

Salt, Caesar, and *Revelation*. The unlikely duo of salt and Caesar Augustus helps increase understanding of my little book, *Revelation*. Salt or Caesar, which one first? Caesar Augustus! If I start with salt, I may get too hungry.

Caesar Augustus became the first emperor of Rome in 27 BC. He took over a huge empire that stretched from the Middle East to England. Augustus quickly consolidated all government authority under him. He was undeniably the center of power until he died in 14 AD.

During his 41 years of reign, Augustus established the Pax Romana, or the Roman Peace. There was peace throughout his empire, and at most of his borders. Any traveler could go on the fine Roman highways almost anywhere in the empire without fear of bandits or war. Throughout my entire lifetime, and for a hundred years thereafter, the Pax Romana was firmly established.

One of the main things the Roman government would *not* put up with was political unrest or rebellion in any of its conquered territories. If any disturbance arose, any politician or soldier in charge was soon relieved of his duties and replaced with one who did not allow such things to happen.

Rome kept the peace by letting the various populations of their conquered territories continue to worship their own local gods, follow local customs, and obey local politicians. Stay peaceful and pay taxes, and you could do almost anything else you wanted.

During my late adulthood, the population of the Roman Empire was about 60-70 million people, with over ten million of them being slaves. There were countless population groups who functioned independently...as long as they stayed peaceful and paid taxes. That was the usual case. However, when the politicians needed to take more money from a group or needed political scapegoats, any local population group could easily be chosen for persecution.

We're getting to the salt part, be patient. There were probably 60-70 million people in the Roman Empire during my late adulthood How many Christians existed when I wrote *Revelation*? Nobody knows for sure, but if you guessed 100,000 or less, you would probably be much closer than if you guessed 1,000,000.¹ We were building a solid base, but the explosive growth of Christianity had not yet happened. *And the Christians that existed were scattered throughout the Empire.*

¹ *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark. Page 7

Modern historians possess huge numbers of Roman records. Yet, there are no Roman records mentioning the Christians as even existing, until after my lifetime.² We were a tiny, tiny part of the Empire's population, and we typically stayed peaceful. Except when our lifestyles caused us to come into conflict with local authorities.

Ok, now...salt. In your life, salt is so cheap that you get it for free at restaurants. It was not always that way. Salt was one of the first reasons people traded and traveled. Salt was incredibly precious because it could be used to preserve food, heal certain ailments, and as you know, make food taste better.

Salt is so effective for taste, that you can scatter a few tiny crystals on a bite of food and it tastes (he makes a yum sound). Scatter a few more, and it tastes (makes a YUM sound). Scatter a few more, and (makes a yuck sound) it gets a little too salty. A few more, and whoa, it's too salty to even eat. A little bit of salt goes a long, long way.

That is one reason that Jesus said for us to be the "salt of the earth,"³ and Paul advised us to season our conversation with grace, as if it were salt.⁴ They knew a little bit went a long way.

Even though there were not that many Christians existing in my lifetime, if they congregated in one place, they could be a little too salty for the tastes of the local politicians. Yes, the Christians stayed peaceful. But, they stayed to themselves and had odd religious rites. They worshiped some foreign God instead of the local gods. And, they made good targets if you wanted to take their stuff, or great scapegoats if you needed someone to blame.

There were not that many Christians in total, but the numbers were growing quickly, especially in some localities. So, Christians were going to be persecuted more and more, and anybody with brains knew it. Especially if you had brains **and** the Holy Spirit to tell you.

According to one historians after my lifetime, there was persecution of Christians by Nero after the big fire in Rome in 64 AD, but he was looking for anybody to blame. In my lifetime, Christians generally lived in peace with the Romans, except from torment by local leaders. That changed in 81 AD when Domitian became Emperor.

Domitian persecuted many Romans and many population groups.⁶ Among the groups he persecuted were the Christians, including me. He caused my exile to the Greek Island of Patmos, not far from my home in Ephesus.

² *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, by Robert Louis Wilen, Introduction

³ Matthew 5:13

⁴ Colossians 4:6

⁵ *Annals*, by Tacitus, Book 15, Chapter 44. Written about 116 AD.

⁶ *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, by Robert Louis Wilken, page 5

If you ever have the misfortune to get exiled, I hope you get the same treatment I got. I was sent to one of the most beautiful islands on Earth. I climbed up the side of a mountain and found a small cave to live in. It protected me from the elements, and allowed me to gather fresh water from the rain. Best of all, I was away from people so I could pray and meditate while looking down at the gorgeous Aegean Sea. What better gig could an old man hope for?

To be very clear with you, I am the John who wrote the *Gospel of John*; *First, Second and Third John*; and, *Revelation*. I was one of the first apostles of Jesus, the brother of James, and the son of Zebedee. I was the one known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” I was the original Teacher’s Pet. At the time I wrote *Revelation*, I was past eighty years-old...a very old man for my time. I had been talking to Jesus every day for more than fifty years, with only three of those years talking in person. Usually I talked spiritually with him.

That is what I was doing one Sunday, just as the sun was coming up over the indigo blue Aegean Sea. What happened next was astounding. I received a direct revelation from Jesus Christ to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending it via an angel. My writing of this is known as *Revelation*, the last book in the Bible. I testify that everything I saw is the word of God and testimony of Jesus.

The book of *Revelation* is challenging for everybody to read. That is why I specifically said that people who read it aloud are blessed, as are those who hear it and take it to heart. I didn’t say you had to *understand* it to be blessed, just to read it aloud, hear it, and take it to heart. (smiling) I wrote the book and I *still* don’t understand all of it.

Let’s start with the basics. The revelation is a letter from God, the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ. The descriptions of Jesus are simply amazing: faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, ruler of the kings of earth, saving us by his blood, and making us to be his kingdom and priests. He calls himself the Alpha and Omega, or the beginning and the end. He is the one who is, who was, and who is to come. He is the Almighty!

We get an early glimpse of the future in one more line: “Pay attention, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him.”⁷ These descriptions remind us of other places in the New Testament where we are told that Jesus is coming back.

Here is another basic that some people forget. This letter was specifically written to seven churches. These seven churches were in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Four of those churches and cities are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

⁷ Revelation 1:7

Thyatira is mentioned as the hometown of Lydia, the seller of purple cloth that Paul converted in Philippi.⁸ It is likely that her influence helped establish the church in Thyatira. Paul mentioned the church at Laodicea twice in his letter to the Colossians.⁹

The church at Ephesus was a major church in New Testament times. It was established by Aquila and Priscilla. Paul lived in Ephesus for three years and really helped grow the church. Timothy spent a lot of time there and probably was a church leader for many years. Some people believe that I lived in Ephesus for a long time, possibly with the mother of Jesus, although the Bible does not say that.

All of the seven churches were located in the Roman province of Asia, modern day Turkey. Ephesus was a major Roman city, and the other six churches were located to the north and east of Ephesus. It is probable that they were all established by Paul and his helpers during the missionary journeys and while Paul lived in Ephesus. If so, they had all existed two or three decades before *Revelation* was written. They must have been well-known and established churches.

The last basic piece of knowledge is how the letter was written. The Lord sent an angel to me, and I wrote down what I was told and what I saw. Sometimes the angel instructed me, and sometimes the Lord himself did. I was instructed to write about “the things that are, and the things which shall happen later.”¹⁰ I was also to write about the mysteries of the seven stars and seven lampstands. The seven stars were the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands were the seven churches.

There is so much left to tell you – So let me save the rest - where you will hear more about the seven churches and their angels, two heavens, and one crazy future.

⁸ Acts 16:14

⁹ Colossians 2:1, 4:13

¹⁰ Revelation 1:19

The scariest Bible verse. At least, the scariest to me. It doesn't have to do with the number 666, or the devil, or anything that you probably think of. It has to do with something so ordinary that you almost never think about it. And it's in *Revelation*.

Before we get to the "scary" verse, we need to talk about the original recipients of the letter of *Revelation* that John wrote. John was instructed to write to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These churches were in the Roman Province of Asia, or modern-day Turkey. On a map, you can start with Ephesus, and go clock-wise around the list. They were all probably started by the Apostle Paul and his helpers a few decades before *Revelation* was written. They had been established long enough to have a reputation, and to have a history of deviating from their original good intentions.

John addressed the letter to the angels of these churches. It is never made clear whether the angels were literal angels assigned to these churches, or whether they are the lead elders of those churches, or possibly something or somebody other than that. It was probably self-evident to those churches even though it is unclear to modern readers.

The second and third chapters of *Revelation* are the words that Jesus spoke to these churches as recorded by John. Each of the seven churches gets their own, very specific message from Jesus. The message generally starts off with a recognition of their current status, goes into a critique of their actions, and ends with a promised reward for those who correct their actions.

The letters are written to the seven churches, but since the churches are made up of individuals, the letters are also written to the individuals in those churches. Also, though the letters are written to the churches that existed at that time, the messages are certainly meant to be applied to all other churches throughout all time.

The first church to receive its message was in Ephesus, a leading city of the region with the largest church. Ephesus was well-known for having a huge pagan temple dedicated to Artemis, and was well-known for its decadent life-style. Jesus praises the Christians for their hard work and perseverance. He is pleased that they cannot tolerate wicked people who want to be among them, and that they reject false apostles and the false teachings of the Nicolaitans. He criticizes them with a scary verse, but it is not the scariest verse.

Jesus tells the Ephesians that they have left the love they had at first for him. They started with a fervent, faithful love but now they have a shallow love for him. Their actions are faithful, but their hearts are not. He says that if they do not change, he will remove their lampstand, which

might mean that he will end their existence. That is scary, but he says that those who are victorious will get the right to eat from the tree of life.

The second church to receive its message was in Smyrna. Jesus recognizes that the people in that church are financially poor but are spiritually rich. Jesus knows they are being persecuted by the Jews, but points out that those Jews are of Satan, not God. He warns the church that it will surely suffer persecution.

However, Jesus reminds them that those who endure persecution and remain faithful to Jesus, even to the point of death, will receive life. Those who are victorious through persecution will not be hurt at all by the second death.

This message to Smyrna must have certainly opened some eyes. Jesus was clear that the persecution of the churches would be certain, long-lasting, and would include death. He was not sugar-coating his message in any way. The promise of not being hurt by the second death must have been encouraging, but bewildering. What was the second death?

The third church to receive its letter was Pergamum. Jesus acknowledges to the church that it lives in an evil city, so evil that Satan has his throne there. Even with the evil, and even with the martyrdom of Antipas in their city, they remained faithful and did not renounce the name of Jesus.

However, even with their faithfulness, Jesus is unhappy some of the Christians in Pergamum follow false teachings. He warns them to change their ways or he will certainly come to fight against them. That is scary, but not the scariest verse.

Jesus says he will reward each person who overcomes false teaching with hidden manna and a white stone with a personal, new name written on it. These rewards must have been very encouraging to those in Pergamum. Can you imagine Jesus giving you a white stone with a new name on it that only you and Jesus know? Talk about best friends forever!

The angel of the church at Thyatira got the fourth message. They must have been very encouraged to hear that Jesus knew of their deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance. That they were doing more than they did even at the first. The angel of Thyatira must have been on the edge of being prideful when he heard those words. Then Jesus lowered the boom.

Jesus is through with them tolerating a woman who pretended to be a prophet but was leading the people of the church into sexual immorality. He names this woman Jezebel, a direct reference to the most evil woman in the Old Testament. He says he gave her time to repent, but she has chosen not to. So, Jesus will torment her, kill her children, and make those who sin with her suffer intensely. Why so harsh? So all the churches will know that he knows their hearts and will repay each according to their deeds!

He asks the faithful ones in the church to continue to hold on, and they will be victorious. Those who are victorious will rule under his authority, **and** will be given a morning star. Can you imagine that? Receiving a morning star as your own?

Patience! We are almost to the scariest verse in the Bible, but first let's discuss the letter to Sardis. Jesus says that Sardis has a reputation for being alive, but is a dead church. He begs them to come alive and repent. However, there are still a few faithful believers in Sardis, and Jesus wants them to stay faithful.

The reward for the faithful is spectacular. Their names will be in the book of life, and Jesus will personally acknowledge them before God and his angels. Try to imagine that. Jesus standing before God and his angels calling out your name as one of the faithful. Gives me the shivers to think that could be my name he is calling out.

Two churches to go. Jesus has only good things to say to the church at Philadelphia, the first city named for brotherly love. Jesus compliments them for enduring trials even though they have little strength left. Since the church has been faithful, he will open doors for them that nobody can shut, and will have their enemies acknowledge that Jesus loves them. Since they have been faithful, Jesus will protect them from some of the upcoming trials, and will make them an integral part of the coming kingdom of God.

Can't you imagine how happy those Christians at Philadelphia must have been when they received this message from Jesus. They had been the true and faithful servants Jesus had talked about while he was on Earth. We at Laodicea looked at the Christians at Philadelphia in a new, rather envious way now.

OK, time for the scariest verse. But you cannot understand why it is scary unless I explain something to you. In your life, water is an everyday, mundane subject. With your pipes, and pumps, and dams, and water towers...it's everywhere, and water is virtually free. Want hot water, you've got it. Want cold water, you've got it. You can even have frozen water or steam whenever you want it.

You have no conception of the true value of water. In my time, water was the key to life. The Romans understood this, so they were the first people to perfect the art of moving water from one place to another using aqueducts, pipes, and storage tanks. Consequently, they could build cities and military bases wherever they wanted. Rome was an empire built on water systems.

The exact opposite was also true, whenever water became unavailable or unhealthy, entire cities were snuffed out of existence. Drought, broken aqueducts, unhealthy water supplies, could end the life of a city, and even an entire people. The subject of water was never far from our minds, as is evident with the many times Jesus talked about water.

Now...the scariest verse in the Bible. Jesus wrote the last of the seven letters to the church where I was an elder, the church at Laodicea. We at Laodicea had no excuses. A few decades

before, the apostle Paul had written us a letter that told us how to behave and believe.¹ We were so proud of the letter that we had shared it with everybody. I guess, over time, we forgot to pay attention to it ourselves.

Laodicea was a wealthy city, and some of the people of our church were very rich. We sometimes equated wealth to goodness. We must have been *very* good people who God loved *very* much because we were *very* rich. We were *very* wrong.

In our message, Jesus cautions us that our physical wealth is worth nothing since we are in spiritual poverty. He warns us to acquire spiritual wealth by accepting his discipline and repenting of our actions. If we do so, he will give us the right to sit with him on this throne.

Jesus starts his letter to us by referring to the two sources of water supply for our city. Laodicea had no big natural fresh water springs. It got water from the northwest from the area known as Hierapolis. This area had hot mineral water springs, and hot mineral water baths were the hit of the area.

The other source of water was from Colossae, in the opposite direction. It had a cold, fresh water spring. This water was remarkably refreshing to drink.²

The trouble was, by the time the hot mineral water got to Laodicea, it was no longer hot. By the time the water from Colossae got to Laodicea, it was no longer cold. We were inundated with lukewarm water that always made us want to gag.

When Jesus said the following we knew exactly what he was talking about. "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot: I wish you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth."

In more modern terms, you are good for something or you are good for nothing. The Bible tells us of the many ways we can be good for something in the name of Jesus. However, if we choose to be good for nothing, Jesus will vomit us out of his mouth. Is there anything scarier than that?

Fortunately, Jesus gave us an incredible alternative. This was his parting message to us, and it applies to you, too. "Those whom I love, I correct and discipline, so be zealous, and repent."

You've heard the scariest verse in the Bible to me. Now, want to hear one of the most peaceful verses in the Bible?... What happens if we are zealous and repent? Jesus says, "I will come in, and we will eat together."

¹ Colossians 4:16

² *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O' Brien, Pages 9-10

“Do not be afraid.” Many times when angels appear to humans in the New Testament, they find it necessary to say that line, “Do not be afraid.” In my case, it is the opposite. You should be very, very afraid of what I have to say.

You have no idea how good of a job John did when he wrote *Revelation*. Imagine trying to describe all of the things he saw in crude human language? He did get to write in Greek, maybe the finest human language ever developed, but still! How would you even begin to adequately describe a creature covered with eyes and wings.¹ John did a fantastic job, but it is no wonder that humans have a hard time understanding much of what he wrote.

Concerning *Revelation*, it is hard for human beings to understand which things are literal and which are symbolic. It is hard to understand which things are happening at what point in time. It is hard to know which things may be applicable in more than one way and at more than one point in time.

And that is when you are considering just the book of *Revelation*. When you add other Scriptures from books such as *Isaiah*, *Daniel*, and *Matthew* the possibilities for interpretation are endless. It is not surprising there are so many books and sermons about *Revelation*. And, it is not surprising that so many humans...people, just throw up their hands in frustration and refuse to study *Revelation*. So rather than interpret what John wrote, I will just describe what he saw and experienced. I am sorry that I have to use human language instead of heavenly language,² which would be much more descriptive. Even than Greek.

I will begin by describing what happened after John was in the Spirit and entered Heaven.³

John saw the one sitting on the throne holding a scroll with seven seals. I was the mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”⁴ When no one in heaven or earth was worthy, John wept in despair. But one of the elders in heaven told John that Jesus was worthy, and John saw that it was so. Then the four living creatures, twenty-four elders, and innumerable angels praised Jesus. They acknowledged that he was

¹ Revelation 4:6-8

² 1 Corinthians 13:1

³ Revelation 4:1-2

⁴ Revelation 5:2

worthy because he purchased people from every nation with his blood and death. Heaven reverberating with innumerable angels singing, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and praise.”⁵ Imagine it. I was one of those angels, it shakes me to my core to think about it.

Before I go on, I must give you essential fundamental particulars, (he stops and translates for us with a smile) a little background information. A few of you people in today’s time still read books. You know what it means to read the front and back of a page, then turn to the next page. In John’s time, they typically read scrolls. These were typically twenty or so pages stitched or glued together on their sides to make a roll of up to twenty feet long. Some of these had writing on the front and back, such as the one John had seen.

To prevent tampering or unwanted reading, a rolled-up scroll was sealed with clay or wax that was impressed with the owner’s mark. An example of this was a Roman will that might be sealed with different seals of multiple witnesses. These wills were only unsealed and read at the death of the person who created the will.

People of John’s time were well aware of the intrinsic power of scrolls and seals. It had built-in authority, dominance and control. About a century before John wrote *Revelation*, the fate of the Roman Empire changed when Octavian purported to have obtained the will of Mark Antony and used it against him politically. Without seals in place, it was impossible to prove whether the will was real or a fake.

Back to *Revelation*. Jesus opened four of the seals of the scrolls. As he did, four riders on four horses came out. A white horse with a conqueror, a red horse with a warrior, a black horse with an economic destroyer, and a pale horse with Death riding it. These riders clearly had the power to bring tremendous devastation on the Earth. This scene is where your term, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, comes from.

When Jesus opened the fifth seal, voices were heard asking for God to be vengeful. These voices were of martyrs that had died because of their faithfulness to the word of God. They were told to be patient until the number of martyrs was completed.

Jesus opened the sixth seal and chaos ensued. There was a great earthquake, the sun turned black, the moon turned red, and stars fell from the sky. Every island disappeared, all the mountains vanished. Every human being on earth, no matter their political or economic status, doomed and desperate for a place to hide from the coming wrath of God and of Jesus.

You should have seen poor, old, John when he saw those things. An almost fatal blow of shock. Certainly, he was not expecting the world to come to an end at that moment. And it didn’t. He saw four angels at the corners of the earth holding back the harmful winds. Another angel coming from the east instructed them not to damage the land or sea until 144,000 from all the

⁵ Revelation 5:12

tribes of Israel had been marked with seal on their foreheads.

John saw the angels, elders, and four creatures worship God and Jesus along with countless numbers of humans (he corrects himself), people, in white robes. This innumerable multitude were from every nation, every tribe, every people and every single language. An elder told John that these were the ones who came out of the great tribulation. He went on to say that they served God, and he protected and provided for them perfectly.

What about the seventh seal? Bear with me another moment. First, trumpets. Information, or better enlightenment about trumpets.

In the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, trumpets were used as musical instruments, and to public gatherings or momentous events. The ancient Jews used them to get ready for battle, in the fall of Jericho, and for distinct and specific religious rites. In the other New Testament books,⁶ the trumpet is most associated with God's appearance at the end of time. In *Revelation*, trumpets serve as warning signals of the advent of God's kingdom.

When Jesus opened the seventh seal, there was complete silence in Heaven. As the minutes ticked by, John trembled to the verge of tears. After half an hour, John was at his breaking point, the seven angels standing before God were given seven trumpets. Another angel had a golden vessel filled with incense. The incense was the prayers of the saints. He filled it with fire from the altar and hurled it to the ground, which caused thunder and lightning and an earthquake.

The seven angels raised their trumpets. John's knees gave way beneath him.

The first trumpet signaled, and hail and fire mixed with blood hurled to earth. A third of the earth, trees and grass was incinerated.

The second trumpet signaled. A mountain type of object was hurled into the sea. One-third of the sea turned to blood and one-third of all ships were destroyed, and one-third of all living creatures in the sea died.

The third trumpet sounded. A star named Wormwood fell into the waters of the earth, where a third of all rivers and springs turned bitter, toxic causing many, many to die.

The fourth trumpet signaled. A third of the sun, moon and stars, were struck which darkened one-third of the Earth both day and night.

John was sure it couldn't get much worse. Then he heard a piercing sound; an eagle flying in the air, crying out for the surviving inhabitants of the world to be very worried, because the last three trumpets were preparing to blast.

⁶ i.e. Matt. 24:31, 1 Cor. 15:52, 1 Thess. 4:16. Ties back to Isaiah 27:13 and Zec. 9:14

The fifth trumpet sounded, the Abyss opened, and locust-like creatures were given the power to torture all people not having the seal of God. They stung so fiercely, so mercilessly that the people wanted to die, but could not.

The sixth trumpet sounded. Four angels were released to kill one-third of mankind. John heard that the number of mounted troops used to do this was two hundred million. What exactly is one-third of mankind? For you, it's 2.53 billion people. Equivalent to the annihilation of the entire population of North America, Europe and all of China. No one left. Every person, gone. Dead.

In John's time, people were used to bloodshed and violence. I would expect your present day sensibilities to be shocked by the vast amount of death and destruction I have described. Why would a loving God do all of these violent things? The answer was found after the sixth trumpet was sounded.

Even after all of the violence, all of the pain, and bloodshed, the survivors refused to repent of worshiping idols and demons. God was doing everything he could to bring them to repentance, but they would not change their ways. They would not turn away from committing murder, practicing witchcraft, sinning sexually, or stealing. So the woe of the sixth trumpet continued.

Another angel, as mighty as myself, came down from Heaven. He shouted, and the seven thunders spoke, John heard it, but he was not allowed to write what he heard. The angel announced that there would be no more delay, the mystery of God would now be accomplished. John was instructed to eat the scroll in the angel's hand, and then ordered to prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.

John was ordered to measure the temple of God, and informed that people would trample the holy city for 42 months. God would give power to two witnesses for 1,260 days to prophecy and to punish the peoples of the earth. After that time, the beast from the Abyss will kill them, and all people will celebrate their death for three and a half days.

After those three and a half days, however, the breath of life reenters the two witnesses and God calls them up to Heaven. Their enemies look on in wonder and terror when an earthquake hits and a tenth of Jerusalem collapses. The survivors, finally, give glory to God.

This was about half of John's time in Heaven. A good stopping point. Read the *Revelation of John*, understand the details of what I told you about the seals and the trumpets.

One more.

Then the seventh trumpet sounded. Loud voices announced that the kingdom of the world had become the kingdom of Jesus, and he will reign for ever and ever. The twenty-four elders rejoiced in the fact that judgment had come, and it was time to reward the prophets, saints and all who revered the name of God. God's temple in Heaven was opened.

Few angels are mentioned by name in the Bible. I am one. Michael. Jude describes me as an archangel.¹ I am also mentioned in the books of *Daniel* and *Revelation*. You can't help but notice all the angels in the book of Revelation. The last named angel in the Bible is Abaddon, also known as Apollyon, the angel of the Abyss that John names in *Revelation*. He was king of the locust-like creatures that tortured people when the fifth angel sounded a trumpet.² I get noticed shortly after the seventh angel blew the seventh trumpet. After that trumpet sound, God's temple in heaven was opened. Then the scene shifted, and John got to see amazing things.

Luke names Gabriel as an angel.³

A wondrous sign appeared in Heaven; a pregnant woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. Another sign appeared in heaven; a giant red dragon with seven heads and crowns, and ten horns. The dragon's tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and flung them to Earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman to devour her child when it was born. But the male child was snatched up to God, and the woman fled to the desert for 1,260 days where God took care of her.

My turn. There was war in Heaven, and my angels and I fought against the dragon and his angels. We defeated the dragon, and his angels, and hurled them to the earth. The dragon was Satan. The arch enemy of mankind from day one. We defeated him.

That epic battle gets only three verses in your Bible! Now, I'm not complaining that it only gets three, although I do think John could have been more expansive. What I want to point out is why these verses illustrate why *Revelation* is so fascinating, and frustrating, and why there are so many interpretations of it.

Ask yourself these kinds of questions: Was this war literal or symbolic? If literal, did it happen in the distant past or in the future? If symbolic, what does it symbolize? How does this account fit

¹ Jude 1:9

² Revelations 9:1-11

³ Luke 1:26

into the overall story of *Revelation*? Does this mean that Satan is on Earth now because I put him there? Why didn't I just kill Satan instead of hurl him to Earth?

If you delve into *Revelation*, you find out that you never get to the end of these types of question. Way more questions than answers. Fortunately, as John said at the beginning, you get blessed by reading, hearing, and taking to heart the words of *Revelation*.⁴ You don't have to understand it to get a blessing.

Anyway, after hurled to Earth, Satan was filled with fury and pursued the woman. But God protected the woman, so Satan went to make war against the rest of the offspring of the woman. Those offspring were those who obey God's commandments and follow Jesus.

It's not often that John explains the things he is seeing in Heaven, but at this point you know that Satan is the dragon, and he is in a war to destroy the people of God. You know that I, Michael, defeated Satan and sent him to Earth from Heaven.

The next thing John saw was a fearsome beast arising from the sea. It had ten horns, seven heads, ten crowns on his horns, and a blasphemous name on each head. Satan gave the beast all of his power and great authority, so that the whole world was astonished enough to follow and worship Satan and the beast. Well, not the whole world. The saints of God whose names were written in the book of life did not do so, and they endured great persecution because of it.

Another beast rose from the earth, and was given great power to enact on behalf of the first beast. He set up an image of the first beast and forced everyone to worship it. He had such power that no one could buy or sell unless they had the mark of the beast on their right hand or forehead. The mark, or name, or number of the beast was 666. This number has permeated your culture in such an interesting way. Often associated with strange mystical power. References abound. In rock bands alone, it's code almost. Anytime anyone wants to infer apocalyptic or satanic mayhem, it's 666.

John saw another amazing sight. Jesus was standing on Mount Zion with his 144,000 servants singing praise to him. Three angels were flying in midair. The first proclaimed the eternal gospel to everyone on earth. The second proclaimed that Babylon had fallen. The third gave a terrible warning about worshiping the beast or receiving its mark. Afterward, other angels came to gather the harvest of the earth, which seems to have resulted in great devastation.

John must have felt relieved with what happened next. He saw a sign in heaven of seven angels with the seven last plagues. When these plagues ended, God's wrath would be complete. The seven plagues were contained in seven bowls. As the bowls were poured out, abscesses broke out all over the bodies of those who had the marking of the beast. Then poisoned water, scorching heat from the sun, debilitating darkness, drought, earthquakes beyond the Richter scale, and hail, boulder-sized hail, weighing hundreds of pounds pummeling the earth and its

⁴ John 1:3

people. Catastrophes the likes of which the planet has never seen. Maybe now they would soften their hearts. Maybe now, they would understand the order of things. Mankind cursed God. (Michael is beyond consoling, beyond understand, beyond mercy, he is horrified) Instead of repenting, mankind cursed God!

John was carried away to see a woman sitting on a beast. She was wealthy, filthy rich. An angel tried to explain to John about the beast and woman, but I'm pretty sure John was just as mystified after the explanation as before. What John was clear about was this, Jesus would make war against all evil and overcome it.

According to the angel, the woman was a city ruling over the earth with every manner of evil. Then another angel came and proclaimed the destruction of that city and all of those with a relationship with the city.

Let's pause and summarize, a lot has happened.. My angels and I defeated Satan and his angels and threw them to Earth. Through the beast, the fallen angel, Satan ruled over the world and caused evil of every sort. The faithful people of God suffered immense persecution, but persevered. The world became evil and dominated by the enemy of God, Satan. God continued to discipline people hoping they would repent and turn to him, but few did. Eventually, God reached the end of his patience.

What happened when God ended his patience? All inhabitants in Heaven began praising and worshiping God because it was the start of the end. The adversary's reign was over; Satan's rule on earth was at an end.

John saw Heaven standing open. Instead of quaking in fear, John started celebrating. There was a gigantic white horse ridden by Jesus himself, followed by the armies of heaven on white horses. John's words were entirely inadequate to describe the awesome sight before him. The results of the battle were so sure that another angel invited all the birds of the air to come and eat the flesh of all the evil people of the world that would soon be defeated.

The beast gathered all the kings and people of the earth to fight against Jesus and his troops. It was a short battle. The beast and false prophet were captured and thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, and all of their troops were killed. The birds gorged themselves with their flesh.

As John joyfully watched his Lord conquer the earth, an angel came and seized the defeated enemy of God, the arch enemy of mankind, the serpent, Satan, and bound him in the Abyss for one thousand years, where he was unable to wrought any evil on Earth. The faithful followers of Jesus came to life and reigned with him for a thousand years. Satan was released at the end of that time, and had a last-gasp war, and was defeated again. This time he was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur with the beast and false prophet for all eternity.

After countless eons, God's patience came to an end. The status of all eternity was about to be fixed. John saw a great white throne with God sitting on it. The dead were judged according to

what they had done. Each person was judged, then death and Hades were also thrown into the lake of fire. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

For those whose names were written in the book of life, they got to be part of the new heaven and earth, but I will leave it to Peter to tell you of that.

Many lessons to learn from *Revelation*, but I want to leave you with something that often gets lost in the telling. Yes, there are epic battles, and evil is formidable, and there is a lot of scary stuff mentioned in John's writing, and some of it is indecipherable, but I'm an angel, archangel, and though I don't know everything, I do know this about all that: God wins. You definitely want to be on his side before all this starts."

Someone dies, they reach the pearly gates, and guess who's there to meet them? Indeed, I am the obvious choice to tell you about Heaven, but not for the reason you may think. There is no good reason to think that I will be standing at the pearly gates to let you in or keep you out. No, I am the obvious choice because I was the first to clearly write about two Heavens.

If you stop to think about it, you could find it strange that while a primary goal of most Christians is to go to Heaven, those same Christians know very little about where they think they want to go for all eternity. I hope to clear up some misconceptions, and to entice you to study the subject in more detail.

One of the reasons to be certain Heaven currently exists is that so many people have seen it. Jesus,¹ Jacob,² Micaiah,³ Ezekiel,⁴ Daniel,⁵ Stephen,⁶ John,⁷ and Paul.⁸ And that's just a partial list of those who have seen at least portions of Heaven.

Heaven is currently the place where God resides⁹ and has his throne¹⁰ and where Jesus resides and has his throne¹¹. God owns Heaven.¹²

¹ John 3:13

² Genesis 28:10-13

³ 1 Kings 22:19

⁴ Ezekiel Chaps. 1-3, 8:3

⁵ Daniel 7

⁶ Acts 7:55-56

⁷ Revelation Chaps. 4-22

⁸ Acts 26:19, 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

⁹ i.e. Deuteronomy 4:39, Joshua 2:11, 1 Samuel 2:11

¹⁰ i.e. Genesis 28:17, Deuteronomy 26:15, 1 Kings 8:30

¹¹ i.e. Matthew 26:64, Mark 16:19, Hebrews 8:1

¹² i.e. Deuteronomy 10:14, 1 Chronicles 29:11, Psalm 115:16

Heaven itself plays several roles, including declaring God's glory,¹³ proclaiming God's righteousness,¹⁴ and praising God.¹⁵ Heaven is a very active and loud place. God seems to be in continual action, as are the angels and creatures of God, as well as the saints who are there.

The descriptions of Heaven by the people who have seen it are complicated by a myriad of factors. The scenes are so overwhelming that the viewers can scarcely describe them; the viewers are seeing only tiny, and sometimes different, portions of Heaven; time has no meaning in Heaven; and God is able to both be in a localized position while simultaneously being everywhere.

Here is a very brief summary of three accounts of what Heaven looked like to Ezekiel, Daniel, and John:

The focus of Heaven is the throne where God sits. God has the appearance of whiteness, light, fire, and has a radiance of His glory around Him, but seems to take on the form of a man. There is a sea of glass and a golden, horned altar in front of the wheeled throne, and a green rainbow that encircles it. Lightning, thunder, and fire are in abundance, including a river of fire flowing out from the throne. Four celestial creatures are near the throne, as well as seven blazing lamps which are the spirits of God. Surrounding the throne are twenty-four thrones on which sit twenty-four elders dressed in white with gold crowns. These elders have harps and gold bowls full of incense of prayers of the saints. The main purpose of the creatures and elders is to lead worship and to give glory, honor and thanks to God. There are billions of attendants around the throne area which include: celestial creatures, angels, elders, martyrs, and saints. These attendants worship through songs, sayings, and prayers. It is incredibly noisy and active with beings coming and going, casting of crowns, judgments, and all manner of worship activities.

Heaven makes a three-ring circus look like a still painting.

To be honest, I find all of that interesting, but not as important as what I am about to tell you. What? Heaven is less important than something else? No, and that is why I was chosen to tell this story.

In my book of *Second Peter*, I wrote: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."¹⁶

¹³ Psalm 19:11

¹⁴ Psalm 50:6

¹⁵ Psalm 69:34, Psalm 148:4

¹⁶ 2 Peter 3:10-13

Did you get that? Heaven and earth will be destroyed by fire and replaced with a new Heaven and a new earth! The Heaven that exists now is not the one that will exist for future eternity!

Incidentally, although I was the first New Testament writer to make this clear, in retrospect the prophet Isaiah declared that Heaven and earth would be destroyed and replaced.¹⁷ My advantage was that I knew much more about the new Heaven and new Earth. What I knew came from Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

John also learned about the new Heaven and new Earth from Jesus and the Holy Spirit. John wrote down much of what he learned in the last two chapters of *Revelation*. Why?

Biblical prophecy reveals both God's power and love. It can motivate its hearers toward holiness in their lives and deeper belief in God. One reason the Bible tells us about distressing things is to warn us so we can avoid suffering the consequences of certain actions, to inspire us to be mindful. On the other hand, we are also told about certain gratifying things so we will strive for the rewards of our actions. The Bible and its prophecies are encouragements and warnings for people to change their ways.

Jesus said, "And now I have told you before it comes to pass, that, when it comes to pass, you may believe."¹⁸ I wrote, "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."¹⁹ Let your knowledge of heaven drive you to a life of holiness.

There is no better description of the new Heaven than how John starts:

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no sea. I, John, saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice out of heaven saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain, for the old way of things has passed away."²⁰

No tears, no death, no sorrow, no pain. No negatives. Only this overwhelming positive...God dwells with his people!

¹⁷ Isaiah 51:6, 65:17. In addition, Jesus indicated several times that heaven and earth would pass away.

¹⁸ John 14:29

¹⁹ 2 Peter 3:11-12 NIV

²⁰ Revelation 21:1-4

This will happen after the final judgment by God. Many of these verses were prophesied by five of the most credible witnesses in the Bible: Isaiah²¹, Jeremiah²², Jesus^{23,24}, John²⁵ and me.

The idyllic Heaven most people think of is referred to by John as a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. This is where God dwells with his servants and all is well forever and ever. It is a resurrected universe inhabited by resurrected people²⁶ living with the resurrected Jesus.²⁷ The new Heaven will be the final and eternal abode of God and his servants.²⁸ God will fellowship with and provide for its inhabitants.

A few more selected verses about this perfect place, listen:

“the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city; and his servants will serve him. They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night; and they will need no candles or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”²⁹

Now you know what Heaven will be like for all eternity, to get even more excited about eternity for God’s children, read the last two chapters of *Revelation*.

I am often asked who will be in Heaven. Hey, I’m the one standing by the pearly gates. Many people want to know what religious formula they need to follow. So, it is particularly noteworthy that Revelation 22 gives an indisputable description of the people who will be in Heaven. It says three times that God’s servants are in Heaven. It's no wonder that Jesus made such a big deal about servanthood and how his people should be servants!

What can we say about the Heaven where God’s people will exist for eternity? Heaven will be perfect in every way...Heaven will provide perfect protection, perfect provision, perfect fellowship, and perfect joy. I’ll see you there.

²¹ Isaiah 34:4, 51:6, and 66:22

²² Jeremiah 4:28

²³ Matthew 5:18, 24:35-36

²⁴ 2 Peter 3:7-10

²⁵ Revelation 21:1-22:6

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:1-2

²⁷ H, pg. xviii

²⁸ Revelation 22:3, 6

²⁹ Revelation 22:3-5