! We matter simply because the risen, glorified Christ is with us. The churches, shining our apparently feeble light into the darkening world, are actually lamps around the feet of our Saviour. We matter because he holds us in his right hand, the best and safest place we could possibly be.

If you are a Christian, do you see what our Lord is like? Have you taken in the vision that John saw of the Lord, King Jesus in his majesty? He is beautiful. He is dazzling. He has all the power over *all* that you dread. He holds the keys of death and Hades; and he holds us firmly in the grasp of his right hand.

To discuss or think about

1. Look at the three titles of Jesus Christ in verse 5. How would they encourage a persecuted Christian then, and how can they encourage you?
2. Verse 7 affirms the return of Christ in majesty. What impact is that truth having on your life right now?
3. Spend some time contemplating John's vision of the risen Christ. How does it challenge you? How does it help you?