

Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church

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Pastor's Bible Study

A Bible Study Series
Based on the book
"Revelation Four Views" by Steve Gregg

Lesson 6
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Part I

The Seven Letters

Revelation 1–3

The Commissioning of John

- **The Commissioning of John**
 - *“And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”* (Revelation 1:17–20, NKJV)
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - The overwhelming vision John witnessed dramatically altered him. Initially, his response was devastating fear, which the Lord removed by assurance and then by giving John a sense of duty.
 - ***When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man.*** ([1:17a](#))
 - In a manner similar to his experience with the glory of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration more than six decades earlier (cf. [Matt. 17:6](#)), John was again overwhelmed with terror at the manifestation of Christ's glory and **fell at His feet like a dead man**. Such fear was standard for those few who experienced such unusual heavenly visions.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - When an angel appeared to him, Daniel reported that "no strength was left in me, for my natural color turned to a deathly pallor, and I retained

no strength... and as soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground" ([Dan. 10:8-9](#); cf. [8:17](#)).

- Overwhelmed by the vision of God that he saw in the temple, Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" ([Isa. 6:5](#)).
- Ezekiel saw several visions of the Lord's glory and his response was always the same: he fell on his face ([Ezek. 1:28](#); [3:23](#); [9:8](#); [43:3](#); [44:4](#)).
- After the Angel of the Lord appeared to them and announced the birth of Samson, "Manoah [Samson's father] said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God'" ([Judg. 13:22](#)).
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - Job had a similar reaction after God spoke to him: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes" ([Job 42:5-6](#)).
 - On his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Saul of Tarsus (better known as the apostle Paul) "saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me" ([Acts 26:13](#)). In response, Saul and his companions fell prostrate in the road ([v. 14](#)).
 - After witnessing the terrifying calamities that follow the opening of the sixth seal, unbelievers during the Tribulation will cry out in terror "to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'" ([Rev. 6:16-17](#)).
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - When one comes into the presence of God, he knows how lost he is on his own. But Jesus, though awesome in appearance, was full of love and mercy. He reached out and touched John.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - **do not be afraid**
 - The unavoidable response of those who saw even a glimpse of His glory is that of fear. Yet how cavalier we are today in our attitude toward the Maker of a myriad of galaxies!
 - We, who dare not even touch a 60-watt light bulb without wearing protective gloves, often treat Him as our "Genie on call." We haven't the slightest notion or appreciation of His holiness, even daring to think that worship is about pleasing us—expressing our

dislike if the music is not to our taste or we are unable to drink coffee during the “worship service.”

- How much we are in need of a glimpse of His glory that we might have a Scriptural fear of the Lord!
- A lack of fear for God is the characteristic of His *enemies* (*Ps. 36:1; Jer. 2:19; 5:24; Rom. 3:18*) and “fear” is one of His titles (*Gen. 31:42, 53*).

- **The Commissioning of John**

- Yet the fear that His children are to have is not the cowering response of a creature fearing retribution.
- It is the healthy, reverent, fear one would have toward a human father of perfect discipline and unconditional love, if one were to exist.
- Coupled with the recognition of power and great might is a deep comfort in the realization that God is also our Protector. As Paul observed, “If God is for us, who *can be* against us” (*Rom. 8:31*)? When we look into the face of the Judge of the Universe, it is our Savior’s face we will see!

○ Anthony C. Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Galaxie Software, 2006), Re 1:17.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- The comfort Jesus offered was based on who He is and the authority He possesses.
- First, He identified Himself as **I am** (*egō eimi*)—the covenant name of God (cf. [Ex. 3:14](#)). It was that name with which He had comforted the terrified disciples who saw Him walking on the Sea of Galilee ([Matt. 14:27](#)). Jesus took that name for Himself in [John 8:58](#)—a direct claim to deity that was not lost on His opponents ([v. 59](#)).
- Jesus next identified Himself as **the first and the last** (cf. [2:8](#); [22:13](#)), a title used of God in the Old Testament ([Isa. 44:6](#); [48:12](#); cf. [41:4](#)). When all false gods have come and gone, only He remains. He existed before them and will continue to exist eternally, long after they have been forgotten. Jesus’ application of that title to Himself is another powerful proof of His deity.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- “I am the First and the Last” undoubtedly designates Jesus as *God*. “I am the Alpha and the Omega” in [v. 8](#) is a close parallel to which [21:6](#); [22:13](#) add another: “the Beginning and the End.” There is no doubt regarding the similarity.
- A question may be raised in regard to possible differences. We have already said that Alpha and Omega are letters, the first and the last of the Greek alphabet, and thus refer to *language*, to the divine spoken or written *Word*.

- "I am the First and the Last" takes up the idea of *time* and thus refers to the whole course of human *history* from the first day to the last.
- "I am the Beginning and the End" refers to a great, extended *work or plan* which has an inception and a consummation.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - We venture to combine the three: 1) in all revelation, 2) in all human history, 3) in all the work and plan of the kingdom—Jesus, the glorious, mighty Jesus whom John here sees, stands at both ends, embracing, governing, controlling the whole. This is his stupendous greatness, absolute supremacy, infinite glory.
 - Lenski New Testament Commentary - Lenski New Testament Commentary – The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation.
 - That is, He is the beginning and the end. He is the One who can be with a person forever—when the person is born and when he dies and during all the days in between. He can be with a person throughout all of eternity. John need not fear the awesome, terrifying presence of Christ, for He is the eternal Lord of the universe as well as the Savior of man.
 - Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible - Commentary - The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible – Revelation.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - The third title of deity Jesus claimed is that of **the living One** (cf. [John 1:4](#); [14:6](#)). That also is a title used throughout Scripture to describe God (e.g., [Josh. 3:10](#); [1 Sam. 17:26](#); [Ps. 84:2](#); [Hos. 1:10](#); [Matt. 16:16](#); [26:63](#); [Acts 14:15](#); [Rom. 9:26](#); [2 Cor. 3:3](#); [6:16](#); [1 Thess. 1:9](#); [1 Tim. 3:15](#); [4:10](#); [Heb. 3:12](#); [9:14](#); [10:31](#); [Rev. 7:2](#)).
 - God is the eternal, uncaused, self-existent One. In [John 5:26](#) Jesus said to His Jewish opponents, "Just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself," thus claiming full equality with God the Father.
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - By the context we can see that this description stands for God's independent, self-existence, and self-sufficiency as the transcendent and sovereign God of the universe.
 - He stands outside and independent of all creation. This same designation is used in Revelation 2:8 to comfort a church in affliction because it stands for Christ's deity and sovereignty over all our affairs.
 - Christ, our Savior and Lord, is God, the origin and goal, the self-existent one who sees the beginning from the end, in whom all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge abide, and who is in total control.

- o J. Hampton Keathley, III, Studies in Revelation (Galaxie Software, 2002), Re 1:17.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- Christ's seemingly paradoxical declaration **I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore** provides further grounds for assurance.
- The Greek text literally reads, "I became dead." The living One, the eternal, self-existent God who could never die, became man and died. As Peter explains in [1 Peter 3:18](#), Christ was "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." In His humanness He died without ceasing to live as God.

- o MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- **Behold** introduces a statement of amazement and wonder: **I am alive forevermore**. Christ lives forever in a union of glorified humanity and deity, "according to the power of an indestructible life" ([Heb. 7:16](#)). "Christ, having been raised from the dead," wrote Paul, "is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him" ([Rom. 6:9](#)).
- That truth provides comfort and assurance, because Jesus "is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" ([Heb. 7:25](#)).
- In spite of his sinfulness in the presence of the glorious Lord of heaven, John had nothing to fear because that same Lord had paid by His death the penalty for John's sins (and those of all who believe in Him) and risen to be his eternal advocate.

- o MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- Christ possesses **the keys of Hades and of Death (v. 18)**, because His own resurrection from the dead has also secured the resurrection of His followers who are faithful unto death (2:8, 10). This may also have been the meaning of Jesus' statement at Caesarea Philippi that "the gates of Hades will not prevail" against the church (Matt. 16:18). Since Jesus holds the keys to the gates of Hades and Death, He can unlock and open those gates to resurrect the saints in the last day.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- "And I have the keys of death and of Hades." As the one who conquered death, He has the keys of death and Hades. "Keys" means authority and power. In Scripture a key is a sign of authority and power. So, the Lord Jesus has control over both death and Hades. What does this mean?
 - (1) He is the Lord over physical death which terminates life in this world. By His death for sin and His resurrection, Christ has

wrenched from Satan's hands any authority the devil had over death (cf. Heb. 2:14–15). This means “no man can die apart from divine permission even though afflicted by Satan and in trial or trouble”³³ (cf. Ps. 68:19–20).

- (2) He is the sovereign over hell or life after death. “Hell” (KJV) and “Hades” (NASB) is the Greek hades. The Greek word hades, commonly translated “hell,” refers to the intermediate state and is to be distinguished from the lake of fire or Gehenna, which refers to the eternal state. To avoid confusion it is better to transliterate the word hades (as does the NASB) and to use the word “hell” as referring to the eternal state only.³⁴

- J. Hampton Keathley, III, *Studies in Revelation* (Galaxie Software, 2002), Re 1:17.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- “Hades” is the abode of the dead. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Sheol* (cf. Ps. 6:5). The King James Version translates this phrase: “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” but that is misleading. Jesus was not talking about the torment of eternal hell; He was saying that the grave cannot hold the elect. The gates of death could not hold Jesus Christ, and they cannot hold Christians captive. “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55).
- Actually, “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” is a promise of resurrection. The language of death and resurrection were becoming common themes in Jesus’ teaching. He knew His disciples were facing treacherous days, and that all of them (except John) would ultimately give their earthly lives as martyrs for Him. He was about to tell them, “Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25). But first He told them that the grave could never hold the elect.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- This theme runs throughout the entire New Testament. Since Christ conquered death, Christians have nothing to fear from it. “Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him” (Rom. 6:9)—nor can it be master over those who are united to Him by faith. Jesus promised, “Because I live, you shall live also” (John 14:19).
- In John’s apocalyptic vision, Jesus told him, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev. 1:17, 18). Jesus Christ destroyed “him who had the power of death, that is, the devil [so He would] deliver those who through fear of death were subject to

slavery all their lives” (Heb. 2:14, 15). He took away the keys to death and Hades, and now the grave cannot contain His elect.

○ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 178-79.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- John is told to write three things (v. 19). The things which he has seen would most naturally refer to the vision just described, although it might refer to things John had seen much earlier. The Gospel of John contains information that the author had personally “seen” (John 19:35), but no commentator, to my knowledge, has suggested that Jesus was here commissioning John to write both the Gospel and the Apocalypse. It is not known whether John had already written the fourth Gospel at the time of this vision.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- **Special Comparative Note on 1:19**

- **“The things which are, and the things which will take place after this.”**

- Dispensational *futurist* interpreters believe that **the things which are** are the developments pertinent to the church age, and John’s record of these things is found in chapters 2 and 3 of this book, in the form of the seven letters to the churches. Some dispensationalists think that the seven letters foresee the entire church age from John’s day until the Rapture
- The dispensationalists also believe that “these things” (Gr. *meta tauta*) in the phrase “after these things” (more literal than **after this**) is a reference to the church age. On this view, the recurrence of the phrase in Revelation 4:1 signals the Rapture of the church and the end of the church age.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- ***The things which will take place after this*** could be more literally translated “the things which are about to take place after these things,” a fact that is seized upon by *preterists* as another evidence for their belief that the fulfillment of the book would be quick in coming. If the book was written prior to a.d. 70, it would thus refer to the fall of Jerusalem.

- **The Commissioning of John**

- The astounding vision John saw inspired in him a healthy tension between fear and assurance. But to that was added a reminder of his duty. Christ's earlier command to **write** is now expanded, as John is told to record three features.
- First, **the things which you have seen**, the vision John had just seen and recorded in [verses 10-16](#).
- Next, **the things which are**, a reference to the letters to the seven churches in [chapters 2](#) and [3](#), which describe the present state of the church.

- Finally, John was to write **the things which will take place after these things**, the prophetic revelations of future events unfolded in [chapters 4-22](#).
- This threefold command provides an outline for the book of Revelation, encompassing (from John's perspective) the past, present, and future.
 - MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Revelation 1-11.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - The symbols are then explained: “The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven candlesticks [which thou sawest] are the seven churches.” (v. 20)
 - There has been much discussion as to what is meant by the angels. They are clearly not angels in the ordinary sense; for there is no Scripture showing angels to have charge of local churches; and who can suppose that Christ would speak to angels through the prophet?
 - The angel, too, is here identified with the moral condition of the Church, and must therefore be a part of it, some person or persons holding towards it a place of special responsibility. The word “angel” carries the idea of representation, and seems to be here used figuratively to describe those who are responsible, from their gift or influence, for the condition of the Church.
 - T. B. Baines, The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Galaxie Software, 2005), 20-21.
- **The Commissioning of John**
 - The seven golden candlesticks—a figure borrowed from the seven lamps of the tabernacle—symbolize the seven churches.
 - They are “golden;” for the Church is founded on God’s righteousness, and so bears the stamp of its divine origin.
 - But they are candlesticks, not candles. The Church is not a source of light, and the claim to be so has been one of the most fruitful seeds of evil in Christendom.
 - It is, however, responsible for holding forth the light; and if it fails in this, it is useless. Hence the threat that the candlestick will be removed out of its place.
 - T. B. Baines, The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Galaxie Software, 2005), 21.