

## Revelation

We come then to the final study of the week and we end where the Bible itself ends – with the book of Revelation. It is probably safe to say that no other New Testament book has been so misunderstood as Revelation. And this misunderstanding has had two consequences:

- God's people are so confused about its message that they stick to other parts of scripture and never read it. This applies to preachers as well who will shy away from preaching systematically through the book; or
- Some people have developed an unhealthy fascination with specific parts of the book which they have taken out of its context and they talk of nothing else.

Five years ago Phil preached systematically through Revelation in our church and a retired minister from the Methodist church in the town heard about this and he commented to his son (who is a friend of mine) that what Phil was doing was a bad thing. The book of Revelation is not appropriate for the gathered church on its Sunday morning services where ordinary people and children are present.

Or you can go onto the internet and you get the other extreme – reams and reams of information, interpretation, commentary and prediction all of which leave your head in a spin as you read them. You can watch any number of You Tube videos or spend all your money on Amazon buying books.

So what are we to make of it? The first thing to say is that the overall message of Revelation is actually very simple – Jesus wins. That is it. Revelation is the final instalment of what the whole of the rest of the Bible always said would happen.

Throughout the whole of scripture God has promised that he would send his messiah – his chosen one – who would complete the work of God on earth. He would save his people and then put all his enemies under his feet and he would reign as the great King of kings for all eternity with his people gathered safely to him. And Revelation merely confirms this great Bible truth.

The church of God in communist Czechoslovakia knew this. On 27<sup>th</sup> November 1989 when the communist government fell a church in the capital city Prague erected a sign. For decades they had been forbidden any publicity, but with the winds of freedom blowing the Christians posted three words which summarized not only the New Testament in general but the book of Revelation in particular: "The Lamb Wins." Their point was not that Christ had unexpectedly gained victory but that he had been reigning in triumph all along. Christ is always the winner. He was winning, even when the church seemed to lie crushed under the apparatus of totalitarian rule. Now at least it could be proclaimed!

Given that the book was written to churches in Asia Minor (Turkey) who were oppressed under totalitarian rule just like those in Prague maybe the message of Revelation is best understood by those who are lowly and oppressed in the world – by those who are battlefield Christians rather than armchair Christians.

But not everyone in church history has shared this positive view about understanding Revelation. Martin Luther was so dismayed by the book that in the preface to his German translation, he argued for its removal from the Bible. (Not his finest moment). Karl Barth, the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, exclaimed, "If I only know what to do with Revelation!" Ambrose Bierce (an American writer) spoke for many when he defined Revelation as a "famous book in which St. John the divine concealed all that he knew."

Yet the opening words of the book should lead us to the exactly opposite conclusion. Why? Revelation 1vs1 begins, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” This is a book, therefore, the purpose of which is to reveal. God gave it, verse one adds, “to show to his servants the things that must soon take place,” and “made it known” to his servant John. It does not sound like Revelation is intended to conceal or confuse, since it reveals, shows, and makes things known. It is a book which is informative and helpful.

What I want to do now is just spend a bit of time thinking about what we have here in the prologue (vs.1-3) to the book. **[READ 1vs1-3]**. This prologue provides four vital pieces of information that will help us understand this book. According to the opening verses, Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy, an historical letter, a gospel testimony and a means of blessing for God’s needy people. So let’s work our way through these four statements.

### Apocalyptic Prophecy

The word “apocalypse” conjures up all sorts of images in our minds fuelled by Hollywood, Xbox and various other not very reliable sources. And most of these are based on a misunderstanding of what is meant when Revelation is called the Apocalypse.

In 1vs1 the word that we have translated “revelation” is *apokalypse* from the Greek word *apokalupsis*. The word means the unveiling of something that is hidden. It might be used of a sculpture that has been covered with a cloth, which is now pulled away. Or it might be used of a grand building whose façade was covered by scaffolding, but now with the scaffolding removed the glory of the architecture is seen.

Paul used this word in 2 Thess. 1vs7 to describe Jesus second coming – “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels”. So the book of the Apocalypse is an unveiling of the plan of God for the history of the world, especially of the church.”

And this is the meaning behind the genre of biblical writing that we describe as apocalyptic. The book of Revelation is not the only apocalyptic book in the Bible. What else? Parts of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah.

Apocalyptic books usually feature an angel who presents dramatic visions to portray the clash between good and evil. These books employ vivid symbols, including symbolic numbers, to depict the spiritual reality unfolding behind the scenes of history. An apocalypse usually contains the message that “God is going to burst into history in a dramatic and unexpected way, despite all appearances that God’s people are facing oppression and defeat.” While there are differences between Revelation and other apocalyptic books, it fits the basic description of the literary genre.

Realizing the kind of book that Revelation is will greatly influence our approach to studying it. Some Christians seek to uphold a high view of Scripture by insisting that it always be interpreted literally. When applied to Revelation, this rule breeds only confusion. It is true that John literally received the visions recorded in Revelation, but the visions consisted of symbols that must be interpreted not literally but rather symbolically.

This is true of the fantastic imagery in Revelation, such as the dragon and his beasts, and of symbolic numbers like 7 and 666. When we are reading the Bible’s historical books, like Samuel or Acts, we will normally take the plain, literal meaning unless there is compelling reason to interpret a passage otherwise. In studying Revelation this approach should be reversed: we will interpret visions symbolically unless there is a good reason to take a passage literally. This is not to say that the

visions do not depict real events, whether in John's time or the future, but that the events are symbolically rather than literally presented in Revelation.

But Revelation is not only an apocalypse but should also be understood as a book of biblical prophecy. This is how John mainly describes his book: after using the term apocalypse in the first verse, he five times identifies the book as a prophecy, starting with verse 3: "the words of this prophecy." We usually think of prophecy as foretelling distant events, but the main job of a prophet was to give a message from the Lord that demands an obedient response. Prophets speak to the present, in light of what is soon to come, and they call for repentance, faith and changes in lifestyle."

It is in this respect that Revelation differs from other apocalyptic writings, since it speaks not only of far-off events but also of those which were soon to break upon the readers. John wrote about "things that must soon take place," urging that "the time is near" (Rev. 1:1, 3). This was not just a way of saying that things, though really distant, should seem near but rather that God was revealing challenges that were immediately before his readers. It is for this reason that Revelation is considered an apocalyptic prophecy. While taking an apocalyptic form, it delivers a prophetic message that is directly relevant to its original readers, as well as to Christians of all times.

And it is relevant because it is "The revelation of Jesus Christ." The book reveals to us that Jesus Christ is reigning in heaven and that he has his church on earth. It tells us that he is in the midst of his church. And it tells us that the church is in a very dangerous place. Christ's bride, the church, is beset by a dragon, which depicts Satan, who is served by horrible, ravenous beasts, a harlot Babylon, and followers who bear the mark of the beast.

What will happen to Christ's bride, the church, with such deadly foes intent on her harm? Revelation's answer is that God will defend his people, judging his enemies and sending Jesus with a double-edged sword to slay those who persecute his bride. In succession, Christ defeats his enemies, starting with the two beasts and then the harlot Babylon, and finally casting Satan and his followers into the lake of fire.

After Christ has come to rescue his bride, Revelation's true story of our world ends with the church living happily ever after in the glory of the royal heavenly city, awakening to life forever in the embrace of her beautiful, loving, conquering Prince.

The prophetic unveiling of this history is the message of Revelation. Revelation does not primarily intend to present mysterious clues about the Second Coming. To be sure, as Revelation advances it narrows its focus on the return of Christ, which brings final victory. ***But the message of Revelation is God's government of history to redeem his purified and persecuted church through the victory of Christ his Son.***

For this reason, Revelation does not speak merely to the generation in which it was written or to a future generation when Christ returns. Rather the book reveals the principles of divine moral government which are constantly operating, so that, whatever age we happen to live in, we can see God's hand in history, and His mighty arm protecting us and giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ so that we are edified and comforted.

#### Historical Letter

A second feature for us to realize is that Revelation is an historical letter that is grounded firmly in the times in which it was given. It begins with the customary letter format in verses 4-5, giving the name of the writer and the recipients together with a greeting, and also ends as a letter in chapter 22.

The letter was written by the apostle John in about 95AD when he was in exile on the island of Patmos. And it was written to the churches of Asia Minor where John was very well known. He had served as an elder of the church in Ephesus and Polycarp of Smyrna had been one of John's pupils.

95AD was towards the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. Domitian was a paranoid despot who was eventually assassinated by his own court officials. A central tool of his reign to ensure that he always got his own way was the reintroduction of emperor worship. He styled himself as a God – the embodiment of the God that was Rome and all people across the vast empire were required to worship him. They could also worship whatever other gods they chose as well. For most people that was fine, but for Christians this was impossible – “You shall have no other gods before me.”

So, at the time of writing John was being persecuted. He was exiled to Patmos and the church in Asia Minor was suffering. This is explicitly confirmed for us in the individual letters in ch's 2 and 3.

When we realize that Revelation was an historical letter, we see the error of those interpreters who view most of Revelation as speaking only about events yet to take place. As a real letter to real ancient people, the meaning of Revelation had to be relevant and accessible to the original audience. The immediate purpose of the letter was to strengthen the wavering hearts of the persecuted believers of the first century. If we are to properly understand it today then we must understand how it applied 2000 years ago also.

#### A Gospel Testimony

A third feature of Revelation is that this book is the Word of God bearing a gospel testimony to Christ: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.” (Rev. 1:1-2). Although John the apostle was the writer of Revelation, the message came not from him but from God, through Jesus Christ.

The description of how Revelation was transmitted gives us insight into the process known as inspiration, that is, the way God used human writers to give a divine message. Many Bible books contain a message God gave immediately to the prophetic writer, who passed it on to other believers. Here, God the Father gave a revelation to Jesus Christ, who in turn sent an angel to show it to his servant John, so that John could write down the message for the servants of Christ in the seven churches. The obvious import of this progression is that Revelation does not consist of a message that originated in the imagination or experience of John himself.

Earlier on in the week we considered the Bible's claims to be the word of God. And because Revelation is God's word we can interpret difficult portions of Revelation by comparison with clearer teachings elsewhere. This is because God's word is harmonious and unified. Indeed, since the images of Revelation are derived from earlier prophetic writings, the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture is especially important when it comes to this book.

Revelation is not only God's Word but John specifies it as “the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:2). Most commentators limit this statement to mean that Revelation is Jesus' testimony to his church. But it is also true that Revelation is a testimony about Jesus as the Lord and Saviour who is sufficient to the needs of his people. It is in this sense that Revelation is a gospel testimony.

Revelation presents Christ as the sovereign over the councils of God for history, the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the seals of God's scroll, thus receiving the worship of heaven (4:1-5:14). It

concludes with the conquering Christ, whose sword cuts down his enemies (19:11-21), who sits on the throne of God's judgment in the last day (20:11-15), and in whose blessing the church, Christ's radiant bride, now delivered from all the trials of this world, dwells in the light of God's presence forever (21:1-22:21). This is why over and over in Revelation, the angels and worshipers above break out in praise to Jesus.

This history presented in Revelation is nothing less than gospel: the good news of Christ reigning over history to save his church. Seeing this belies the idea that the gospel is only for those who are yet to be saved. Revelation is not primarily an evangelistic book; its intended audience is not the unbelieving world facing divine judgment but the beleaguered church looking to Christ for relief. To be sure, Revelation is evangelistic – the book even concludes with an invitation to receive the free gift of salvation (22:17) – but its gospel message is primarily given to needy believers, who Christ calls to courageous faithfulness in light of his gospel reign.

### A Means of Blessing

And fourthly, this prologue tells us that the book of Revelation (just like the Bible in general) is a means of divine blessing for those who read, hear and keep its message. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."

Since the God who originated this book is still the God who reigns over all with wisdom and power, those who read and believe Revelation will be supernaturally blessed even today.

John specifies blessing, first, on "the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy." The order of the churches listed in Revelation 2-3 follows the path a messenger would take from city to city. This suggests that John intended the letter to go from one to the next so that it could be read aloud in each congregation. In a time of persecution, this action required courage and a strong devotion to Jesus, for which the reader was sure to be blessed by God.

God's blessing was furthermore given to "those who hear," and specifically to those "who keep what is written in it". To keep the book of Revelation is to treasure its message and obey the commands of Christ given in it. This connects with John's description of his readers as God's "servants" (Rev. 1:1). Literally, the word *doulos* means "slave." The point is that true believers are those who accept the obligation of obeying God's commands, and who not only give outward agreement to the Bible but also confirm it in the faithfulness of their lives. These servants are blessed by God through the grace that comes through his Word.

The urgency of receiving Revelation is made clear by the final words of John's prologue: "for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3). One of the lamentable tendencies in the study of Revelation is to believe that it focuses only on the return of Christ to end history. Under this reasoning, many if not most sermons on Revelation conclude with the question, "Are you ready for Jesus' coming?"

It is true that Revelation foretells a great event that Christians must face. But that great event is not the Second Coming, at least not first of all. Rather, the event that in Revelation's view is soon to arrive is the persecution of the Christian church by the blood-thirsty world. To be sure, Christ's coming is near – either through the help he gives us now or in his final coming to end all history – but John's appeal to the urgency of his writing pertains to the obedience of his church to the commands and promises of Christ in the face of violent worldly persecution.

Every Christian can be blessed now, John says, though facing persecution and beset with weakness and sin, by hearing and keeping the saving testimony of the Bible. We are blessed in our trials by

God's Word. Receiving in Revelation the good news that "The Lamb Wins," we are blessed above all other blessings to be persuaded that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:37-39).

So the study of those first three verses gives us the framework with which to approach the study of the book. What I want to do for the rest of the time is to run through the structure of the book. In a book which is full of symbolism it is no surprise that the structure falls into seven distinct parts.

It is important to say at the outset that these seven sections are not sequential. They are not a record of seven consecutive epochs or events that are to be played out one after the other. Rather what we have are different and developing views of the same thing, all of which culminates in the great victory of the lamb.

These different perspectives are all on human history from the time the letter was written to its climax in the second coming of Christ. We will see this as we work our through the book.

## **Revelation (The Bible's Grand Finale)**

(= a *technicolour* vision of Human History\* & its Final Outcome)

\*from John's day, towards the end of the First Century AD

### **Prologue**

Title and Blessing, Greeting, Warning, Authentication (1v1-8)

### **① Seven Letters to Seven Churches** (chapters 1-3)

(= history from the standpoint of local churches)

OPENING SCENE: **The Glorious Son of Man in the midst of his churches** (1v9-20) ⇨ *Christ is in our midst*

"write what you've seen, what is, & what is to take place after this..." (1v19)

- ① Ephesus: "Everything... But Your First Love" (2v1-7)
- ② Smyrna: "Poor & Under Attack... But Don't Fear!" (2v8-11)
- ③ Pergamum: "Faithful... but Beware Compromise!" (2v12-17)
- ④ Thyatira: "Well Done... but Watch Out!" (2v18-29)
- ⑤ Sardis: "A Name for Life... but At Death's Door!" (3v1-6)
- ⑥ Philadelphia: "Weak... but Be Encouraged!" (3v7-13)
- ⑦ Laodicea: "So Confident... but So Wretched" (3v14-22)

### **② Seven Seals of History Opened** (chapters 4-7)

(= the key elements in history, echoing *Matthew 24* etc.)

An Open Door to Heaven! (4v1)

"...I will show you what must take place after this"

OPENING SCENE: **God and The Lamb** (4v2–5v13)

God Enthroned as Lord & Worshipped as Holy Creator (4v2-11)

The Lamb Can Open the Seals & is Worthy of All Worship (5v1-14)

⇨ *God is on his throne*

Four Horsemen

- ① The Conqueror (6v1-2)
- ② Strife & War (6v3-4)
- ③ Trade & Scarcity (6v5-6)
- ④ Death & Hades - war, famine, plague, predators (6v7-8)
- ⑤ The Martyrs Cry "How Long?" (6v9-11)
- ⑥ Earthquake, Signs in the Skies, Mountains & Islands Removed, The Lamb's Wrath (6v12-17)

INTERLUDE (How the church fits in...)

God's Servants on Earth – Sealed for Protection (7v1-8)

...and into in Heaven – Shepherded by the Lamb (7v9-17)

⑦ Seal 7: Silence in Heaven (8v1)

## ③ Seven Trumpets of Warning Sounded (chapters 8-11)

(= *history with God's warnings highlighted*)

OPENING SCENE: Prayers and incense ascending (8v2-6)

⇒ *Prayer is being heard*

① The Earth Stricken (8v7)

② The Sea Stricken (8v8-9)

③ The Rivers Stricken (8v10-11)

④ The Sky Stricken (8v12)

“Woe, Woe, Woe to men, at the Remaining Trumpet Blasts...!” (8v13)

⑤ Locust Torment from The Pit (9v1-12).

“...two woes to go...!” (9v12)

⑥ An Army of Death; Idolaters Unrepentant (9v13-21)

INTERLUDE (How the church fits in...)

Seven Thunders: No More Delay (10v1-7)

...John to Eat the Little Scroll & Prophecy (10v8-11)

The Temple Measured; The Two Witnesses; Earthquake (11v1-14)

“one woe to go...!” (11v14)

⑦ The World's Kingdom is Now Christ's (11v15-18)

## ④ The Dragon's War (7 visions of cosmic conflict) (chapters 12-14)

(= *history as the great theatre of hostility*)

God's Temple Opened: The Ark is seen & a storm breaks (11v19)

OPENING SCENE: **The Woman, the Dragon, & the Child Born to Rule** (War in Heaven & On Earth!) (12v1-17)

“and I saw” ① ...the Beast from the Sea & its worshippers (13v1-10)

...call for endurance & faith (13v10)

② ...the Beast from the Earth, and the mark '666' (13v11-18)

...call for wisdom (13v18)

③ ...the Lamb and his 144,000, singing a new song (14v1-5)

④ ...three Angels of Warning (14v6-13)

...call for endurance (14v12)

⑤ ...the Son of Man and the Final Reaping (14v14-20)

⑥ ...Seven Angels with seven Last Plagues (15v1)

⑦ ...the Song of Victory (15v2-4)

## ⑤ Seven Bowls of Wrath Poured Out (chs.15-16)

(= *God's judgments throughout history*) [*parallel ~ the trumpets*]

OPENING SCENE: Within the sanctuary (15v5–16v1)

① The Earth Stricken (16v2)

② The Sea Stricken (16v3)

③ The Rivers Stricken: A just judgment (16v4-7)

④ The Sky Stricken (16v8-9)

⑤ Darkness & Pain for the Beast's Kingdom (16v10-11)

⑥ Earth's Kings Assembled for Battle (16v12-16)

⑦ Earthquake, Babylon Judged, Mountains & Islands Removed; Hail (16v17-21)

## ⑥ The Sin and Fall of Babylon the prostitute (chapters 17-19<sub>v10</sub>) [*scenes as 'utterances'*] (= history of "The World": immoral, materialistic, hostile)

OPENING SCENE: "Come & See Babylon the Prostitute" (17v1-6)

- ① The Mystery of Babylon Explained (17v7-14)
- ② ...The Beast & his Allies turn on Babylon! (17v15-18)
- ③ The Ruin of Babylon Proclaimed (18v1-3)
- ④ Call to Come Out of Babylon Who Will Be Paid Back (18v4-8)  
. ...Onlookers Lament; Saints Called to Rejoice! (18v9-20)
- ⑤ Babylon & All the Activity in Her Will Be No More (18v21-24)
- ⑥ The Multitude Rejoice in the Prostitute's Demise (19v1-5)
- ⑦ The Multitude Rejoice in the Lamb's Bride (19v6-8)  
... "Blessed Invitation, the True Words of God" (19v9-10)

## ⑦ The Last Battle and Beyond (Chapters 19<sub>v11</sub>-21<sub>vs8</sub>) (the end to which history is heading)

OPENING SCENE: **The White Rider!** (19v11-16).

- "I Saw..." ① ...The Carrion invited to Feast on an Army! (19v17-18)
- ② ...The Beast and the False Prophet Defeated (19v19-21)
  - ③ ...The Devil Bound for a Thousand Years (20v1-3)
  - ④ ...The Faithful Martyrs Reign with Christ (20v4-6)  
...After Which Satan Is Released, Attacks & Is Defeated (20v7-10)
  - ⑤ ...A Great White Throne (20v11)
  - ⑥ ...The Dead Judged: books & the book of life (20v12-15)
  - ⑦ ...The New Heavens & New Earth (21v1-8)

## Epilogue: The Glorious Future Unfolded (21v9-22v21)

Come See the Lamb's Bride, the Holy City (21v9-21)  
...the Lord & the Lamb are its temple, its light (21v22-27)  
...The River & the Trees, No More Curse or Night (22v1-5)  
"...the lord has shown the things that must soon take place" (22v6)  
These Words Are True, and I Am Coming Soon (22v6-11)  
I Am Coming Soon, A & W; The Blessed & Outsiders (22v12-15)  
Final Invitation, Final Warning, Come Lord Jesus! (22v16-21)