

Fear Not

vv. 17-18

John's reaction, upon taking in all of the things he has just observed in the preceding verses, is to fall at the Lord's feet as if dead. Remember, this is John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who laid his head on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, who saw Him transfigured on the mountain, and who boldly wanted to sit at Jesus' right hand in the Kingdom. And this is his reaction. This is no "gentle Jesus, meek & mild."

Similar reactions to John's are found throughout the Bible – sometimes, when men encounter only angelic beings. See Judges 13:20 (Manoah); Joshua 5:13-14; Job 42:6; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1:28; 3:23; MK. 4:41; Dan. 8:17; LK 5:8; Acts 26:14 / 9:4; MT 17:6.

While the Bible gives us the real result of man coming face to face with deity, I have laid out an example below that gives a contemporary and somewhat typical view of encounters with "deity" by charlatans of today who have no fear of God and whose intention for ministry seems to direct every effort towards their own aggrandizement. This attitude is seen in numerous books about so-called life after death encounters and especially by charismatic hucksters who seem to go for a circus-like atmosphere in their "crusades". Benny Hinn is one such huckster, and the following quote exposes an hubris that demonstrates the massive ego and self-love that characterizes his 'ministry'. This is the worst sort of blasphemy <sup>①</sup>

*"Once, in England, I was staying in the home of a Christian family. My room was at the very top of the house. One evening I was lost in the Spirit, having the greatest time in the world talking to Him. The woman of the house called up, "Benny, supper is ready."*

*But I was bubbling over and didn't want to leave. She called again, "supper is ready." And as I was about to leave, I felt someone take my hand and say, "Five more minutes." The Holy Spirit longed for my fellowship."*<sup>i</sup>

Since God never changes, we have to assume that Benny Hinn is a liar, and so is anyone who relates the same type of story about meeting God in person and says their attendance was casual.

As John lay there as a dead man, terrified, Jesus does what He so often does in the Gospels, and says, "Do not be afraid" or "fear not". See LK 5:10 (to Peter); 8:50; 12:7; 12:32; Acts 27:24, etc. Many times in the OT accounts, it is angels who tell the human involved to "fear not", but here in Revelation 1:17, it is Jesus. Jesus also places His hand on John to add to the comfort of His words. We assume that John responded positively and got up to continue to see, hear and record what he was being shown.

Now Jesus continues to comfort John by helping him to recognize who He was. “I am the first & the last”. Notice MT. 14:27; MK 6:50; JN 6:20 where it literally says, “I Am, fear not.”

In Isaiah 48:12, which also is a link to Ex. 3:14, “*I Am Who I Am*”, says this: “*Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.*” That passage is a close parallel to what Jesus is saying here in Revelation where Jesus takes this name on as His own.

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus uses this name “I Am” of Himself 8 times – the most well known one being JN 8:58. “*Before Abraham came to be, I Am.*” John knew for certain now whose presence he was in; and just as the words of Isaiah 48:12 served to reassure Israel, Jesus uses them to comfort John here in Revelation.

In v. 18, Jesus goes on & adds to the description of who He is in a big way. There is a contrast here between His earthly life and then death, and His eternity – “I am alive forevermore”. “The living One” is a title used of God in both the OT & NT numerous times.<sup>ii</sup> He has life as His essential nature. He died at a point in history – an event – but His living is eternal, ongoing, forever – a continuous state of existence...”Behold” – John, you can see for yourself that I am alive forevermore.

Jesus’ 3<sup>rd</sup> claim is related to the first 2. Since He is eternal & has life in & of Himself, He has the power to give life ( JN 5:26-28 ), and to consign people to either death or life. The keys He mentions denote authority, so he is saying that He is in control of death & Hades – cf. Rev. 3:7-8. Because of His unchallenged victory over death no one can be imprisoned in death & Hades except by Jesus’ will. He truly holds the keys. ②

## The Outline of Revelation

v. 19

You would not think so by simply reading this verse, but there is some controversy as to the nature of John’s commission recorded here. Some say that it is one thing being presented and the book as a whole is in view, which necessitates that John wrote chapter 1 last; while a second view sees 2 divisions – the 1<sup>st</sup> being chapters 1 – 3, and 4-22 as the 2<sup>nd</sup>. The sense of this 2<sup>nd</sup> concept is this, “Write then the things which you saw, even what they represent, and the things that will happen after these things.”<sup>iii</sup> However, the break in thought from chapter 1 to 2 is huge and forces us to see this as a major division, and the transition to chapter 4 from 3 is also major, so the best interpretation is that Jesus is referring to a 3 division view of Revelation.

The 3 division view is the most natural to the sentence, to the original Greek grammar, and the contents of the book as a whole. This makes:

- The things you have seen – the vision of Christ just described in 1:13-18.

- The things which are – the messages to the 7 churches which immediately follow chapter 2 and which speak of current events then extant in those churches.
- The things that are to take place – those events described following the letters to the 7 churches – future events.

## Symbols Interpreted

v. 20

Jesus now clears up what had been a mystery to John when he recorded it – the 7 stars and 7 lampstands – what do these represent? The 7 stars are said to be messengers or angels of the 7 churches. A mostly unresolved discussion continues to take place with regard to who these stars are, and 4 major approaches are out there:

- They are unfallen angels who are the guardians of the 7 churches, or
- They are personified spirits of the 7 churches, or
- They are bishops or chief teachers ( pastors ) who represent the churches, or
- They are men who represent the 7 churches but have no unique leadership roles or functions.

Here are the arguments for each position:

### Unfallen Angels

Throughout Scripture we hear of guardian angels who guard individuals as well as nations ( cf. II Kings 6:12-17; Dan. 10:13,20,21; 12:1 ), and it is possible that there are angels who guard churches as well. Stars often symbolize angels in the Bible – Job 38:7; Isa. 13:12ff; so this is a real possibility that these stars represent holy angels. ③

### Personified spirits of the 7 Churches

This is a good explanation and blends the churches with their representatives in stating the destination of each message. This view provides for the intention of Jesus that the messages go to each church as a whole. There are other places where this occurs in Revelation – 7:1; 9:11; 14:18; 16:5.

Against this view is that the churches are symbolized by the lampstands & so a double symbol for the angels creates a problem. A star is a symbol for an angel who is in turn a symbol for a church, therefore, the star & lampstand have the same meaning, which does not make sense.

### Human Messengers Who Are Leaders ( Bishops, pastors, elders )

This idea says that each church had a leader as its' star. Scripturally, there is evidence for this where a star symbolizes a high position – Num. 24:17; Isa. 14:12; MT 2:2; or a faithful or false teacher – Dan. 12:3; Jude 13. The fact that the messengers of chapters 2 & 3 represent and are responsible for the actions of the churches fits this idea. Also, the fact that the churches sent these 7 to minister to John on Patmos seems to indicate a leadership role.

Arguing against this position is the fact that in the NT era, there was more than 1 leader in most churches, so singling out 1 of them to bear sole responsibility for the behavior of the whole church was unlikely.

Human Messengers who represent each church but are not necessarily leaders. We have the examples of Epaphroditus & Epaphras ( Phil. 2:25; Col. 4:12 ) who traveled to Rome from their respective churches to minister to Paul, and it is likely that the Asian churches were sending people to minister to John, because he had served in many of these churches for 30 years. “Angelos” is used to refer to human messengers – MT 11:10; LK 7:24; 9:52; James 2:25 – and II Cor. 8:23 tells us that churches did select delegates or ambassadors to visit & assist the apostles in their ministries or during times of imprisonment, etc. Humans are more natural recipients of a message to a church than is an actual angel.

An objection against this view is that as representatives of these churches, these men must have had some authority, but it can be countered that they were not the sole leaders. They could have been moral representatives without being the actual pastor. This is the most likely explanation because objections to it are the weakest of the 4.

Christ’s explanation of the stars is that they were symbolic of 7 visitors to Patmos who were there then or were coming soon, and who would leave with a specific message to take to their respective church bodies along with the contents of the whole book. The lampstands stood for the 7 churches and the One who was the source of the messages, Jesus Christ, stood symbolically in the midst of them.

④

## Introduction to the 7 Churches of Rev. 2:1 – 3:22

Next lesson we’ll begin to look at the personalized messages of Christ to each church of the 7 local churches, but before we do, we need to present a system for understanding what these churches represent. One thing is clear – at the time that John wrote these words, these 7 churches existed and were real churches filled with real people dealing with real life issues and attempting to live out their faith in fear & trembling as the world threw everything it had at them.

Let me quote here from a sermon by Art Azurdia III<sup>iv</sup>, as he sets up his introduction to Revelation in the following practical way:

*“Events of life trigger a sentiment in our lives that goes like this: “Life certainly hasn’t turned out as I’d expected”. In your wildest dreams you could never have anticipated the experience of so much sorrow & disappointment.*

*Truth be told, with each passing year, your naiveté fades, your idealism fades as you become more and more familiar with the pain of unfulfilled expectations, unrealized dreams, dashed ambitions. And how ironic, you think to yourself, ‘I would have expected that being a Christian would have made a difference.’*

*As you consider your own immediate family for example: your wife is dying of bone cancer; your son has rejected the very gospel for which you would readily give your life; your daughter is being abused by her husband who leads a midweek Bible study at their church and your middle management position at work is soon to be eliminated as a result of downsizing; and then, of course, there is your own heart – more than ever before the imprint of Adam's fall appears inescapable. Selfishness, pride, greed and lust and anger seem to dog every thought or action in your life. And by and by, you've given up any hope for real likeness to Jesus Christ as if such a thing were an impossible wish / dream.*

*On the national scene, things seem to be equally disappointing. It is clear that you live in a post-Christian society. The concept of truth is now regarded as a shibboleth from a less enlightened day. Public schools fear the mention of God; the legal system wrestles with the right to choose and the right to die. Special interest groups lobby for same-sex marriage. Any honest evaluation of the present American landscape can only arrive at one conclusion – that the Puritan experiment – the establishment of this nation as the New Jerusalem – has miserably failed.*

*Globally speaking, famine, hunger & disease indiscriminately take the lives of tens of thousands of children and adults every day; Christian and non-Christian alike. Basic human rights are being violated by totalitarian governments and the rich oppress the poor, as the powerful exploit the powerless, and at this present moment dear friends, I would remind you that the major industry on the planet is war; robbing the world of a new generation as young men and women lay dead, not only on open fields of battle, but on the streets of inner cities & on the school-grounds of middle class suburbs.* ⑤

*And then there is the church of Jesus Christ...your love & your life if you are a Christian. Her convictions seem more compromised than ever before. The quality of her worship services are now measured by the extent to which they appeal to people who are not Christians!*

*Preaching has degenerated to a moral pep talk rather than a spirit endowed exposition of the sacred word. The distinctly Christian call to self-denial has given way to the promise of self-fulfillment. Her saltiness is nearly gone, her light is merely a flicker and her prophetic edge has been dulled. There is no passion, there is no conviction, there is no zeal, there is no hunger, there is no appetite – the aroma of luke-warmness prevails.*

*Now by the grace of God there are other churches, especially around the world that have sought to resist these trends, that have sought to remain faithful to the gospel, but as you have seen for yourself, they often live with the accusations of being too extreme, too excessive, too dogmatic, too authoritarian. Now as you would have expected, sometimes these accusations come from outside the community of faith. What breaks your heart however, is the increasing realization that these accusations come most harmfully and most often and most vehemently from those who actually profess to be family members! Your home,*

*your nation, your world, even your church...it's not what you expected. It's not what you dreamed, it's not what you hoped for.*

*But my friends, those sentiments are not unique to this day and time. They are not unique to you.”*

With these words, Art Azurdia sets the tone for our expectation to be blessed by the unfolding revelation of Jesus Christ.

Some theologians have come up with the idea that what these churches represent is the historical progress of the church since the book of Revelation to the present. In this view, the churches give us a panoramic view of church history, with each church representing some era during that time. For example:

- Ephesus = the church during the Apostolic age till about AD 100.
- Smyrna = the church under Roman emperors AD 100-313
- Pergamos = carnality & false doctrine –AD 313 ( & Constantine’s edict of tolerance ) to the rise of the Papacy in AD 500
- Thyatira = Papal church from AD 500-1500
- Sardis = the church of the Reformation from AD 1500-1700
- Philadelphia = the resurgence of missionary activity AD 1700 – present
- Laodicea = the lukewarm, liberal churches of today until the end time arrives<sup>v</sup>

Although certain parallels can be seen when you do a comparison like this, and the most attractive feature of it is the Laodicean church ( which everyone acknowledges does seem to be a lot like today’s Christianity in general ), but there is a simpler & better way to look at these churches. ⑥

There are 7 churches, and 7 is the number often associated with perfection in the Bible. These 7 churches have varying virtues alongside various sinful or faithless practices. Throughout church history and right up to now, we find examples of all these things within many Christian churches, so these 7 churches represent the kinds of churches present throughout the church age, right alongside one another.

Five of the 7 are rebuked for tolerating sin in their church ( & that certainly goes on today ). The issues range in severity from a waning love for Christ in Ephesus to complete apostasy in Laodicea. Any church in any historic time frame can possess a mixture of the sins and foibles that these 5 are rebuked for.<sup>vi</sup> The other 2 churches represent a minority – those churches doing what they are supposed to be doing as they await Jesus’ return. So these 7 are a pattern of true church life anytime you look at the universal church in the world.

Ephesus is addressed first because it was first on the postal route from Patmos, and was the most prominent of the 7. It had become a sort of mother church out of which the other 6 had been founded – cf. Acts 19:10.

Each letter contains the following 7 features:

1. The correspondent
2. The church
3. The city
4. The commendation
5. The concern
6. The command
7. The counsel of Christ

*“Always, in every age, the church of Jesus Christ is under attack. Our interpretation of the Revelation then, must be driven by that fact and correspondingly, the difference God expects it to make in the life of the church right now. Is our church under attack? Of course it is! We’ve not existed for one moment without the church being under attack. This is why this book is for us; which means, practically speaking, that even if it were possible to comprehend every phrase, rightly interpret every symbol accurately; trace out every OT connection; we will have failed to be affected by the Revelation as God would have us be if simultaneously our testimony to Jesus Christ in this world is either silenced by the intimidation of public opinion, deluded by the embracing of a pluralistic gospel or neutralized by our western culture’s lust for prosperity.”<sup>vii</sup>*

As we begin to look at the messages of Jesus Christ to the 7 churches next time, it is important to realize that these were real churches & real people; the problems being described were real problems in those churches; the promises to them were real; the rebukes were real; and they were expected to heed what Christ was saying to them or suffer the consequences of disobedience. The opposite is also true – if they heeded what He said, they would receive the blessings He laid out before them as faithful worshippers of this One that John describes for us as God in the flesh. ⑦

Next lesson – Rev. 2: 1-7 The Church at Ephesus

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<sup>i</sup> Benny Hinn; “Good Morning Holy Spirit”; Thomas Nelson Publisher; 1990; pg. 56.

<sup>ii</sup> “The living One” – Deut. 32:40; Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2; 84:2; Isa. 49:18; Jer. 5:2; Dan. 12:7; Hos. 1:10; MT 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; Rom. 9:26; II Cor. 3:3; 6:16; I Thess. 1:9; I Tim. 3:15; 4:10; Heb. 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; I Pet. 1:23.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Thomas, p. 115

<sup>iv</sup> Art Azurdia III – sermon # 202-04 “Apocalypse Part 3” at the 2:37 mark to 7:35 minute mark; accessed from “spiritempoweredpreaching.org” website.

<sup>v</sup> Steve Gregg; Revelation – Four Views; Thomas Nelson; 1997; p. 62.

<sup>vi</sup> John MacArthur; Revelation 1-7; Moody; p. 55

<sup>vii</sup> Art Azurdia – IBID – from 31:46 minute mark to 32:38 minute mark.