

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Revelation 1:17-19

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When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not” (Rev. 1:17).

One of the most hotly contested matters in the book of Revelation is whether it describes events present in John’s time or distant future events before Christ returns. Revelation 1:19 is a key verse in this debate: “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.” In the minds of many 20th century commentators, especially those influenced by Dispensational theology, this verse outlines three sections in the book. Chapter one records the vision that John saw, chapters two and three pertain to the present through the letters to the churches, and starting in chapter four Revelation describes events in the distant future. The chief problem with this approach is that it fails to note how these three descriptions pertain to material throughout the book. All of Revelation involves visions shown to John, concerning things both present and yet to come. The best way to understand Revelation is to see its series of visions as they pertain to the entire church age and as they advance in focus to the events involved with Christ’s return.¹

In my opinion, overemphasis on its future orientation has diminished Revelation’s influence among Christians. After all, if the book is focused on events not likely to occur during my lifetime, why should I give much attention to it, however interesting its visions may be? Contrary to this view, however, Revelation should be given, if

¹ For a brief but compelling explanation of Revelation’s organization, see William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1940, reprint 1967), 16-36.

anything, a place of precedence when it comes to the present relevance of New Testament books. Our study of the opening vision in chapter 1 has highlighted its present focus. The exalted Christ in John’s vision is presently Lord over the church and over history. Appearing to John as prophet, king, and especially as priest, Christ appears the way his disciples always know and experience his saving work. Moreover, by standing amidst the lampstands, Christ emphasizes his present rule over and care for the churches that proclaim his name. Finally, John’s reaction to the vision, falling “at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17), shows how sinners must always respond to divine holiness. Jesus’ answer, “Fear not,” introduces how the gospel always works in raising sinners to new and eternal life by the grace of God in Christ.

AS THOUGH DEAD

The opening vision of Revelation vividly presents the main actors of history. First, Christ is seen as the sovereign Son of Man who reigns in triumph over all. Second, the church is depicted in its precious value as a golden lampstand that shines Christ’s light. Third, John himself represents the people who are saved by Christ. As we now focus on him it is startling to realize that when he saw Christ’s glory, John “fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17).

Readers who are not well-versed in the Bible may find it strange that the apostle “fell apart” in Jesus’ presence. In fact, John depicts how sinners always respond to a true vision of the holiness of Christ, whether in person or in the pages of Scripture. Given the way that Revelation follows the visions of Daniel, we should note that the ancient prophet had a similar experience. Daniel chapter 10 records a vision almost identical to that of Revelation 1, causing Daniel to lose all his strength and collapse to the ground (Dan. 10:9).

This experience of being undone before the majesty of God was vividly described as well by the prophet Isaiah. On the night that he was commissioned as a prophet, Isaiah went into the temple and “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (Isa. 6:1). As the worshiping seraphim cried, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts,” Isaiah responded, “Woe is me! For I am lost... for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 6:5).

The Bible indicates two reasons why men are slain in the presence of God's holy glory. The first is the awe of creatures in the presence of the divine. Job cried out: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). This overwhelming experience of seeing the Lord in glory is especially striking in the case of John, since he was the disciple most loved by Jesus and most intimate in friendship with the Lord who was now revealed to him in divine splendor. The John of Revelation is a mature disciple, long schooled in godliness and commended for his faithfulness under persecution. That John should fall as dead before the glorified Christ therefore amplifies the significance of the Lord's majesty. Charles Spurgeon explained: "The most spiritual and sanctified minds, when they fully perceive the majesty and holiness of God, are so greatly conscious of the great disproportion between themselves and the Lord, that they are humbled and filled with holy awe, and even with dread and alarm."²

A famous episode from the life of Martin Luther provides an example of this terror of the holy. After several years of training, Luther was authorized to celebrate his first mass as a Roman Catholic priest. He stepped to the altar and prepared to speak the Latin words that would supposedly turn the elements into the body and blood of Christ. At that moment, however, Luther froze solid. Year later, he explained:

I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, "With what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God."³

Psychologists in our time have looked on episodes like this and raised the question as to Luther's sanity. Yet they fail to account not only for the creature's dread before the Creator's glory, but even more as to the sinner's terror in the presence of the pure holiness of God. This is the second reason why John fell as dead before the Lord: because he was a sinner in the presence of perfect divine holiness.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1984), 18:4.

³ Cited from Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Penguin, 1955), 30.

From the biblical perspective, when we consider how grievous is a single sin in the holy presence of God, we understand how appropriate it was for Luther to tremble in God's presence. With this in mind, R. C. Sproul comments that if Luther really was insane, "our prayer is that God would send to this earth an epidemic of such insanity."⁴ Since only sinners who experience the death of seeing their sins before God are forgiven through faith in Christ, how much better if this shocked terror over sin were to descend upon our entire race!

When we consider biblical examples of believers falling as dead before the Lord, a common element is their awareness of personal sinfulness. Isaiah was undone because, he said, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). Job condemned himself when he saw God after chapters of complaining about the Lord. Perhaps the clearest example was that of the apostle Peter, when he first perceived the deity of Jesus. Peter had been fishing when Jesus asked to preach from his boat because of the large crowd. Afterwards, Jesus told Peter where to place his nets, and when Peter obeyed they with fish filled to the point of breaking. Through these events, Peter perceived the divine majesty of Christ. Like John on Patmos, "he fell down at Jesus' knees," and then pled, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk. 5:7-8). Perceiving the holiness of Christ, Peter was immediately overthrown by a terrifying comprehension of his own sin. Steve Wilmhurst writes: "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 deeply aware, horribly aware, of our own sin and 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."⁵

How different is this perspective on God from the easy-breezy attitude that permeates so many churches. Today, Christ is treated not with reverence but with flippant familiarity. It is true that Jesus is a friend to sinners because of his saving mercy. But Christians must realize that we come to a holy God in the person of Christ. Therefore, as the prophets Isaiah and Daniel show, together with the apostles Peter and John, true spirituality consists not of joviality and lighthearted fun,

⁴ R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1985), 126.

⁵ Steve Wilmhurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 30.

much less in worldly enthusiasm, but is built on the awe of a holy God, a loathing for sin, and the longing for saving grace from the merciful hand of our Savior. The first matter of true godliness concerns the necessity of dealing with our sin. In this way, when John in conviction fell “as though dead” (Rev. 1:18), he reminds us that the “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). As a sinner before the Lord John therefore fell as one who had died in terror of the holy.

FEAR NOT!

Church-growth consultants today would criticize such an emphasis on God’s holiness as hindering our success in ministry. Peter’s exclamation, “Depart from me, Lord,” is the opposite of what church marketers are hoping to hear. John’s experience, however, together with the testimony of the whole Bible, shows how the dread of sinners before the holiness of God is precisely what fosters a true and saving relationship with Christ. According to the Bible, the spirit that has been crushed before God in humble repentance is the kind of spirit in which God chooses to dwell. “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy,” Isaiah wrote: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isa. 57:15).

With this in mind, perhaps the most important statement about John was not what he did – falling down as though dead – but where he did it – “at [Jesus’] feet” (Rev. 1:17). Instead of turning away from God in servile terror – an ungodly fear that loathes God – he turned to the Lord in reverent humility. In the fear of the Lord and at the feet of Jesus is always the safest, most blessed place in all the world.

The reason why we are safest when trembling before God at Jesus’ feet is Christ’s character as a tender Savior. Jesus showed this in two actions. First, John said, “he laid his right hand on me” (Rev. 1:17). This was an act of great symbolic and personal significance. All through the Gospels, when Jesus healed or raised the dead, he usually touched his suffering subject. Whether it was an unclean leper, a dead son, or a shamed sinner, Jesus not only spoke words of power but also placed his holy hand upon the person in need. In this way, Jesus showed his compassion and above all, his personal acceptance. Being

perfectly holy, Jesus can touch the unclean without becoming polluted himself. Being filled with mercy, he is willing to reach out with saving grace in a personal way. If you have come to Jesus as a sinner and received the gift of saving faith, that work of his Holy Spirit was like the touch of his hand: Christ personally laid hold of you in mercy, power, and love. Imagine what it meant to John, completely undone at the vision of Christ's holy majesty, lying as one dead before the Lord, to have Jesus reach down with a strong hand of blessing, to touch him and lay hold of him for salvation!

Having laid his right hand on John – the hand of strength and favor – Jesus spoke: “Fear not” (Rev. 1:17). These words may seem strange, since we have noted how right it was for John to fear. But, when combined in salvation, the sinner’s fear and the Savior’s “fear not” go together. Derek Thomas explains how fear and ‘Fear not’ define the Christian’s experience: “We fall down before his exalted majesty, and we feel the reassurance of his hand upon our shoulder encouraging us not to be afraid... We are awed by his majesty and drawn by his grace.”⁶ There is no other saving Christianity than that which joins the sinner’s fear of holiness with the Savior’s assurance of grace.

Jesus went on to explain his authority to banish our terror: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one” (Rev. 1:17-18). This statement calls back to the words of God the Father in verse 8: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” By taking up similar words, Jesus declares his Oneness with the Father in deity. As “the first and the last,” Jesus is sovereign over all that comes between, that is, over all time, history, and creation. As “the living one,” Jesus possesses the power and life needed to cast away all fear.

Sinners will therefore find in Jesus’ person all that we need for salvation. This makes the essential point that Christianity is all about Jesus Christ: past, future, and present. Sometimes people will walk away from Christianity, saying it no longer meets their needs.

Perhaps it is a college student who is led away by sinful pleasures or vain philosophy. Perhaps it is a man or woman who is caught up in work. In every case, they have forgotten, if they ever knew, the majesty, glory, and power of Jesus Christ. There is nowhere else for us to go in order to receive life. It is true that a Christianity without

⁶ Derek Thomas, *Let’s Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 15.

the living Christ is worth little. How many Christians experience this when their religion ceases to be about Jesus and because of Christ himself. Jesus is the living Lord and Savior, and it is always before him that we experience the power, vitality, and joy that we ought to crave and that we truly need.

As Jesus describes himself we see particular aspects of his all-sufficiency. As the eternal God, there is never a time when Jesus is not present to lift us up, forgive our sins, and defeat our foes. As the sovereign Savior, there is nothing that can befall us that is contrary to his will. Even if the things we most fear should happen, we can know that Jesus has sovereignly willed them in order to strengthen our faith, preserve us from sin, and lead us closer in fellowship with him. Moreover, Christ in his might is able to remove our trials at the time that he knows is good for us. This was true in John's day under the Roman Empire's persecution. The trials of the seven churches could go only so far as Christ willed them and always to serve the purposes of God. The same is true for us: as "the first and the last" our Savior not only chose us in eternity past, called us to personal saving faith, and has promised our final salvation, but he will also rule all things for our eternal well-being and for his own eternal glory.

Especially as "the living one," Jesus is qualified to remove the fears of one, like John, who was as dead before him. The Bible teaches that sinners are "dead in transgressions" (Eph. 2:1): spiritually unable to believe the gospel or live according to God's Word. But just as Jesus possesses the purity that enables him to touch and conquer the unclean, so also does Jesus possess in himself the life that removes the curse of death. This power comes to Christians today through God's Word, where the Lord speaks with the saving power of life. To receive the life we need we must come to him. To dwell in the power of life we must abide in his Word. As Peter once cried, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68).

VICTORIOUS OVER FEAR

Jesus' final statement in casting out John's fear directs us not only to his person but also to his victorious saving work: "I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18). Coming to the *person* of Christ in faith we meet

the one who has power to banish our fear. Then trusting in the *work* of Christ, we see that everything we fear has been conquered, so we are freed to rejoice in the holy presence of our Savior and Lord.

First, Jesus said, “I died,” in this way conquering our fear of condemnation. We have seen that when biblical figures fall in fear before Christ’s majesty, it is largely as they are made aware of their sin and of their dread of wrath. How can the sinner confront the Holy God without the terror of condemnation? Jesus answers with reference to his atoning death on the cross: “I died.”

There are two great marvels in this world and they are found together in this passage. The first marvel – one that causes the angels to gaze downward in wonder (1 Pet. 1:12) – is that sinners should be received into the loving favor of the holy God. Lawbreakers embraced by the Righteous Judge! How can this be? The answer is given in the second marvel: Jesus, “the living one,” proclaims, “I died.” It was to perform this second wonder – so necessary if the first wonder could ever take place – that Jesus was born of the virgin and became incarnate in true humanity. God the Son – eternal, sovereign, self-existing in life – became man in order to die for the sins of his people. “You shall call his name Jesus,” the angel told Joseph about the son to be born, “for he will save his people from their sin” (Mt. 1:21). The incarnation thus found fulfillment in the atonement; the purpose of Christmas was fulfilled in Good Friday.

The power of Christ’s death to cast out fear of condemnation for sin is illustrated by another curious episode from Martin Luther’s life. After his famous stand on God’s Word at the Council of Worms, Luther was whisked away for protection to a castle known as the Wartburg. There, while Luther was working on his translation of the Bible into German, Satan appeared to him to accuse Luther of his sins. In a letter written to his friend Philip Melancthon on May 24, 1521, Luther recalled his anguish as Satan unveiled a long scroll with all his sins written with care, each of them read out one-by-one. All the while Satan mocked his pathetic desire to serve God, assuring him that after all he would end up in hell. Luther writhed in spiritual agony until, at last, he jumped up and cried: “It is all true, Satan, and many more sins which I have committed in my life which are known to God only; but write this at the bottom of your list...” Luther then recited to the Devil the glorious words of 1 John 1:7, “the blood of Jesus [God’s]

Son cleanses us from all sin.” Then grasping an inkwell from his table, Luther threw it at the devil who thus fled, leaving a black spot that can be seen there still, bearing testimony to Luther’s deliverance from condemnation because Jesus died for his sins.⁷

Not only did Jesus die to free us from fear of condemnation, but he rose from the dead to overcome our fear of failure and defeat: “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore” (Rev. 1:18). Many Christians, knowing that their sins are forgiven, yet live in the terror of sin’s power because of their weakness in the face of temptation. Yet the Savior who rose from the dead has that same power to give to his people. In Ephesians 1:17-20, Paul prayed that his readers would know “what is the immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power toward us who believe.” According to Paul, weak and needy Christians receive the same might “that [God] worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead.” Do you know that the power that raised Jesus from the grave enables you now to continue in faith, turn away from sin, and offer your life in worship and service to God? Christians will not ultimately fail and we are delivered from the fear of defeat by remembering that Christ, who died, is alive forevermore in the power of life that he gives to those who call on his name in times of need.

When we think of John falling as dead before Christ’s glory, believers have a special reason not only to rely on his resurrection but also to look forward to our own resurrection. In our current sinful condition, it is not possible for even the best of Christ’s disciples to see his true majesty without being undone in terror of the holy. But, John wrote in his first epistle, “we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2). In our resurrection, the children of God will be transformed into a glory in the likeness of Christ’s glory, all vestige of sin having been removed so that we, too, are pure and radiant in holiness. Philip Hughes writes that because of our coming resurrection in Christ, “the expectation of every Christian believer is that he will see God (Jb. 19:26f.), when his own glorification has become a reality, which will be the completion of his sanctification.”⁸ John said that knowing this should animate our hearts with a desire to increase in holiness now: “everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:3).

⁷ David Baron, *The Visions and Prophecies of Zechariah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1972), 93-94.

⁸ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 28.

Third, Jesus delivers us from the final and most dreadful of our enemies, the fear of death. He concludes: “and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). To possess keys is to control the doors and have authority over who goes in and who goes out. Jesus, by the conquest of his death and resurrection, now rules as victor over both death and hell.

Here, then, is how Christians are freed from our greatest fears. Christ by his death has removed legal curse that requires death, and by his resurrection has broken even the power of death. Christians therefore may live courageously before the threat of the grave. Paul Beasley-Murray writes: “He is able to lead his followers out from death into life. For those facing the prospect of martyrdom (2:13), it must have been a great comfort to know that death was not the end. Because of this they could give themselves to his service, whatever the risks, knowing that their ultimate future was secure.”⁹ A. W. Pitzer writes: “The Christian need not fear to die! There is one who is his friend, who has overcome death and who holds the keys of the grave and the unseen world, and who says to him: ‘Fear not.’”¹⁰

THE GREAT “I AM”

When we consider carefully the message of Revelation chapter 1, we see that the key to understanding this book is not found by unraveling how prophecies relate to the present or the future. More important than giving us clues to future history, Revelation directs our attention to the one who is Lord of history, the Sovereign who stands in glory among the lampstands, and the Savior whose right hand lifts up his people and says, “Fear not.”

As the key to the book of Revelation, the first chapter fixes our gaze on Jesus in his glory, who says, “I am” (Rev. 1:17). Our success as Christians therefore comes not by unraveling every mystery of history, but in knowing who Jesus is, entering into discipleship with him through a living faith, and relying on the all-sufficiency of his saving work to conquer every foe that besets us. He is the one who loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood (Rev. 1:5). He is the glorious Son of Man, who stands in sovereign power amidst his

⁹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *The Message of the Resurrection*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 199.

¹⁰ A. W. Pitzer, “Why Believers Should Not Fear,” cited from *Southern Presbyterian Pulpit* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1896, reprint 2001), 170.

lampstands (Rev. 1:13). He is coming again with the clouds, and every eye will see the One whom they pierced (Rev. 1:7). Do you know Jesus? Our calling is to receive him as Lord and Savior in faith, to serve his kingdom despite all tribulation, and to trust him to meet all our needs, knowing that he will not fail in any aspect of our salvation. “Fear not,” he says: “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:17-18). Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.