

THINNING
THE
VEIL

ENCOUNTERING JESUS CHRIST
IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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1

THINNING THE VEIL (Revelation 1)

The Casualty of Loneliness

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I struggle in my soul and have sorrow in my heart day after day? How long shall my enemy triumph over me? Behold and answer me, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death.

PSALM 13:1-4, A PSALM OF DAVID

WE DON'T HAVE TO LOOK FOR LONELINESS. It finds *us*. All of us. Regardless of gender, race, creed, or nation, loneliness is universal.

Loneliness is always on the hunt. Undeterred by our bank accounts. Relentless in our times of struggle. Unforgiving even in a crowded room. Loneliness lurks, feasting on the guilty and the holy. The saints of old, like David, and sinners today, such as me.

6-20-23, 2:39 a.m. (my journal)

I'm trying to hold it all together. But God, I feel betrayed by you. Abandoned by you. And I've felt that way for a long time. I'm broken. But you won't freaking put me back together. So, I fade. No hope of resurrection. . . . Do you care? No manipulation. Genuine question. Do you even freaking care? Then why won't you show it? Why won't you prove it? Where the hell are you?



Loneliness wafts over the soul like smoke wisping from the end of incense. A foggy shroud unfurling with lies and deceit. Loneliness whispers, “You don’t belong.” Loneliness mutters, “You aren’t worth the effort.” Loneliness convinces that God is no longer Immanuel but something closer to perpetually disappointed.

6-13-23, 11:49 p.m. (my journal)

God, are you proud of me? This question seems to hound me relentlessly. . . . I feel like a failure. I feel like I have no faith. . . . I feel like a waste. I feel like I’m a massive disappointment. A spiritual, spoiled brat. To be honest, I don’t know if I’m worthy of your investment. There just seems to be so many more cut out for this than me. I just don’t feel like I belong anywhere. I feel trapped. Cut off. My life more of a cautionary tale than anything else. Will you meet me here? Will I even be able to see you?

Loneliness woos us to desperation or depression, typically interweaving both into a confluence of confusion and pain. An ever-increasing descent into isolation and anger, numbness and panic, insecurity and frenzied motion. Loneliness blooms in desolation. Demands segregation. Thrives in exile.

6-11-23, 4:17 p.m. (my journal)

God, my heart is remarkably resistant to your love. My body stubbornly resistant to your healing. My mind exhausted. My will retired. Where do I turn, Lord? Have I grown deaf to your Spirit? Have you stopped speaking to my wayward heart—no longer wanting to waste your time on me? Is there hope? My goodness, hope is elusive. It seems so tangible at times, yet scares away so easily. I seem to swim in it as I go to sleep, only to awake to despair as a bed-fellow with hope nowhere to be found. . . . Please be with me, God. Truly with me. Do you see me, God? Can you hear me through this soul besmirched with stains of sin? Then cleanse me, Jesus.

Loneliness finds us all. Those forgotten in the slums, those ignored on a corner holding cardboard, those abused, misused, and falsely accused. Regardless of age, time of day, personality, or prosperity, loneliness neglects no one. Includes all in its embrace. Sinners and saints, young and experienced, new converts and even apostles.



AN APOSTLE'S STRUGGLE

In Revelation 1, at the end of the first century CE (ca. 90–96),¹ John was on the island of Patmos *alone* and *lonely*. Exiled by Rome for his testimony to Jesus (Rev 1:9).² Away from Asia Minor and the seven churches he pastored. Away from his family. From his friends. Alone on an island as the last living apostle.³

An apostle who witnessed the birth of Jesus' ministry (Jn 2:1-12), the final breath of Jesus' body (Jn 19:25-30), and even the empty tomb populated by linen and nothing else (Jn 20:3-8). An apostle who watched Thomas place his hands in Jesus' wounds (Jn 20:24-29), the Holy Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), and the gospel exploding from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 8:1; 15:1-35). An apostle entrusted with caring for Christ's mother (Jn 19:26-27), with nurturing churches planted by Paul such as Ephesus (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; 3.3.4), and with preaching the good news to the powerful, the impoverished, and the broken (1 Jn 1:1-4; Acts of John 38-39).

And yet, here at the beginning of our Revelation, John is condemned to an island of loneliness. Unsure of what's next. Uncertain of his ministry's success. Unclear on whether God is intent on fulfilling his promises, yet quite clear on Rome's appeal to dominance, violence, and the title "the kingdom of heaven reigning on earth."

It's not clear when John arrived on Patmos or how long he was on the island before Revelation 1. We don't know whether John arrived during the

¹For detailed analysis on the date of Revelation, see Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies and the Book of Revelation* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 110-31, 132-85.

²For more discussion on John's exile as "physical persecution," see Wood, *Alter-Imperial Paradigm*, 140-47.

³When I refer to "John" or "the apostle," I'm not suggesting that "John, son of Zebedee" is the author of Revelation. Instead, I'm appealing to the narrative arc regarding the life of John, son of Zebedee, preserved by the Johannine tradition. John Behr argues convincingly that the Gospel of John and Revelation were written by the same author. See Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 43-98. He concludes, however, that the author of both is the enigmatic figure "John the Elder." While I do not find his methodology or conclusion for John the Elder persuasive, the Johannine tradition does indeed reference this *elder* moniker in the introduction of both 2 John and 3 John. As a result, the authorship of the Johannine texts is likely not solved by a single individual but by a Johannine tradition traced back to John, son of Zebedee (possibly responsible for portions of the corpus) also including John the Elder (also possibly responsible for portions of the corpus). Thus, my reference to "John" or "the apostle" and even "the disciple" points to John, son of Zebedee preserved in the Johannine tradition, but not as a means to preclude the legitimacy of John the Elder as a possible author as well.

hot, dry months of May–August. Or the wet, dreary months of December–January, which provide only six to seven hours of sunlight a day. We don’t know whether his aged body was riddled with years-old ailments, lingering aches and pains, or battling a fresh cold deeply set in his laboring lungs. We don’t know the condition of his heart, soul, mind, or strength (Mk 12:30).

But we do know that John was stretched thin. On the precipice of breaking. At his emotional end. For example, at the sight of a sealed scroll in God’s hand, John bursts into tears, virtually inconsolable, desperate for a word from the Lord (Rev 5:4). Still later, erratic and irrational, John twice falls prostrate to worship at the feet of an angel (Rev 19:10; 22:8), both times receiving a stern rebuke and a command to “Worship God!” (Rev 19:10; 22:9). John is not himself. Quite unlike the beloved disciple from the Gospel bearing his name, the steady disciple bold enough to stand at the foot of the cross as the rest scatter out of self-preservation (Jn 19:26–27).

The strain of loneliness tempts even titans to transform into something far less than who they truly are. In Revelation 1, John is *alone* and *lonely*. Alone and wrestling. Alone and agonizing, questioning, clinging. Alone and desperate for a revelation.

Moments like these, however long or short they may be, seem suffocating. The stomach twists as the mind sprints, the chest constricts as the breath quickens, and God’s silence thickens with each question unanswered, with each prayer pending:

God, are you there? Do you hear my cries? Do you see my pain? Why won’t you respond? Are you angry with me? Are you listening to me? Why are you withholding? “I cry to you, LORD, for help. In the morning, my prayer comes to meet you. Why, LORD, do you reject me? Why do you hide your face from me? . . . You have taken away my beloved friend and neighbor. Darkness is my closest friend.” (Ps 88:13–14, 18)

Such pain plagues the faithful and the far off, the pastor and the prodigal. Without response, the veil between heaven and earth seems impenetrable. A chasm of chaos. Whatever the cause or catalyst for this curse of silence, the result is the same: loneliness.



TRANSFORMED BY LONELINESS

Yet, such a description may just be projection. Saints, so I'm learning, simply don't experience loneliness as I do. Yes, they struggle. Indeed, they languish. But their pain retains meaning. Not through sadistic twists and turns but through a belief that union with God simply doesn't translate to our faculties. That as grace presses deeper into our souls stained with worry and fatigued by wandering, we experience life as a "ray of darkness"; we encounter truth in a "cloud of unknowing."⁴

God's silence is mistaken for indifference when in fact he's speaking in a language foreign to our senses, yet quite familiar to the recesses of our soul. A language more fit for the Spirit than for sin, more attuned to our suffering than we presume. Drawing closer to God's radiant glory, as bright as "the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Rev 1:16 NIV), we are blinded by grace. What worked before no longer works. What helped before no longer helps. All of our idols are awash with a light so bright all now seems dark; God so close all now seems lost.

Yes, John is alone and lonely. But it may not be a loneliness understood by those uninitiated in the divine intimacy found only in the "dark night of the soul."⁵

Consider Mother Teresa. In 2007, the book *Come Be My Light*, a biography compiled from her journal and intimate letters with her spiritual mentors, came with both excitement and scandal. These writings, which Mother Teresa pleaded to have destroyed, revealed the inner world of a saint who, from the outside, appeared closer to Jesus than most. Yet she recounts an enduring silence, an absence of Christ's presence for more than twenty-seven years. A darkness and poverty of soul that rivaled the darkness and poverty she served in every day among the poor and dying in the slums of Calcutta.

Undated, ca. 1959 (her journal)

In the darkness . . . I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One.—Alone. The darkness is so dark—and I am alone.—Unwanted, forsaken.—The loneliness of the heart that wants love

⁴Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* 1.1 (PG 3:999) writes of a "ray of darkness." The Christian contemplative classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* was penned by an anonymous monk in the fourteenth century.

⁵This phrase was coined by St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Carmelite friar, in his masterpieces, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*.

is unbearable.—Where is my faith?—Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness.—My God—how painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing.—I have no faith. . . . Love—the word—it brings nothing.—I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.⁶

“How is this possible?” many quipped. “Is she a faux saint, hypocritically speaking of God’s love while absorbing wounds from her divine abuser?” Such questions are spoken from a perspective that misunderstands silence and God’s presence in the form of loneliness. For even during immense internal agony, Mother Teresa resolves, “I am not alone—I have His darkness.”⁷

A mystery here may yet minister to our understanding of the Revelation of Jesus Christ just as much as it may illumine the cavernous longing in our souls that compels us to deconstruct our faith, abandon the bride, lash out at Christian culture, and even more. For silence is a divine strategy, the dark night a gift of grace, the cloud of unknowing evidence of an awakening of intimacy.

Indeed, the pain of the process is real: “[In the dark night,] the longings for God become so intense that it will seem to individuals that their bones are drying up in this thirst [of love],” proffering a suffering “worse than death.”⁸ But the purpose isn’t punishment or divine neglect. It’s intimacy. Unity with the infinite. Nearness to the “light of the world,” whose gaze is so brilliant that all our senses go mute, blinded by his radiant presence. For in order to draw near to the one beyond all senses, our senses must meet their end, as St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) admits.⁹

Thus, what appears as divine abandonment is actually a divine strategy for ineffable intimacy. So Padre Pio, a twentieth-century Franciscan saint (1887–1968), comforted a child of the faith afflicted with inner loneliness by unveiling heaven’s design. “What is producing such desolation in your spirit,” he suggests, “is a very special grace.”¹⁰ The “alarm and terror” at the inner

⁶Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta,”* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 186-87. The peculiar capitalization and frequent use of em dashes as a multipurpose punctuation mark are unique to Mother Teresa’s writing style.

⁷Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 223.

⁸Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 187, 59.

⁹John of the Cross, *Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 178, 181.

¹⁰The quotations in this paragraph are from a letter written by Padre Pio to his spiritual daughter Raffaelina Cerese on February 28, 1915, as recorded in *Padre Pio’s Spiritual Direction for Every Day*, ed. Gianluigi Pasquale, trans. Marsha Daigle-Williamson (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2011), 153.

loneliness is “the poor soul’s reaction to this grace.” When the radiant light of God draws near to the soul saturated in death, life “finds the soul unprepared and not well adapted . . . to receive this supernatural light.” Ill-equipped and caught off-guard, “the poor soul,” Padre Pio explains, “experiences terror and fear in its faculties, memory, intelligence, and will.” However, over time, the soul’s sight adjusts to the light, and “little by little, it soon begins to feel the healing effects of this new grace.” A new grace that feeds the malnourished with an intimacy surpassing all cravings.

With such a cloud of witnesses, loneliness transforms into a conduit of transformation. If seen, if perceived, if welcomed as grace. To embrace loneliness as a gift, even in the face of the great silence, we must harness its despair as the essential spark that ignites faith, that increases longing for God, for his Word, for his presence.

Loneliness, as in the dark night of the soul, will produce intimacy and clarity beyond reason and articulation if it isn’t shunned but partnered with. Resiliently embraced. Harnessed with joy in suffering, so that, with Mother Teresa, we can say, “I will smile at Your Hidden Face—always.”¹¹

And in Revelation 1, this is just how John responds.

ENCOUNTERING THE COSMIC CHRIST

Loneliness wooed John to his knees, pressed him into prayer and pleading “on the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10). Loneliness situated John on Patmos in a posture of surrender, a disposition of receptivity to encounter God intimately. An ineffable union fit for the mysterious phrase “in the Spirit” (Rev 1:10).

“In the Spirit,” John’s loneliness is transformed from isolation into a conduit through which God can be received, or maybe, still better, *perceived*. For “in the Spirit,” John’s senses are no longer dulled by dereliction, but surpassed. Unfettered to hear and see what the Spirit says and unveils.¹²

“In the Spirit,” John hears “a sonorous voice like a trumpet” (Rev 1:10), shattering the phantasm of solitude. Alone on Patmos, John turns (Rev 1:12) and sees Christ transfigured: “His face as brilliant as the sun shines” (Rev 1:16;

¹¹Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, 187.

¹²Revelation is saturated with senses: sight is referenced over 125 times (e.g., Rev 1:12; 7:1-2; 22:8); hearing over 120 times (e.g., Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:3, 6, 13, 20, 22; 19:1; 21:3); touch over 20 times (e.g., Rev 1:17; 2:1; 7:9); taste over 12 times (e.g., Rev 8:11; 10:9-10; 17:16); smell 3 times (e.g., Rev 8:3-4; 19:3).

cf. Mt 17:2); “His hair as white as wool, as white as snow” (Rev 1:14; cf. Dan 7:9); “His feet like bronze flamed in a furnace” (Rev 1:15; cf. Rev 10:1); “His eyes as a fiery flame” (Rev 1:14; cf. Dan 7:9).

No, John is not alone. Christ is present. As always, Jesus is here, yet quite unlike the crucified “King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19-22), who cried out from the cross in John’s Gospel, “I thirst” (Jn 19:28). Here, in Revelation 1, on the island of Patmos, Christ lacks nothing. For what was finished on the cross (Jn 19:30) is now present without a veil to cover the Lord’s glory (2 Cor 3:7-18). Christ’s divinity now on full display for those with eyes to see in the dark.

In Revelation 1:13, John identifies “the voice that was speaking to me” (Rev 1:12) with the peculiar phrase “one like a son of man.” A designation that conjures a context of ancient exile and prophecy. In Daniel 7, living in the shadow of Babylon, the prophet receives a vision fit for the book of Revelation: beasts are coming out of the sea (Dan 7:2-7; cf. Rev 13:1-8) resembling a lion, a bear, and a leopard (Dan 7:4-6; cf. Rev 13:2), some with ten horns (Dan 7:7; cf. Rev 13:1) and others with the power to crush any who oppose their authority (Dan 7:7; cf. Rev 13:7-8). Daniel is enamored and astonished (Dan 7:8; cf. Rev 17:6), but his vision is interrupted by divine presence. Entering the heavenly throne room, the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9) is seated in sovereignty, wearing “a robe as white as snow” with “the hair of his head as white as wool” (Dan 7:9 LXX). The throne itself was “flaming with fire,” with chariot-like wheels “as a fiery flame” (Dan 7:9 LXX). A great multitude stood before the throne in anticipation of what was to come (Dan 7:10). Or, better still, *who* was to come: “In my vision at night I watched, and look! Coming with the clouds of heaven was *one like a son of man*” (Dan 7:13).

The parallel language is not incidental but intentional. Yet the parallel is anything but a one-to-one correlation. John, as elsewhere in Revelation, invokes the Old Testament to bring greater clarity to the Revelation of Jesus Christ.¹³ Or to demonstrate how Jesus brings greater clarity to the sacred Scriptures.

The initial parallel is clear: “one like a son of man” (Rev 1:13; Dan 7:13) who is “coming with the clouds” (Rev 1:7; Dan 7:13) and rightfully celebrated as supremely sovereign (Rev 1:5-6; Dan 7:14). But John moves beyond what the Old Testament affirms, blending the imagery of the “Ancient of Days” with

¹³By my count, there are over 516 allusions to the Old Testament in the 404 verses of Revelation.

the “one like a son of man.” In Daniel 7:9, the Ancient of Days has clothing “white as snow” and hair “white as wool,” whereas in Revelation 1:14, Jesus’ hair is “white as wool, as white as snow.” The throne of the Ancient of Days is aflame with fire, wheels ablaze (Dan 7:9), whereas John identifies the feet of Christ “like bronze flamed in a furnace” (Rev 1:15) and “his eyes as a fiery flame” (Rev 1:14). Daniel’s vision, then, matures in Revelation to depict the “one like a son of man” with imagery more fit for the Ancient of Days himself.

This high Christology unfolds further as the Revelation unfurls. In Revelation 5, the heavenly elder comforts the weeping prophet (Rev 5:4-5) by redirecting his attention to the triumphant Lamb “appearing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev 5:6). Yet it’s the location of the slain Lamb that startles: “[The Lamb is] standing in the middle of the throne, surrounded by the four living creatures and the elders” (Rev 5:6)—the same cast who encircled God’s “throne in heaven” (Rev 4:2, 4, 6) with songs of praise and postures of worship. If such an infringement on the Shekinah could be excused, the chapter’s concluding hymn would surely cause concern: “To the one sitting on the throne *and* to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Rev 5:13; cf. Rev 7:17; 22:3).¹⁴

Revelation modifies Daniel’s vision not by mere happenstance but strategically, Christocentrically. Daniel discerned through the revelation and narrative of Jesus Christ. A narrative invoked in Jesus’ trifold appellation in Revelation 1:5:

“the faithful witness”: an allusion to Christ’s death on the cross¹⁵

“the firstborn from the dead”: an allusion to Christ’s resurrection¹⁶

¹⁴Cf. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 38b. For analysis of early Christian worship/hymns and Jesus’ divine status, see Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 605-19.

¹⁵The word μάρτυς (here translated “witness,” and from which the English word *martyr* is derived) is used five times in Revelation (Rev 1:5; 2:13; 3:14; 11:3; 17:6). Each time it refers to the death of Christ or one of his followers. Significantly, the moniker “faithful witness” is used only three times: for Jesus (Rev 1:5; cf. Rev 3:14, ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός) and for Antipas (ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστὸς μου), who was put to death in the city of Pergamum (Rev 2:13).

¹⁶Oddly, the word *resurrection* (ἀνάστασις) is used only twice, in Rev 20:5 and Rev 20:6, neither in reference to Jesus. Nevertheless, Christ’s resurrection saturates the Apocalypse in a variety of creative expressions that resist a simple word study: “I am the Living One. I was dead, but look! I am alive for ever and ever!” (Rev 1:18); “who became dead yet lived” (Rev 2:8); and describing the two witnesses, whose ministry reflects Christ, “after the three and half days, the spirit of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet” (Rev 11:11). The resurrection of Jesus is even parodied by the “beast from the sea” when it “appeared to have been slaughtered in death, but the fatal wound was healed” (Rev 13:3).

“the ruler of the kings of the earth”: an allusion to Christ’s ascension to heaven¹⁷

The story of Christ, retold in Revelation time and again, unveils the divinity and sovereignty of Christ. So, in Revelation 1:17-18, Jesus can claim the divine identifier “I am the First and the Last” (Rev 1:17; cf. Rev 2:8) because of his death on the cross (“I was dead,” Rev 1:18) and his triumphant resurrection (“I’m alive for ever and ever,” Rev 1:18), which secure universal dominion in his ascension to God’s right hand (“And I possess the keys of Death and Hades,” Rev 1:18).¹⁸

Such a revelation of Jesus Christ changes not just our understanding of Old Testament texts such as Daniel 7 but even our understanding of loneliness, the veil between heaven and earth, and grace itself.

THINNING THE VEIL

Grace is a movement of God toward humanity. Toward the fallen and the forlorn. Toward the forsaken and the crestfallen. Toward us. Grace is a divine movement impossible to reproduce or fabricate or coerce, yet a movement unmistakable to those on the receiving end. For grace does more than just “get us out of hell”; it unveils. Transforms. Creates all things new. Even “in the beginning.”

God’s first movement toward humanity, his first grace, didn’t occur on the cross or in the virgin birth or with the law on Sinai or with the exodus from Egypt. God’s first grace occurs in the first five words of sacred Scripture: “In the beginning God created” (Gen 1:1). Not from a sense of loss or a payment for an overdue debt but from a divine desire. As the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4:11 melodically instruct, God “created all things, and *through your will* they came to being and were created.”

¹⁷Throughout Scripture, depictions of the ascension are always in the context of kingdom, sovereignty, or reigning (cf. Acts 1:3-9; Dan 7:13-14). This kingdom context is why the ascension is at times invoked with the shorthand “sat down at the right hand of God,” a position of sovereignty (Mk 14:62; Acts 2:32-36; 5:31; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20-21; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22; Rev 3:21; cf. Mk 16:19; Acts 7:55-56).

¹⁸In Rev 1:8, God the Father invokes the parallel sobriquet, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” which he reintroduces in Rev 21:6, adding “the Beginning and the End.” Incredibly, Rev 22:13 combines all three parallel monikers in red letters: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

God birthed creation by his choice; he sustains creation by his desire. He pours himself out anew each day and each moment, so that breath continues to fill life's lungs, so that gravity continues to secure love's attraction, so that the heavens, day after day, "pour out speech" (Ps 19:2) testifying to God's glory, goodness, and grace.

Nevertheless, creation, both space and time, is a gift of grace often misconstrued. Space is warred over, while time maligned—never enough of either to satisfy the avaricious heart of humanity originally fashioned in the image of a God (Gen 1:26-27) who, ironically, withholds nothing. Sacrifices all for everyone. Pours himself out on evil and his own indiscriminately.

As in the Garden of Eden, though, humanity still longs to live with no boundaries, no limits, no restrictions. Humanity crafts anything and everything to transcend space and time, re-envisioning creation as not a movement of grace but something more akin to incarceration. A flaming sword preventing us from going back to Eden while compelling us toward our inevitable appointment with death, the ultimate end of our space and our time. Humanity imagines a body-like prison fettered to creation.¹⁹ Manacled by space and time.

Yet, in the beginning, God created both space and time as an act of grace. An ineffable context through which the boundaried and the boundless can commune, the finite and the eternal can interact, God and humanity can walk together "in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8). Yes, God is beyond all, yet in creation, *because* of space and time, humanity can encounter him. The boundaries of creation make possible interaction with the boundless Creator. In other words, creation is grace, a movement of God toward us.

Humanity, though, deceived by the "ancient serpent called the devil and Satan" (Rev 12:9), chose to conjoin creation with death (Gen 3:6-7), converting the pure into the perverted and reinterpreting the cosmos as an impenetrable barrier between God and his beloved. Creation, then, became the thorn in the flesh of divine intimacy—cosmological bars imprisoning us from ourselves, from others, and from heaven's gaze. As expected, space and time were imbued with loneliness, a movement of death toward humanity.

However, our reinvention of creation in the image of death didn't pause God's pursuit or prevent God from drawing near. Regardless of what our

¹⁹See Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.1-6; *Legum allegoriae* 3.72-74.

senses say, creation doesn't limit God's presence but engenders the possibility of divine intimacy. Alone on Patmos, John still encounters the cosmic Christ (Rev 1:10-21), unveiling a truth that echoes throughout the entirety of Revelation: the veil between heaven and earth is not as thick as we assume.

All throughout the Apocalypse space and time intermingle with eternity and the abode of God in a way that is as seamless as Christ's clothes bartered at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:23-24). For, in Revelation, cosmology collapses under the weight of God's pursuit. So, Jesus visits earth in Revelation 1, even as John graces the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4-5. In Revelation 7, John sees the multitude of Christ-followers *on earth* (Rev 7:1-8), and with a glance he sees the "great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue, *standing before the throne* and before the Lamb" (Rev 7:9).²⁰ All throughout Revelation, this theme plays on repeat, so that what happens in heaven affects earth, and so too the reverse.

Consider the seven seals. The Lamb enthroned in heaven (Rev 5:6) opens the first four seals (Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7), each resulting in an earthly consequence, because what happens in heaven affects the earth. In the seventh seal, though, it's the prayers of the saints on earth that render heaven silent "for about half an hour" (Rev 8:1, 3), because what happens on earth touches heaven. Why? Because in spite of what loneliness promises, in Revelation, space doesn't separate. And time is no different. In Christ, time is no longer a barrier or even linear. In Revelation, time moves uninterrupted from the beginning of eternity (Rev 6:12-17; 11:15-19; 16:17-21) to the very creation of the earth. So, the death of Jesus under Pontius Pilate pervades not just first-century Palestine but the entire timeline, for, according to Revelation, "the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8).

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, then, reveals that the veil between humanity and divinity is actually quite porous, easily penetrated, rendering heaven and earth, time and eternity, at times almost indistinguishable (Rev 14:1-20). The veil is so thin that in Revelation the abode of God and the abode of humanity interact without hindrance, a wedding of the divine and

²⁰Revelation 7:1-3 painstakingly locates the 144,000 on earth, with the angels standing at "the four corners of the earth," obstructing the "four winds of the earth" from moving about "the earth or on the sea or on any tree" (Rev 7:1), before receiving the command to "not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we might seal the servants of our God on their foreheads" (Rev 7:3).

the human found only in the incarnation itself. In the person of Jesus Christ. Fully human yet fully God. A union that foreshadows the promise to come in Revelation 21, where heaven and earth are indeed new because they are, once again, *one*—as it was “in the beginning.”

In the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the veil between God and humanity is “torn in two from top to bottom” (Mt 27:51). Cosmology collapses, not whimsically but strategically. Purposefully. Revelation thins the veil to consume our loneliness, to transform our quarantine into the conduit through which heaven draws near to earth to respond to the cavernous void created by the tyranny of death. Revelation confronts the satanic deception that in creation, we are alone, exiled on an island of misery and isolation. Instead, Revelation reveals the startling truth that heaven is closer than we assume. That even in our loneliness, God is nearer than we surmise or at times can endure.

GRACED BY LONELINESS

In Revelation 1:17-18, cosmology collapses under the weight of God’s pursuit. In these two verses, an image of intimacy unfolds, a depiction of death’s undoing, a divine movement of grace that summarizes the point of this chapter, the message of Revelation, and the heart of the gospel as a whole.

In Revelation 1:12-16, Jesus draws near (grace), and John is overwhelmed. Undone. “And when I saw him,” John recounts, “I fell to his feet as though dead” (Rev 1:17).²¹ A posture mirroring his lonely heart. But John doesn’t cling to Christ’s feet like Mary in the garden (Jn 20:11-17) or pepper Jesus with questions like the two on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-29). John buries his

²¹Most commentators spend little space on the first part of Rev 1:17. For example, in G. K. Beale’s 1,245-page tome, about ninety words are used on this text. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 213. Perhaps scholars relegate this text because the action is seen as a typical feature or “stereotyped behavior” of the prophetic genre. See James Moffatt, “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), 5:345. See also David E. Aune, *Revelation*, WBC 52A-52C (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997–1998), 1:99; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 67; Christopher C. Rowland, “The Book of Revelation: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12:567. Nevertheless, Rev 1:17 adds a unique detail absent from other prophetic theophanies. Whereas elements such as “falling to the ground” (Dan 8:17; Ezek 1:28; 43:3; 44:4), a “loud voice” guiding the vision (Dan 8:16; Ezek 1:28; 43:2), and the comforting command “Do not fear” (Dan 10:12) are all found elsewhere, John’s addition “as though dead” seems to describe more than just his reaction to the divine appearance—it appears to extend to the plight of the Christian communities navigating the tension of Domitian’s reign (for more, see chapter two below).

face in the rocky soil of Patmos, breathes in the dust of the earth that seeks to reclaim his body in death.

John falls at the feet of Christ. His King. His absent friend. That is, until now. For now, Life approaches with brilliant light dispelling all isolation, rending darkness with his presence. Now, Truth appears with a piercing gaze, dissolving all mystery and doubt. Now, Resurrection draws near to confront the death enshrouding his beloved.

Jesus arrives; John falls down as though dead. And silence fills the scene.

The silence of an empty tomb.

The silence of despair defied by hope.

John doesn't move because the dead don't move. John doesn't speak because the dead are mute. John doesn't assert control because the dead are lost in an abyss of surrender. A cosmological collapse crafted in the image of death and separation.

But then: grace.

A movement of God.

Toward us. For us.

“And when I saw him, I fell to his feet as though dead. But he lay his right hand on me saying, ‘Do not fear. I am the First and the Last. The Living One. I was dead, but look! I am alive—for ever and ever. And I possess the keys of Death and of Hades’” (Rev 1:17-18).

In response to John's deadness, Jesus makes the first move. A move toward John, drowning in death. Jesus reaches across the chasm and touches him, refusing to allow the story of creation to end in tragedy, refusing to allow cosmology to dictate intimacy. In Christ Jesus, separation is spanned by grace. Christ crosses the canyon of fallen creation, the cavern separating life and death, with a nail-scarred hand, tenderly soothing the wounds of humanity with a divine touch and a profound exhortation, “Do not fear.”

Do not fear the loneliness. Do not fear the daunting horizon before you. Do not fear the illusion of divine distance. For perfect love casts out all fear. Exiles fear. Dismisses fear as far as the east is from the west, so as to embolden creation to see beyond the veil that death uses to shroud us from grace, from the movements of God toward his creation. With his touch, Christ whispers words of peace stretching far beyond what language can contain: “Do not fear, dear child. Let the scales fall from your eyes; let life displace death in you,



transform loneliness in you from a barrier into a birth canal. Breathe once again, O my creation, for the Spirit is filling your lungs anew, transforming dust into a divine home, a temple fit for the triune God. Do not fear, for resurrection has come.”

THE GOOD NEWS OF THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Revelation 1:17-18 is the gospel in short. The book of Revelation in brief. The Revelation of Jesus Christ in toto. Death is touched by life in a movement of grace that casts out all fear and dispels any doubt: the veil between humanity and divinity is quite thin. Our brokenness hasn't gone unnoticed, our rebellion hasn't gone unperceived, our resilience won't go unrewarded. Because God is near; he is moving. He is breaking every barrier, traversing any boundary, not just to be by you but to transform you. All of you. Through the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Without question, Revelation's target is not prediction but transformation. Of you. Of me. Of all that is broken.

Revelation comes to us and finds us wallowing in loneliness. Finds us face down as though dead. Unable to move or respond or to do much more than weep and make things worse. Revelation responds by spanning the chasm of death with the touch of life. Revelation responds with a message of intimacy beyond imagination, of God's movement beyond perception, of healing far beyond what we can procure through our own efforts and strain. Revelation responds with grace: God's movement toward his broken creation.

To those east of Eden, Revelation sings songs of transformation, conducts hymns of liberation, and marches to the rhythm of the divine heartbeat found in all creation, embedded in the image of God shrouded with garments of skin. Revelation, by God's grace, thins the veil between heaven and earth, revealing, among other things, a God who is near. Intimately so.

GOING DEEPER

THE TOOL: Context, part 2. Assumptions can be blinding, obscuring our ability to see others or even Scripture clearly. Watch this video on challenging assumptions (www.ivpress.com/wood-la) and wrestle with the following questions:

1. What assumptions have people made about you? How did they make you feel?
2. What assumptions have you made about other people (be as specific as you can)? How did they affect your interaction with them?
3. Before this study, what assumptions did you have about Revelation? How did that affect the questions you asked about the text?

THE TEXT: Encountering Christ (Rev 1:1-21). Loneliness threatens our ability to see God clearly. Yet God confronts our loneliness with divine presence. After watching this video (www.ivpress.com/wood-lb), answer the following questions:

1. When you are lonely or struggling to see God move, what questions saturate your prayers? What thoughts pervade your heart and mind?
2. Recount a time when you saw God move or answer your prayer. What prayers did you offer in response? What thoughts filled your soul?
3. If Christ were sitting next to you right now, what questions would you ask him? What words would you offer him?

THE TAKEAWAY: Encountering the voice of God. Revelation 1:3 says, “Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of this prophecy.” Since the majority of the first-century world was illiterate, most Christians experienced the New Testament letters by hearing the Word of God. Not reading them. Thus, the ancient Christian prayer practice of *audito divina* centers on the transforming power of hearing God’s Word. Here’s how it works:

1. Go to www.biblica.com/resources/niv-audio-bible-listen-online-for-free/ and navigate to Revelation 1.
2. Click the audio link at the top of the passage so the narrator reads the passage out loud.
3. Close your eyes and allow God’s Word to wash over you.
4. Reflect on the following:



- ▶ What word or phrase stuck out to you? What do you think the Lord is saying to you through that word or phrase?
- ▶ What image or symbol stuck out to you? What do you think the first-century Christian would have experienced hearing that same symbol?
- ▶ Compare and contrast hearing the Word of God with reading the Word of God.



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