

"REVELATION MADE RELEVANT"

A verse by verse exposition of the Bible's most controversial book

I. Why Revelation?

If we are going to understand why Revelation is so important, we need to first take a close look at the first three verses of Revelation (1:1-3). These will be the focus of our first study. We will also look at introductory elements like author and audience, date and place of its recording, and overall purpose. In addition, we will review the four main interpretive approaches toward Revelation over the last 2000 years.

Let me just add that Revelation is more than a doomsday forecast. It is not primarily a social or political commentary. Rather, we will see that it is the culminating expression of Christ's work on earth – past, present, and future! The truths expressed through the words and visions given to John serve as a guide for understanding God's plan for our world and life, as well as the hope all people have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A. Setting

1. **Author** - the early, well-documented tradition among the church fathers – Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Origen (c. 150-250 AD) was that John, son of Zebedee, and the beloved apostle and author of the Gospel of John and his three letters, wrote the book of Revelation.
2. **Audience** - Revelation describes the vision that the apostle John had while on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. After he wrote it down it was sent to seven churches on Asia Minor as a "circular letter" to be read during their worship services. More copies were transcribed and sent to other churches until it became a common scroll used in worship services and study.
3. **Date** - The content of Revelation suggests it was written during a time of severe persecution. There are two possible periods when Christians suffered persecution under the Roman Empire:
 - a) The reign of Emperor Nero (AD 54–68)
 - 1) some ancient versions of Revelation mention Nero's name.
 - 2) Nero blamed Christians for a massive fire in Rome. He then severely persecuted them.
 - 3) Revelation does not mention the destruction of the temple which occurred after Nero's reign in AD 70. If Revelation was written later than AD 70, proponents contend that a significant event like the temple's destruction would likely have been mentioned. (Of course, they forget that if the visions came directly from God and they were about the future, there would be no need to mention the Temple in Jerusalem!).

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- b) The reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81–96)
 - 1) Testimony from early church fathers reports that John wrote the book during the reign of Domitian.
 - 2) Emperor Domitian required that he be addressed as “lord and god.” Christians refused, making themselves likely targets for persecution during Domitian’s reign.

4. Purpose

- a) It first served to encourage and challenge believers living in Asia Minor during a time of persecution – see above. The Church not only faced persecution, but false teachers, idolatry, immorality, and spiritual complacency. It eventually became accepted as God’s Word for the Church for all ages.
- b) Revelation is meant to instruct, comfort, and reassure Christians in their spiritual journey and point the world to the coming Day of the Lord – the Return of the King!

B. The Five Most Important Words in the Bible?

1. What are the five most important words in the Bible? Some might say, “*In the beginning God created*” or “*God so loved the world*” but they only tell part of the story. The full story can only be expressed by....
2. **Revelation 1:1a:** “**THE REVELATION of Jesus Christ**” or “**APOKALYPSIS IESOU CHRISTOU**” in the original Greek.

The Greek word, *apokalypsis*, is taken from the Greek verb, *apokalupto*, which means “to reveal or uncover.” “To reveal” means “to expose in full view that which was formerly hidden, veiled, or secret.” In other words, the only way you can know it, is if it were shown to you. You could not figure it out on your own. Our faith is a revelatory faith. It is not something man figured out or made up. It comes directly from God, and specifically the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In fact, these five words sum up the entire witness of Scripture. The first sixty-five books of the Bible are also “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” You ask, “How so?” Recall Jesus said in **John 5:39** that the Scriptures (our Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible) testify (bear witness) about Him. The Apostle Paul affirms this in his benediction at the end of his letter to Romans (**Romans 16:25-27**). The entire witness of the Bible is to show God’s plan of salvation and life through the promised coming, the actual life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So these *first five words* of Revelation simply affirm the entire purpose of the Bible! The only way we can truly know God is to know Christ. And the only way to know Christ is if He reveals Himself to us. **John 1:14-18** states that Jesus did just that as “***the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us... No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.***”

The Bible tells us we can know that there is a God by virtue of observing the creation – c.f. **Romans 1:18-20**. And also our conscience bears witness to the reality of a Creator in that we all have a sense of right and wrong. In fact, it is our conscience **Romans 2:14-16** tells that will either condemn us or excuse us on the day of judgment. Both creation itself and man’s conscience and consciousness (i.e. – knowing that one exists) are examples of what is termed General or Natural Revelation. While we can know that there

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is a god through natural revelation, we can never know WHO God really is unless He shows Himself to us.

And He does so through Supernatural or Special Revelation. Throughout Scripture, the way God supernaturally reveals Himself to mankind is through what is called the "Word." In Hebrew (Old Testament), the term that we translate as "word" is *dabar*. In the Greek (New Testament) it is *logos*. *Dabar* was anything God did to reveal Himself and communicate His will. It could include a voice from the Lord, a vision or dream, a miracle, an angelic visitation, a word of knowledge, and so forth. These dynamic Words were preserved in written form and became the Holy Scriptures. Ultimately however, as noted in **John 1:1-18** and demonstrated throughout the four Gospels, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us – Jesus Christ!

So do you see how the very first words of the Book of Revelation bring the focus on Jesus Christ? Note it is "THE" not "A" REVELATION of Jesus Christ. It is not RevelationS either! This shows that THE REVELATION of Jesus Christ is complete in and of itself. It is a coherent unified whole with no conflict or division within it. It is also final (c.f. **Rev. 22:18**). There is no greater authority. This is affirmed in the rest of verse 1. The word "of" can mean that it is both of Jesus Himself as well as from Jesus. So the entire book of Revelation comes from Christ Himself and reveals Christ as well!

3. **Rev. 1:1b:** *"which God gave Him to show His bond-servants which shall soon take place;"* To demonstrate further that this book is directly from God we read that **"God** (the Father) ***gave*** it to ***Him*** (Christ) ***"to show" His bond-servants what must shortly take place.*** God is showing us what will soon take place (after the visions themselves are disclosed). Note God's people are called "bond-servants" (*doulos* in the Greek) or can be translated simply as "servants," the first of eleven times that title is used for us! Jesus said if we are to be great in the Kingdom of God we must be a servant of all. Jesus came to serve and our call is no less!
4. **Rev. 1:1c:** *"and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John,"* Jesus revealed the visions to John, a fellow servant – like us! – and sent an angel to make sure John got it right! Angels are part of God's created order. They take part in the worship of God, execute His judgments on earth, minister to God's people, and communicate His word. Angels are mentioned sixty-seven times in Revelation alone! Here we see the five links in the chain of authorship - – God the Father *to* God the Son *to* His angel *to* His servant John *to* the servants of God (us!). It should be noted that later in verse 10, John writes that he was ***"in the Spirit"*** which shows that the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, was completely involved in the revelation process as well.
5. **Rev. 1:2:** *"who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ."* The word "testify" (*martyria* in the Greek) means to validate as an eyewitness. It is what you would expect from a person in a court of law. John is verifying that what he saw is true by virtue of the fact that it is both the Word of God (a divine revelation) and it is personally from Jesus Christ Himself.

C. The Blessings It Brings

Rev. 1:3: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." Here we have the first of seven blessings (the other six are found in Rev. 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14) pronounced in the book of Revelation. The blessing begins with the one who reads and those who hear the words read aloud. Books were not easy to come by in the ancient world as there were no printing presses. The scrolls of the Scriptures were read to the congregation during services on the Lord's Day – Sunday. We continue that practice today at St. Bartholomew's. It is also likely that the entire book of Revelation was read in one sitting! (They didn't have the distractions we have today) This should encourage us to gain an understanding of the entire message of Revelation as a whole as well as its corresponding parts.

But the blessing cannot be fully realized *unless* the things which are written (God's Word) *are obeyed*. This is reiterated in the sixth blessing found in **Revelation 22:7: "Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book."** This means that the message of Revelation CAN be understood and followed. It is meant to be read, known, understood, and applied to everyday life. Thus, we will see throughout our study that Revelation is not only a book of prophecy, but it is a book of worship, discipleship, evangelism, salvation, judgment, history, hope, AND ultimately it is the book of Jesus Christ!

II. The Four Main Interpretive Approaches to Revelation

- A. Preterist** - Revelation is a prophecy that was fulfilled primarily in the first century AD.
1. Partial Preterists understand most of Revelation as prophecy fulfilled in the first century AD, though the final chapters describe future events at the end of time.
 2. Full Preterists contend that the return of Jesus described in Revelation 19 was spiritual and occurred in AD 70.
- B. Historicist** - Revelation is a prophecy about church history from John's time to the world's end.
1. Revelation is like a history textbook for the past, present, and future.
 2. The events are symbolic descriptions of historical events throughout church history culminating in the return of Jesus Christ the establishment of God's Kingdom.
- C. Futurist** - see Revelation as prophecy primarily about the future end of the world.
1. All events mentioned *after* chapter 3 are yet to occur. Revelation is a prophecy that describes the end of time & the years leading immediately to the end (tribulation period).
 2. Some futurists understand the Seven Churches similarly to the historicist view: the churches represent eras in church history.
- D. Idealist** - see Revelation as a non-historical and non-prophetic drama about spiritual realities.
1. The images and visions are symbolic expressions of the struggles between good (the kingdom of God) and evil (the powers of Satan) throughout time.
 2. This view originated among ancient Alexandrian theologians who frequently spiritualized and allegorized biblical texts.