

The Alpha and Omega

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- [0 : 0 0] This is the PM service on the 1st of March 1998. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.
- His sermon is entitled The Alpha and the Omega and is from Revelation chapter 1 verses 1 to 20. Our great God, you are indeed the Lord God, the Almighty.
- And we praise you that you reign from heaven. We praise you that you've revealed Jesus Christ to us. And we pray that as we study these verses of scripture, you will indeed reveal him to us afresh.
- Amen. Some of you, I guess, will know the song from the end of the film, questionable film, The Life of Brian, the song Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.
- It's a song that's used occasionally in advertisements in other places on television and so on. It's a fairly vacuous song. That is, it's devoid of substance.
- [1 : 1 5] A person is about to die and the song from one person to this person about to die says, cheer up, things could be worse. Empty words of encouragement.
- The person who sings the song to the person who's about to die says, well, whistle, hum, cheer up a bit, smile, it'll be all right, things could be worse. Always look on the bright side of life.
- And yet, mocking though that song is, in a way, so often our encouragement either to others or from others to us is not much different.
- Cheer up, it's going to get better. Empty statements of encouragement. Where's the substance? The book of Revelation is a book of encouragement and it's a book of encouragement to people who need encouragement because they're facing the possibility of death.
- It's a book that's written to Christian people facing death from the Roman Empire. But it is hardly a vacuous book. It is full of substance, full of real reasons for having encouragement even in the face of persecution and difficulty.
- [2 : 2 4] The person to whom these visions and words were given was a man called John. Most probably the John who was one of Jesus' disciples, the author of the Gospel of John and the author of three letters in the New Testament which bear his name also.
- And the situation of this John at the time of the book of Revelation is that he's probably an old man. We're told in verse 9 of chapter 1 that he's on a Greek island but he's not having a holiday in the summer. He's rather in exile.
- And there's some suggestion from ancient documents that the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea between the Turkish and Greek coasts was possibly a penal colony at the time of John in the first century AD.
- The reason that John's there is not because he stole a loaf of bread but rather because he bore witness to Jesus Christ. He was a Christian leader of a church and he preached and taught that Jesus Christ is Lord and for that reason, and that reason alone, he was sent into exile on this Greek island.

It was better than death but it probably wasn't all that pleasant. But John's not alone in facing persecution because the people to whom he sends the words and descriptions of the visions that he's given in this book are people in a similar situation to him.

[3 : 42] They're not in exile and they're not on the same Greek island but they're people who face persecution as well. So again in chapter 1 verse 9, I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution, the kingdom, and the patient endurance.

That is, he, like them, is facing tribulational persecution. And he, like them, is having to exercise patient endurance as they await the fulfilment of God's kingdom in the future.

And the situation is that it's probably the very end of the first century AD, the mid-90s AD. The Roman emperor is a man called Domitian and he was rather a despot.

And like Nero 30 years before him, he persecuted Christians and put them to death because they were Christians. One of our difficulties with the book of Revelation is that we're not in that situation.

We don't face persecution like that in our country. And though from time to time there may be isolated incidents of persecution, in some respects the place where it's most keenly felt, I think, in our society these days is at high school.

[4 : 51] We don't face death very often for Christian faith. I suspect it will get worse in my lifetime in this country, but it may not get to the point it was in the ancient Roman Empire of Domitian's day.

Christians facing death just for being Christian. Very good reasons for them to feel despondent. Very good reasons for them to feel downcast. Very good reasons for them to doubt the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's the context for this book. And it's very important that we get it straight because for so many people the book of Revelation is a closed book of confusing riddles and puzzles.

So what does God do for a people who are facing persecution, who are perhaps in despair or doubt? God doesn't take them out of their situation.

He doesn't stifle the Roman Empire. He doesn't turn their swords into nothing. He doesn't tell the Christians to go off to another country to live where it's safer.

[5 : 55] He doesn't tell them to shut up and keep the gospel quiet amongst their midst so that their lives will be protected. No, God doesn't do any of that though he could have done. What does God do to a people who need encouragement?

He reveals Jesus Christ to them. That's what this book is. The first five words tell us that. The revelation of Jesus Christ.

That is, this is a book which reveals Jesus Christ. Now, yes, it reveals it to Christians who already know him but it's a revelation of Jesus Christ in such a way that they are to be encouraged even in the face of persecution and trouble and strife.

And the reason God shows them and reveals to them Jesus Christ is because Jesus Christ is the answer to their problems. The answer to their despair, their being downcast, their doubts, their fears.

Jesus is the answer. So the book opens the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is a book about Jesus. He is its content.

[6 : 59] He is its key. Any interpretation of the book of Revelation that doesn't recognize that Jesus is the central figure in it is wrong. The book tells us who the key is. It tells us who the central figure is.

The lead role, if you like, at the very beginning. Jesus Christ. So whatever goes on in the book is revealing Jesus Christ to us. So often you see people think that this book is a puzzle, that it's confusing.

But John tells us straight from the very first five words. This is about Jesus Christ. He might not always be named by name. There may be some symbols which relate to him. But it's a revelation of Jesus Christ.

And the book reveals. It doesn't hide. It doesn't confuse. It reveals. It makes things known. Ironically, you see, for so many people they've got to the wrong way round. They think revelation is about confusing us.

It's actually about revelation, making things known and making things clear to us. Notice also the first verse gives us a chain of communication.

[8 : 02] The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God, that is God the Father, gave him, Jesus, to show his servants, that is Christian people, people who serve God, Christians.

Christians. But the chain is actually filled out a bit in the rest of the sentence in the next verse. What must soon take place, he made it known by sending his angel, that's Jesus made it known by sending his angel to his servant John who testified to the word of God.

So the chain of communication is God the Father gives a revelation about Jesus to Jesus who gives it to an angel, who gives it to John and time and time again in the book of Revelation and John says an angel said this, an angel told me that, an angel showed me this, an angel took me to this place.

It's the angel communicating it to John and the book we now have is John's bit of the communication. John, to Christian people, called in this verse servants of God.

So if you're a person who claims to be, wanting to be, or claims to be a servant of God, then this is a book for you because it's for all servants of God. Verse 3 says, Blessed is the one singular person who reads aloud the words of the prophecy.

[9 : 18] Not just any old reader, but the idea is that this book would have been taken to the servants of God in different churches. And when it arrived at the church and the church would gather together, somebody would get up and read it.

So that's why it says, Blessed is the one who reads, the person. But notice what it then says in the second half of verse 3, and blessed are those plural, who here, but not only here, also keep or obey what is written in it.

Because remember, the book of Revelation is not about information, it's not about facts to pass an exam, it's not about things to sit up in our head, it's a book for us to keep, it's a book for us to obey, to follow, it's a book for us to change our lives by.

It is a practical book. And so often that's forgotten. So then this is a book that has God's very own authority. God, to Jesus, to the angel, to John, to us.

And we're told it's about what soon must take place. 1900 years later, it seems that some of those things have not yet taken place. But in God's perspective, they are still soon to happen.

[10 : 28] But the point is that we are to live our lives now as if the things described in this book are about to happen. That is, the future is meant to have an impact on us in the present now.

Well, that's the opening paragraph. The book is addressed to seven churches. We're told that they're in Asia, beginning of verse 4. But that doesn't mean Hong Kong and Singapore and mainland China.

It actually means Turkey. We think, oh, Turkey's not in Asia, it's the Middle East or even Europe. but in Paul's day, the mainland of Turkey was called Asia or even proconsular Asia because a proconsul would rule it under the Roman Empire.

And verse 4 is a typical beginning of a Christian letter. Grace to you and peace. Grace to you and peace. Not here is a puzzle for you to solve. Not here is a riddle.

Here is a confusing set of visions. Try and make sense of this if you can. But rather, grace and peace. What great words of comfort to wish people who are facing persecution.

[11 : 35] Grace which sums up all of God's generous gift of salvation freely given to us. Peace which is the resultant state for those who've received the gift of salvation. Peace with God and peace with God's people at large.

A statement of comfort for Christians who are facing persecution. Grace and peace. At one level they may think, oh, we don't have much peace in the world.

We're under the threat of death. But even then, peace can belong and ought to belong to the person who has peace with God.

But notice where this peace and grace derive from. John just doesn't say, grace and peace to you from God. He actually fills it out a little bit in verse 4 and 5. Grace to you and peace from, firstly, him who is and who was and who is to come.

Which is a sort of convoluted way of saying God the Father. God who's been there at the beginning, God who's there now in the present, God who will be there at the end. That's who it's describing.

[12 : 39] Secondly, it's the grace and peace from the seven spirits that are before the throne. Now that's a bit of a puzzle. Who are these seven spirits? And some commentators disagree about this.

Some think it's talking about angels or even messengers or some angelic being or something. But it seems to me that in the context of this verse it's probably a way of saying the Holy Spirit.

Because the third person for whom grace and peace come from is Jesus Christ. So you've got the Father and thirdly, you've got the Son and so probably there's a statement of the Christian Trinity.

God who is Father, Son and Spirit. It's a strange way of saying the Holy Spirit when it says seven spirits. And they occur in a couple of other places later in the book. But the Revelation is something that is full of strange ways of describing things.

Seven is a number of perfection or completion. Because in the beginning of the Bible everything was made in seven days. A complete number. So in the book of Revelation the number seven occurs time and time and time and time again.

[13 : 43] As a number of completion or perfection. So it's probably a convoluted way of saying the perfect Holy Spirit. That's the second one from whom grace and peace come and the third is Jesus Christ. And John could have left it there but he doesn't.

And whenever that happens we must think well why doesn't he? Why doesn't he just say grace and peace grace to you and peace from God the Father the Spirit and Jesus. Why does he say and Jesus and then adds a lot about Jesus?

Again because it's got some impact for people who are being persecuted. Notice the three things it says about Jesus in verse 5. He is the faithful witness. That is the one who's been where the readers are now.

He's the one who's been under persecution. He's the one who's bore witness to the truth about God and the gospel even in the face of opposition and even to death. And he's done so faithfully.

He's kept it. He hasn't given up. He hasn't renounced his faith because of the threat of death. He's been a faithful witness. So Jesus has been where they are now the readers of this book.

[14 : 46] What an encouragement you see to think that Jesus my Saviour has been where I am and he was faithful and so can I be under the face of persecution and opposition.

The second thing that says about Jesus is he's the firstborn of the dead. Two very important things tied up in that little expression. He died. His faithful witness led him to death.

And just like many Christian martyrs since Jesus have died for the faith of Jesus Christ Jesus was the first of those. But not just the first who died the firstborn from the dead the one who rose from the dead.

And what again encouragement that is for Christians who are facing persecution. Yes their witness to Jesus Christ may lead to death but as Jesus rose he was the firstborn of those from the dead.

That implies that many others will rise from the dead. Those who also bear faithful witness even to death. What an encouragement to people who are facing death for their faith.

[15 : 53] But there's even more the third thing is that this Jesus Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth. Extraordinary statement. A stunning statement almost a treasonable statement in ancient Roman Empire.

Jesus Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth. That is he is the ruler over Emperor Domitian. He was the ruler over Emperor Nero 30 years before.

He's the ruler over the pro-consul. He's the ruler over the town dignitaries and so on. Jesus Christ is the ruler of all of them. Now that's an astonishing statement of encouragement for people who are facing persecution.

Because they look around the world they read their newspapers each day they hear what's on their ancient radios and so on that says Rome's in charge the emperor is lord of all. But God says to them through John wrong.

Jesus Christ is the ruler of all kings. And what an encouragement that must be for those who face the opposition of Rome.

[17 : 02] You see why this is a revelation of Jesus Christ? See why Jesus is the answer for those who face despair, doubt, being downcast at persecution? Because Jesus has been where they've been.

He's died yes but death wasn't the end he rose and more than that he's now the ruler of all the kings of the world. Don't judge by worldly appearances. Rome looks to be the king but Jesus in fact is.

Jesus. But there's even more to come about this same Jesus. Modern Christians, modern scholars, modern non-Christians I guess, love to find all sorts of obscure things in the book of Revelation.

And over the years people have found Moscow, Ronald Reagan, the Pope, Hitler, Napoleon, all sorts of things. I think most of that's quite bizarre to be honest.

people try and find a code and crack the code. This is all about the Iron Curtain and Moscow and America. What fools when the Iron Curtain fell down really?

[18 : 07] The code though is clear. The code to this book is the Old Testament. The scriptures that Christians would already have had and probably known better than we do after all.

So those three descriptions of Jesus that I've just mentioned, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, they're all descriptions from one of the Psalms, Psalm 89 as it happens, the Psalm that extols God's greatness in making promises to David that there would always be a Davidic king.

And this is saying God's kept his promise, Jesus is the answer, it shows that God is faithful and what he says he'll do, he'll do. So trust him, even in the face of persecution God can be trusted to keep his promises.

But that's not all either. There's even more to be said about this Jesus here. Notice that John goes on then to extol and praise Jesus in the end of verse 5 and into verse 6.

To him, that is to Jesus who loves us. That's very unusual in the New Testament because time and time again the New Testament says to Jesus who loved us, past tense, referring to the cross.

[19 : 13] But this says Jesus still loves you. He died for you, that was the greatest demonstration of his love, but his love didn't end there or dry up there. he still loves you even if you face persecution.

What an encouragement. But more than that even, not only does Jesus love us, he's freed us from our sins by his blood. The idea here is that our sins have somehow enslaved us.

The conception here of sins or human failures is another way of saying it. Anything that infringes God's law and puts a barrier between us and God, they're sins according to the Bible, they're not just something that we do, they're something that we do and they enslave us.

We cannot shake them off of our own free will. But it's Jesus Christ who's freed us from it. It's Jesus who's broken the chains of sin over our life and he's done that by his blood, that is by his death on the cross.

So this revelation of Jesus here is not just about Jesus the person, but the core of it is that he died for us. Jesus' death, is the key to the whole of this book of Revelation for it's his death that is the ultimate victory in this world.

[20 : 27] But there's even more. He didn't just free us from sins, but he freed us for a purpose. That is to make us to be a kingdom priests serving his God and Father.

Kingdom priests. Two words that in one sense don't quite fit together and yet time and time again in the Bible do. A notion of royalty that's to do with the kings or kingdom.

A notion of mediation to do with the priest. When God made everything his idea was that human beings would be kings and priests.

So when he made human beings in Genesis chapter one he gave them dominion, rule, that is royalty, a place of kingship if you like over the world under God the supreme king.

But more than that he made humanity in his own image, to be a mediator between God and the rest of the world. So humanity from the beginning was meant to be royal and priestly.

[21 : 27] But it failed. Adam and Eve failed, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. God then decided to choose one people to be the epitome of what he wants the whole world to be. So he chose Abram and Abram's descendants.

When Abram's descendants had grown to be a little nation or relatively strong nation I suppose, he gave them a whole lot of laws at a place called Mount Sinai. But before he gave them the laws he said you are a royal priesthood.

Exodus 19. The same two notions again. Kings and mediators. Royalty and priesthood. But again God's people that he had chosen failed to do what he wanted them to do.

They failed to exercise right dominion, they failed to exercise right mediation between God and the rest of the world. So then what did God do? Well he sent one descendant of Abraham who perfectly epitomised what it was to be royal and priestly.

Jesus Christ. The King of Kings. Jesus Christ. The Great High Priest. Both of them fulfilled in Jesus but there's more to the story because those who follow Jesus are also given the same charge.

[22 : 31] To be kings and priests to God. To be royal and to be mediators. So a statement in the New Testament to Christians in general in 1 Peter 2.

you are a royal priesthood. And the book of Revelation is riddled with notions that imply that God's people by and large are kings and priests.

They will wear crowns in heaven. We will wear crowns in heaven. And our job now is to be mediators between God and this pagan world. That's why Jesus died for us and forgave us our sins.

No wonder John says to him be the glory. Not to God but to Jesus. This is a very Jesus centred statement of praise in this letter.

But more than that even. This Jesus who now reigns in heaven the ruler of all kings is coming again. And John says when he comes again everyone will see him. There will be no exception.

[23 : 31] It's hard to imagine that isn't it? When Jesus comes out of heaven to this world which is spherical after all how will everyone see him? But they will and I'm sure that when it happens we'll see how God has fulfilled his promise even if we can't work it out now geometrically.

But when Jesus returns everyone will see him. You won't need somebody to tell you that Jesus has come. That he's now sitting on a beach in Florida or up in a guru's hut in Pakistan or something.

When Jesus returns you will know. Everyone will know. Every eye will see him. And they will know that it's Jesus. They won't need somebody to tell them. Notice what it says that he's coming with the clouds.

Every eye will see him and even those who pierced him that is put him to death on the cross and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. When people see Jesus and they are the ones who put him to death that is they are sinners who are unrepentant they will mourn and wail.

They will realise that they've backed the wrong horse. It may look as though in the Roman Empire that they're on the winning course but they're wrong. When Jesus comes it will be clear that he is Lord of all.

[24 : 40] I think it's actually an allusion to the Romans. The Romans are the ones who put Jesus to death. The Romans are the ones who are exercising the dominion it seems in the world empire of John's day. And when John says even those who pierced him I think he's saying even the Romans.

They look invincible now. But believe me when Jesus comes again they'll get what's coming to them. And when Jesus comes they will wail and mourn because they put Jesus to death as indeed any sinner does for it's our sins that nail him to that tree.

So certain is John about this that he ends that verse 7 by saying so it is to be amen. In effect he's saying amen, amen. Yes it's true. Yes it's true.

To underline the assurance of this. And what encouragement that is to Christian people who are facing persecution. It looks as though Rome's in charge but he's saying no he's not. Jesus is in charge.

Trust in Jesus. He's the ruler of the kings and when he comes all these empires who have put him to death they will fall down and wail at his feet. Trust in Jesus Christ.

[25 : 50] And then God himself speaks. He only speaks twice in the book of Revelation here and at the end. I am the alpha and the omega. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and Greek was the language that was spoken in John's day.

In effect he's saying I am A and I am Z. Not because he was there at the beginning and will be there at the end though that's true but I think because it's saying that what God has begun he will bring to completion. He's begun it in Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven where Jesus now reigns and he'll complete it when Jesus comes again in glory on that final day.

Trust God for what he begins he completes. So far this is really introduction to the book but it's jam packed full of statements of encouragement for persecuted people.

Verses 9 to 11 set the immediate context of John getting this vision. It's the Lord's day we're told in verse 10 a reference to Sunday showing us that early Christians worshipped God on what's called the Lord's day.

That is the day of resurrection rather than on the Jewish Sabbath. Very early it seems Christians broke away from the Jewish practice of a Sabbath worship to a Sunday worship which they called the Lord's day.

[27 : 08] And John is on the island of Patmos as I've described. He heard a voice and the voice said write down what you see. He's then told the seven places to send these letters and I'll deal with those in the next four weeks as I deal with the letters that follow in chapters 2 and three individually.

Then John turns. He wants to see whose voice it is that has told him write all this down. People often ponder what does Jesus look like?

Often children ask that don't they? They see a picture of somebody with blue eyes, long hair, invariably a beard, usually white skin, often sort of attractive and good looking and so on and they think that's Jesus.

But so often our picture of Jesus is wrong. We're not really told in the Bible what he looks like but here is one passage where we are. So if ever anyone says to you well what did Jesus look like?

Direct them here to verses 13 to 16. And I think they'll be shocked. He's called one like a son of man. Which is a statement Jesus used about himself in his own life on earth to refer to his authority over all things.

[28 : 31] And notice that this Jesus is in the midst of lampstands. Seven lampstands. And we're told at the end of the chapter that the lampstands are the churches. So Jesus is in the middle of the churches which of course is where he ought to be because the church is Jesus' body.

So any church, even a persecuted church, has as in its midst Jesus Christ. The crucified, risen and ascended Jesus Christ is in the middle of the church.

Again, a statement of encouragement, isn't it? Because if you're a church in a little pro-consular tinpot town, few Christians gathering around on the Lord's Day, facing persecution from their neighbours and the town mayor and so on, what an encouragement to think that Jesus Christ is in your midst.

But it's true. As indeed he is here now where two or three gather in my name, there am I in their midst. Here is John with a vision of much the same thing.

And the description of Jesus follows in verses 13 to 16. He's clothed with a long robe, with a golden sash across his chest, an unusual place for a sash but often priests had sashes across their chest rather than their waist.

[29 : 41] Head and hair were white as wool, white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, feet like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, voice like the sound of many waters, although it's already been described as a voice like a trumpet back in verse 11 or verse 10.

In his right hand he held seven stars. We're told later on in verse 20 that they're the angels of the churches. And from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like a shining sun.

Now I think in Revelation one reason why people get so confused is that they try and take each of those descriptions in a vision, each detail, and make it mean something.

But I don't think it works all the time in the Bible when things like that happen. You try analysing one frame of the film Titanic when the ship splits in two, and you've got bits flying through the air, you've got people flying in a bit of a chair, and a steering wheel of a ship, and you've got a lifeboat breaking in two, and a bit of wood here.

Nobody looks at a frame and says, well, here's a bit of wood down here, and this must mean this, and here's a bit here. It's the overall impression that counts, isn't it? But that's the same here. The overall impression of this Jesus is a figure of authority, a figure of some dignity, a figure of some rule, maybe even a decisive figure.

[31 : 04] The two-edged sword is a biblical idea of judgment of God's word. As God's word comes out, it divides into two, those who are saved and those who are not, depending on how they respond to that same word.

So it's the overall impression that's important here. I don't think his white hair is meant to mean that he's like Santa Claus, or meant to mean that he's very old, or meant to mean that he's pure, or anything like that. It's just a general overwhelming picture of authority.

But even more, because as I've said already, the key to the book of Revelation is in the Old Testament. And anybody who knew their Old Testaments would know where this picture comes from. Some of you may indeed know.

But in the book of Daniel, chapters 7 and chapters 10 in particular, you get all of these descriptions. And some of them apply to somebody like a son of man, but some of them apply to God himself, the Ancient of Days he's called there.

What John's picture shows us is that Jesus is described like God. But that shouldn't surprise us either, because we're when Jesus was on earth, he said, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father.

[32 : 09] So the picture here shows Jesus who is divine. Because the key is found back in the Old Testament. Not for each individual detail, but the overall impression. This is a royal, divine, authority figure.

It is Jesus Christ in the midst of his churches, even in the face of persecution. So what's the significance? It's saying that Jesus is sovereign. That Jesus is God.

That Jesus is Lord. The same Jesus who died. The same Jesus who was a faithful witness. He is the Lord. He's not a remote God, but one who's been in the same situation as these persecuted Christian people.

What encouragement for them, you see, to think that the same Jesus who was where they are is now Lord and sovereign of all. The description of Jesus in this paragraph sets the scene for the letters that come.

Each aspect is appropriate for an individual church. And so over the next four weeks, if you follow through these sermons, you'll see aspects of these descriptions coming out and being applied for the churches that follow.

[33 : 14] John's response is that he falls to his feet. Who wouldn't? I think we all would at such an awe-inspiring figure. That's the impression we're meant to get. Jesus full of awe, splendor, authority.

And John in verse 17 falls to his feet. But this same risen, ascended, almighty, sovereign Jesus Christ is the one who issues tender words of comfort to John.

He places his right hand on his shoulder and says, stop being afraid. It's rather incongruous at first to think of an almighty figure stooping low to put his right hand on John and saying, don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. But so often they're Jesus' words to his followers, aren't they? And of course they're appropriate words for people facing persecution. Don't be afraid.

Not because you won't die. Not because you won't come to harm. But don't be afraid because Jesus is Lord. He's been there. He's done it. And he's risen. And he's Lord.

[34 : 23] Don't be afraid, he says at the end of verse 17. I am the first and the last. A statement of divinity. Just as God is the Alpha and Omega. I am the living one.

I was dead. And see, I am alive forever and ever. What encouragement to John and his readers. They face death.

But Jesus lives. He was dead. But now he's risen as the first born of the dead. But even more than that, he says, and I have the keys of death and Hades.

It's not Domitian who controls who dies. It's not your Roman governor or your town mayor who controls who dies. It is Jesus who has the keys of death and Hades, the place of the dead.

He's the one who controls who stays there and who rises from there. What a great encouragement. But all of those statements of Jesus of tender comfort to John.

[35 : 23] I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I am alive. Resonate with statements Jesus said in his earthly life. But point beyond that to statements God said to Moses way back near the beginning of the Bible.

Moses said, what's your name God? And God said, I am. That is my name. And when Jesus here says, I am the living one. I am the first and last. He's alluding to the fact that he also is God.

To be worshipped. John's then told in verse 19 what to write. And we're told what the stars and the lampstands mean in verse 20. Let me conclude.

When reading the book of Revelation, don't lose sight of the wood for the trees. Keep the big picture in mind. Because that's what it's full of. Big pictures. It's a Titanic type film.

The detail isn't quite important. It's the big picture that counts. It's a vision of Jesus Christ. He is its dominant figure. He is its key. Its content. So keep Jesus central and the rest of the book will unfold before your eyes with clarity.

[36 : 31] Remember that it's written for persecuted Christians. So the picture of Jesus is to encourage them and lift them up in the face of their persecution. For this picture of Jesus is of the one who died, who rose, who ascended and who is Lord and sovereign of all but more than that, the one who's coming again to vindicate God's people once and for all.

Herein lies real encouragement, doesn't it? Because this is a real Jesus. A real Jesus who accomplishes something and therefore we can be really encouraged by this vision.

It's not a vacuous statement of cheer up, things are going to get better. But here is real substance for having hope in a difficult world. The very first Christian martyr had this hope.

The very first person who was killed for being a Christian was a man called Stephen. In Acts chapter 7, he's stoned to death because of his claims of Christian faith.

And as he's being stoned, he looks up to heaven and he says, I see the Son of Man seated in heaven. It's a similar picture to this.

[37 : 40] But it works. For in the face of his death, Stephen had great hope and encouragement. Under persecution, he could see the Son of Man in heaven and he knew that his death was not the end.

But that Jesus Christ reigns really in heaven and day by day. And though we don't face that same persecution in our society now, nonetheless, we live in a world and a society where all sorts of other gods are enthroned in people's lives and our society's lives.

Gods of secularism, gods of the new age, gods of money and economic rationalism, gods of family, gods of some noble things and many that are ignoble. And the church is becoming more and more a struggling minority.

It's very hard to see that Jesus Christ reigns. But this book tells us he does. This book tells us the reality. Don't be fooled by appearances. The reality is that Jesus Christ is sovereign over all.

So look up to him. Turn your eyes upon him. As John did, as Stephen did, as countless other Christian martyrs over the centuries have done, look full in his wonderful face and the things of this earth will grow dim in the light of his glory and grace.

[38 : 55] Amen. Amen.