

REVELATION 1:4–18. (EHV)

John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is, who was, and who is coming, and from the seven spirits that are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his own blood and made us a kingdom and priests to God his Father—to him be the glory and the power forever. Amen.

Look, he is coming with clouds,
and every eye will see him,
including those who pierced him.
And all the nations of the earth will mourn because of him.
Yes. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, the one who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty. I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingship and patient endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus. I was in spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard a loud voice behind me, like a trumpet, saying, **“Write what you see on a scroll and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”** I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. When I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like a son of man. He was clothed with a robe that reached to his feet, and around his chest he wore a gold sash. His head and his hair were white, like white wool or like snow. His eyes were like blazing flames. His feet were like polished bronze being refined in a furnace. His voice was like the roar of many waters. He held seven stars in his right hand. A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth. His face was shining as the sun shines in all its brightness. When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He placed his right hand on me and said, **“Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last—the Living One. I was dead and, see, I am alive forever and ever! I also hold the keys of death and hell.”**

What are you afraid of?

A lot of people like to delude themselves with the notion that they are afraid of nothing. But that’s not true. There are all sorts of things to be afraid of. There are fears related to our kids. How do I know they’re getting the best education? How do I know they’re going to make a difference in the world? What if they get involved in the wrong relationship? What if they get into an accident? What if any of that is my fault?

There are fears related to our marriages. What if I’m not making my spouse happy? What if he or she doesn’t love me anymore?

There are fears related to our jobs. What if they cut my pay? What if I lose my job? What if I’m not living up to my full potential with the job I have?

There are miscellaneous fears. Monsters under the bed. Heights. Tight spaces. Fear of offending someone. Darkness. Spiders. Storms. And the list goes on.

And then there is the big one—death. The prospect of the death of someone close to us. The prospect of our own death.

But I'm guessing that if I were to ask you individually, "Tell me five people or things you're afraid of," not a single one of you would say, "Jesus." But actually, unless we have a good reason not to be, Jesus should be at the top of the list of our fears.

The apostle John, called "the disciple whom Jesus loved," when he saw Jesus in this vision, he fell at his feet like a dead man. He was afraid. But Jesus placed his right hand on him and said, "Do not be afraid."

He says the same to us today: Do not be afraid. So first we need to consider why there is reason to be afraid of him, and then to consider why he tells us not to be.

1.

John begins: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingship and patient endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus." John was the head pastor of the congregation in Ephesus, but during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian there was widespread persecution of Christians in the early 90s, and John was exiled to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

And maybe that's where we should start. John says that suffering and patient endurance are ours in Jesus. There are plenty of televangelists and mega church pastors right now who will tell you that if you become a Christian your life will become noticeably better, but Jesus says the exact opposite. Your life becomes more of a struggle once you become a Christian, and Jesus guarantees that struggle.

That's kind of frightening, isn't it? That Jesus is the type of person who would let even his best earthly friend get exiled to an island for following him?

John continues: "I was in spirit on the Lord's Day"—that is, Sunday—"and I heard a loud voice behind me, like a trumpet, saying, 'Write what you see on a scroll and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.'"

John's going to tell us later that the man who is talking to him is Jesus. And here he describes his voice as sounding like a trumpet. Trumpets don't have to be frightening. When they're playing beautiful music, they're far from it. But when someone's voice sounds like a trumpet blast, that's frightening. And when that trumpet blast is telling you to do something, that's even more frightening. Imagine if every time your parents told you to clean your room or do your homework, their voice sounded like a trumpet.

John turned around to see this voice. And when he turned, he "saw seven gold lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like a son of man. He was clothed with a robe that reached to his feet, and around his chest he wore a gold sash."

Later Jesus will tell John that the seven gold lampstands are the seven churches that he is telling John to write to. If you started at Ephesus and traveled to all the cities where these churches were located, you would be traveling well over 200 miles. Yet John says that this one human, Jesus, who is just standing there, is in the midst of all of them. Imagine seeing a man standing in the midst of Our Redeemer's in Martin, Zion in Valentine, Trinity here in Winner, Zion in Colome, St. John's in Brewster, Grace in Burke, and St. Paul's in Naper, all at the same time. Furthermore, the number seven in Revelation is always a symbolic number. These seven

weren't the only Christian churches in the world, but Jesus chooses them to represent the entire Christian Church, so actually this one man Jesus is present in the midst of every Christian church, including ours. That's some frightening ability.

Other than where he's located, John hasn't yet noted anything particularly frightening about his appearance, but he does note that he's clothed with a robe reaching down to his feet and he has a gold sash or belt around his chest. He is clearly someone important.

He goes on: "His head and his hair were white, like white wool or like snow." We've all seen whitish hair before, but rarely does someone have hair that is truly white. And Jesus is described as not only having white hair, but his whole head was white. How white? John has trouble describing it. First he says, white like white wool, but then he adds, like snow. In other words, it's really, really white. Pure white. You know what it's like when a bunch of snow falls at night and then the sun rises bright and clear the next morning. You can hardly look at the ground because the sun's reflection off the snow is so bright. That's close to the white that John sees here.

And what does white stand for? Purity, holiness. This man issuing commands to John, standing among the entire Christian Church, is completely spotless and holy. He has never sinned. Sin is the exact opposite of who he is. It is his enemy. Which makes the next detail all the more frightening.

"His eyes were like blazing flames." Jesus can see anywhere. Nothing escapes his notice. Even the darkness is like light to him. The deepest depths of the ocean, where not even scientists and biologists know what dwells down there, Jesus can see clearly. But Jesus isn't so much concerned about the ocean. He searches the hearts of humans. He can even see into the deepest, darkest recesses of our hearts. He can see all our doubts and fears. He can see all our sinful, self-serving, discontented, hateful thoughts. He knows each one from every angle. Whenever we sin and know we're sinning, we often try to hide our actions in secrecy. But even if we're in the darkest room with the door locked, Jesus's eyes burn brightly on us.

And remember, he is holy. So he is looking into our unholy hearts and at our unholy actions from his holy perspective. What he sees is the opposite of what he is. What he sees is hostile to him, is his enemy. That's frightening.

"His feet were like polished bronze being refined in a furnace. His voice was like the roar of many waters." When the Bible talks about Jesus's feet, it's talking about his authority. John mentions this earlier when he calls Jesus "the ruler of the kings of the earth." The president of the United States? The king of England? The president of Iran? Prime ministers? If you are afraid of any of them and what decisions they might make to affect your future, maybe you should be directing your attention farther up to the One who has his bronze foot planted firmly on their necks. They can only do what he allows them to do.

And his voice is like the roar of many waters. Have you ever tried to have a conversation at the bottom of a waterfall? It doesn't work very well, does it? The roaring waters drown out everything else. Anyone who goes against God's word will be drowned out and swept away.

"He held seven stars in his right hand." This is the frightening one for me. Jesus later says that the seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches. He is talking about their pastors and other public ministers. And again, there are seven, so he's not just holding the seven pastors of these seven churches in Asia Minor in his hands. He holds all pastors in his hand.

How often have I patted myself on the back for the job I was doing? Yet who is the one holding me? And what would happen if he stopped holding me? How often have I neglected to make the calls or visits I should have? How often have I not put the study and preparation into a sermon that I should have? How often have I not gone to God in prayer like I should have? Do I think I have escaped the notice of him who holds me in his hand at all times, and who sees him in his hand with eyes like blazing flames?

“A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth.” The writer to the Hebrews tells us more: “The *word of God* is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

“His face was shining as the sun shines in all its brightness.” Hopefully, none of you have ever looked directly at the sun so that you can tell me what that’s like.

What’s the impression you’re getting of Jesus? The One you are going to see once you die, the One who will judge you on the Last Day—what does he look like? Who is he? He is holy, and his word is powerful beyond description. John wrote earlier, “Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him. And all the nations of the earth will mourn because of him. Yes. Amen.

“‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God.” “I am the Alpha and the Omega”—that really sums it all up. Jesus is first and last, top and bottom, beginning and end, high and low, front and back. He is everything. He is all that matters.

There’s a saying that the only two things that must not be discussed in polite society are religion and politics. How stupid! Much wiser are the words of the Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1880. He wrote: “I always admired Mrs. Grote’s saying that politics and theology were the only two really great subjects.” Even wiser would be to give theology its own position above politics. Jesus is holy. Jesus’s word is powerful. Jesus’s coming is inevitable. And what have we been wasting our lives talking about and doing?

That’s frightening.

2.

The apostle John thought so too. “When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man.” John became like what he and we all deserve—death.

But then something amazing happened. “He placed his right hand on me and said, ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last—the Living One. I was dead and, see, I am alive forever and ever! I also hold the keys of death and hell.’”

It’s awfully similar to what the disciples experienced in our Gospel. They were deathly afraid, and why shouldn’t they have been? Jesus’s body was gone. They were suspected of stealing it. The Jewish leaders hated them, and the disciples thought Jesus wasn’t around to defend them and speak up for them anymore. Then, even though the doors were locked, suddenly Jesus stood among them, and they were even more afraid. Because now their fears were shown to be foolish. They were doubting that Jesus was alive when of course he was alive. Death cannot hold the holy author of life! What was he now going to do to them?

“Peace be with you,” he told them. And then he showed them his hands and side. And they were overjoyed.

Same here. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus says, as he puts his right hand on John. That right hand has the power and the right to crush John and throw him into hell, but that is the farthest thing from Jesus’s mind because the hand that he places on John has a nail mark in it. And out of that nail mark had come Jesus’s own blood that had paid for John’s sins. Out of that nail mark had come Jesus’s own lifeblood which he had poured out unto death in order to win eternal life for John and all people. And weak as John’s faith might have been at this moment, John still believed it.

So Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.” He is the First and the Last, but he is that for John and for his Church, for you and for me.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says. He is the Living One. He was dead, and behold, he is alive for ever and ever. He died to pay for our sins. Since he is now alive, there is no doubt our sins are paid for and our guilt is covered. There is no doubt that he rules over all things for our good.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says. He holds the keys of death and hell. Death cannot harm you, if Jesus has locked its door for you. Hell cannot touch you, if its door will not welcome you. On another occasion Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

And so we do have a very good reason not to be afraid of Jesus. All those traits of Jesus that we thought were so frightening aren’t so frightening after all for those who believe in him. His eyes are like blazing flames? Yes, that means he can see all of our sins, but he sees them and he finds them in order to forgive them, even the ones of which we are unaware. And he also sees our love for him, performed even in the most humble act.

Jesus is holy? Yes, and we are not. But Jesus is holy precisely to clothe all who believe in him in his own holiness, so that they can shine in heaven like he does.

Jesus has bronze feet? Yes, and he rules the rulers of the earth for our benefit. If they harm us, it’s because Jesus has a loving plan for us in their harm.

He holds his pastors in his hand? Yes, and what hand would I rather be in than one of those that were nailed for me?

His word is a two-edged sword? Yes, and a good thing too. A good thing it identifies my sin, so that I repent of it. A good thing that it is so powerful so that I know even if my neighbor yells at me for sharing it, even if I get exiled on an island for sharing it, I know that it has had an effect.

His voice is like roaring waters? Yes, and all those who reject it will get swept away to death, while all those who follow it will eventually be carried to the sea of glass as clear as crystal, to the shores of heaven where there is nothing but peace and rest.

There is only one Man we should by rights be afraid of—not anyone or anything that can kill the body and that’s all, but the one who after killing the body can throw body and soul into hell [Matt. 10:28]. That’s Jesus. But because he lived in our place and died for our sins, because he is now living in glory at God’s right hand, he tells all who believe in him that they need not be afraid. And if we need not be afraid of Jesus, then we truly have nothing to be afraid of at all. Amen.