

Revelation: The Hope of Glory

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

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THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST Revelation 1:1-8

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. 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.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:1-8).

If you have Bible and I hope you do, turn with me to Revelation 1. And while you're turning, go ahead and find Daniel 2 also. Feel free to use your Table of Contents. Find Revelation 1 and Daniel 2 and kind of have both places marked.

If you look at your notes, you can probably tell that I haven't been preaching here the last five weeks. I'm trying to make up for lost time. But I cannot express to you how excited I am for us to study this book.

Truth be told, I've been hesitant, even a little bit nervous, because of what a challenging book Revelation seems to be. And it can be a challenging book. I read somewhere that Revelation is the book people in the church most want to hear taught because they don't understand it. At the same time, Revelation is the book preachers in the church least want to teach because they don't understand it. And it can be tough just to sit down and start reading. You go through your quiet time in the morning and you find myself meditating on an apocalyptic monster, and you think, "I'm not sure what good this does for me today, not sure how to apply that monster to my morning."

So it can be challenging. This week, I just found myself humbled on my knees and overwhelmed to the point of tears by the things we're about to study. This book is glorious, and its message is breathtaking. And I want you to hear it and see it and feel it. I want you

to feel the wonder of God's Word in the book of Revelation. I want you to feel the wonder of what it means for your life and for our church. So today, we're going to set the stage for the whole book, which is why we've got a particular amount of introductory ground to cover. And some of it can feel pretty technical, especially here at the start, so hang with me. I really want to set the stage, and I think there are some necessary things that need to be covered at the start. But we're going to have to go quick—I'm talking Secret Church style fast—so get ready. Here we go.

What is the book of Revelation?

What is the book of Revelation? And what I mean by that is what type of book is it? The Psalms are poetry. The Gospels are narratives. Matthew, what we just finished studying, is the story of Jesus. New Testament epistles are letters. So what is Revelation? And here's my best attempt to sum it up.

A series of apocalyptic visions...

The book of Revelation is a series of apocalyptic visions. Now let's pause here. There are three key words or phrases that I want you to see in this first verse of Revelation that are absolutely critical for understanding this book. You might underline them. The first is "revelation," which is the word "apocalypsis." It literally means an uncovering of truth, a revelation of truth. The second word/phrase to underline is "*things that must soon take place*." So it's a revelation of something that is either happening or is going to happen soon. And the third word/phrase I want you to underline is "*made it known*." "*He made [this revelation] known by sending his angel to his servant John...*" (Rev. 1:1). So underline those words/phrases, and then step back and see what we've got. We've got revelation of something that is already happening or is going to happen, and this book is written to make it known.

Now, there is only one other time in all the Bible where those three words/phrases appear together, and I want to show it to you: Daniel 2:28. Revelation is saturated with Old Testament references—over 400 of them—and this is the first. And it's huge for understanding the entire book.

What's happening in Daniel 2 is Daniel is interpreting a dream/vision for Nebuchadnezzar about the future. As Daniel interprets it, in what we're about to read, the word "apocalypsis" is used five times, "something that will come to pass" is used three times, and "make known" appears two times. All the phrases that are in Revelation 1:1. Read Daniel 2:28-30 with me.

"...But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind" (Dan. 2:28-30).

So Daniel is saying, "Nebuchadnezzar, you've had a dream of something that is going to come to pass, and God, through me, is making known to you, He's revealing what that dream means. And then, right after this, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar what dream he had.

He describes it perfectly, and the dream had all kinds of symbols and images: stones and iron and clay and bronze and silver and gold. And then Daniel interprets what those symbols mean, and I want you to hear the climax of that interpretation. Go over to verse 44. *"And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever..."* (Dan. 2:44).

So catch this. In Daniel 2, God uses a dream, a vision, to reveal/uncover the reality that one day God was going to set up a kingdom that will never, ever be destroyed. And so when John opens the book of Revelation, the very first verse he points us back to, of all places in the Bible, is the day when God revealed through a vision how His kingdom would be established and would never, ever be destroyed.

And that is what the book of Revelation is all about. This book is a revelation through a vision of how God's kingdom is being and will ultimately be established, and will never, ever be destroyed. So just like with Nebuchadnezzar, God is giving a vision to John that is filled with all kinds of symbols and images.

There is a predominant use of symbols all over Revelation. Revelation is less like a systematic theology and more like a picture book—and it's designed that way. This book is designed to communicate truth through pictures and symbols. In fact, some translations, instead of *"made it known"* there in verse 1, actually say *"signified"* because that's what that word literally means—to make known or to communicate by signs and symbols. These are symbols that are being *"shown"* (another word used in verse 1). This is a book that's about all that John *"saw"* (end of verse 2).

Now the reason this is so important is because we need to realize from the start that not everything here in the book of Revelation is intended to be understood literally. Some people try to read it this way, looking for literal fulfillments of everything that's mentioned here. But John is telling us from the very beginning, "This book is intended/written to be understood symbolically. It's a vision filled with symbols that signify the coming of God's kingdom on earth." Now that doesn't mean every single verse is symbolic. There are some places where John is clearly telling us to take something literally, but for the most part, the thrust of this book is symbolic. That's the kind of book it is.

It is a series of apocalyptic/revealing visions filled with symbols and numbers. Certain numbers are used over and over again as symbols of various things. 12 and its multiples (like 144,000) to symbolize God's people. 10 and its multiples (like 1,000) to describe complete amounts of time. The number 7 is used to symbolize perfection and completion. Here in verse 4 the Holy Spirit is described as the "seven spirits," a picture of the perfect Spirit of God. Revelation is written to the 7 churches that are in Asia, but there were more than just 7 churches in Asia. It's a picture of the entire church, not only here in Asia but around the world. We're going to read about 7 letters, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, and 7 bowls, all of which together symbolize God's complete judgment in Revelation. The number 4 also symbolizes completeness, particularly in the world. The earth is described in 4 parts with 4 corners and 4 winds.

Sometimes 4 and 7 are used together. We read about 4 series of 7 judgments on the earth. Various names of God and Christ are used either 4 or 7 times. The 7 spirits are mentioned 4 times. Jesus is referred to as the Lamb 28 times (which is 7 times 4), and 7 of those times Jesus as the Lamb and God as Father are mentioned together.

Now I know what you're thinking, "Aren't you reading a little too much into this? Doesn't somebody have a little too much time on their hands to count up all these numbers?" But that's part of the beauty of this book! Is it possible that some of these numbers mean nothing? Sure. But once you see these things over and over and over again, you start to realize nothing in the all the universe is haphazard or accidental or incomplete. Everything here is planned and purposeful and complete. It's like there's Someone behind it.

Filled with prophetic pronouncements...

So what we've got is a series of apocalyptic visions (with a predominant use of symbols) filled with prophetic pronouncements. Look down in verse 3 and you see John write, "*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy...*" (Rev. 1:3). So this is also a prophetic book in the line of other prophetic books in Scripture like Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah, and others, all of which are alluded to in Revelation.

There's a sense in which Revelation is the climax of all prophecy because, unlike all of the Old Testament prophets, Revelation is not announcing the coming of God's kingdom. The message of Revelation is that the kingdom of God has come and will soon be consummated. And this is also huge to understand. The book of Revelation is not ultimately about a coming kingdom. The book of Revelation is about a King who has already come and who reigns right now.

Just like John the Baptist announced in the Gospels, "*The kingdom of God is at hand*" (Matt. 3:3), John the revelator here is announcing at the end of verse 3, "*The time is near*" (Rev. 1:3). That's not just a reference to the future; that's a reference to the present. John's saying, "The king who was prophesied all throughout the Old Testament has come and is ruling and reigning at this moment." We'll talk about that more in a minute.

Written as a congregational letter.

So this is a series of apocalyptic visions (revelation through symbols) filled with prophetic pronouncements and written as a congregational letter. So you get down to verse 4, and this book starts to sound like an epistle from Paul. John is writing a letter to seven churches in Asia Minor (which is eastern Turkey today) who represent all the church.

If you follow the progression from verses 1-3, you see that this revelation comes from God in Christ through an angel to His servant John for the church. And don't miss the picture in the last part of verse 3: "*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear...*" So follow this. Imagine the scene: you have churches in the first century that would gather together for worship, and someone would read this letter to them—the book of Revelation. They would read it out loud from start to finish while everyone in the church sat and listened to what it said.

Now realize why that's important! This letter was written in such a way that members of the church in the first century could hear it read in a church service and understand what was being said and be able to apply it to their lives, to "*keep what is written in it*." What that means is that we've got to be careful not to overcomplicate this book. First-century hearers, many of whom didn't even have enough education to read for themselves, were able to hear this book once, understand it, and apply it to their lives. They didn't have charts in their hands. No commentaries (as if they could read those). No Bible search software. They just listened to the Word. And that's part of the reason why, during this series, we've asked different people to just read the text during our worship gatherings separate from the sermon.

Now you might wonder, "Well then, why isn't that enough for us? How come we can't just listen to the text and understand it that easily?" And this is the challenge of Bible study. Because we're not members of the church in the first century. There are images here and there is a writing style here that would have been easily understandable to them that is not so easily understandable to us.

Think about it this way. Most of us in this room don't do a lot of poetry. If I were to preach my sermon every week as a poem, you'd probably think I was a little weird and you'd probably have a bit of a hard time trying to follow what I'm saying. But when you look at how the Old Testament prophets preached, that's exactly what they did. Old Testament prophecy is filled with poetry, and the Israelites understood it.

But they were living in a different time, with a different understanding, so our goal whenever we study the Bible is not just to hear what the Bible says, but to get into the shoes of the people who were first hearing it read. And the purpose of commentaries and resources and sermons is to help us get into their shoes. But even with all that said, we still need to remember: brothers and sisters, the only thing we necessarily and ultimately need to understand this book is the Spirit of God, and I just want you to be encouraged by that. Some of you look at this book and you think, "I can't understand it," but if you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus, even if you are an illiterate follower of Jesus with little to no education, you have the Spirit of God inside of you and He is supernaturally able to help you to understand this Word. To understand this unique letter filled with apocalyptic visions and prophetic pronouncements.

When will these prophecies be fulfilled?

Four different interpretations...

Now, one of the most controversial questions surrounding Revelation is: When will these prophecies be fulfilled? When will the words of this prophecy in Revelation come to fulfillment? And basically, in the history of Christianity over the last 2000 years, you have four different interpretations, four different answers to that question. Now this is going to sound technical, but let me give you a brief overview, because the way we approach and understand this book is very important.

The first way that people have interpreted Revelation is the preterist interpretation, which says that these prophecies were fulfilled in the first few centuries of Christianity. So basically, some people believe that everything that's written here in Revelation was fulfilled not long after it was written. Some people believe the book is prophesying the fall of Jerusalem in the first century. Other people believe the book is prophesying the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century but nothing beyond that. Now the good thing about this interpretation is that it takes seriously the potential application of this book to its original audience. The bad thing is that it ignores the clear allusions to final judgment, not just for Israel, but for all the nations of the earth.

Then you have others who have taken what's called a historicist approach, saying that these prophecies have been and are being fulfilled in the course of Western Christian history. Basically, it's been common throughout more recent history, in particular, over the last 500 years or so, to read predominantly Western Christian history into the pages of Revelation. During the Protestant Reformation, many reformers believed that the pope was the antichrist or the Roman Catholic Church was the false prophet. Others have said Hitler was, or Napoleon, or Mussolini. In the 1980s, it was the Soviet Union, led by Mikhail Gorbachev,

and the mark of the beast was that thing on his head. Particularly after the last 60 years, after Israel became a nation, there's been heightened intensity with this interpretation, where people see every detail of Revelation through the eyes of current events in the Middle East.

The problems with this, obviously, are many. The focus is almost exclusively on Western church history. There's all kinds of speculation that's involved in trying to find contemporary parallels, then you have to rework it for every new period in world history. And on top of all this, this interpretation makes the book of Revelation virtually irrelevant for its original hearers. This was not a message that when they heard it made them think about Hitler or Mussolini or the Pope or Benjamin Netanyahu.

That then leads to the futurist interpretation, which says these prophecies are largely unfulfilled—basically chapters 4-22 are still awaiting fulfillment in the future. There are different versions of this view. Some believe these prophecies will be fulfilled literally in the order in which they're listed here in the book of Revelation. Others believe these prophecies will be fulfilled not quite as literally or as strictly chronological as they're described here in Revelation. Again, one problem here is this calls into question what application this book would have had for its first-century hearers if the majority of the book was talking about things that haven't happened in 2000 years since then. And then it leads to a lot of speculation about how these prophecies will literally play out.

Finally, there's the idealist interpretation, which says that these prophecies are being, and have been, fulfilled symbolically throughout the history of the church. Basically, this interpretation views Revelation as a symbolic portrayal of the conflict between God and Satan, Christ and His church battling with the forces of sin and evil, a conflict that is reflected in every age of the church and a conflict that will one day culminate in the ultimate triumph of Christ and His church. This interpretation obviously avoids some of the speculation that's common in the other interpretations, but at the same time it seems to downplay some of the literal historical realities that are represented by certain symbols in the book of Revelation.

So, which one is right? Obviously I'm not going to come on the scene today and claim to have it all figured out. I will say that there's a reason why all of these perspectives have been held by Christians, because there's some good in all of them. Like the preterist view, we do need to seriously consider how these words spoke and applied to the very first people who heard them. Like the historicist view, we need to think about how this cosmic war between Christ and Satan is playing out in every age in the church. Like the futurist view, we need to consider how Revelation is pointing to a coming reality when the kingdom of God will be consummated in a new heaven and a new earth, final judgment and final redemption. And like the idealist view, as we've already seen, we need to seriously consider the symbols of this book and what they represent, not reading too much literal into them where that ends up skewing the meaning of the text. So you've got good in each one of these. I think more good in some than others.

Three millennial views...

But then you add on more controversy. So on top of these four different perspectives, you have three different views on the millennium that are described in Revelation 20 when Revelation talks about a thousand-year reign of Christians where Satan is bound and peace is spread. Christians have debated for centuries what that is and how it relates to the return of Jesus.

Three millennial views. You've got premillennialism, which says that Jesus will return before the millennium. You've got postmillennialism: Jesus will return after the millennium. And then you've got amillennialism, which says that the millennium is the present church age, and there is no other future millennium to come (before or after Jesus' return). So the thousand-year reign known as the millennium is really just a symbol for the times we're living in now. And then there are some who would call themselves panmillennialists, who just say that everything's going to pan out just fine in the end however God determines.

Now, like I said, this doesn't really come up in Revelation until chapter 20. The reason I mention it here is simply to point out that there are different views held by sincere followers of Christ on different things in the book of Revelation, and we have to be careful not to let those differences divide us. This is key.

There are some doctrines that are of first and primary importance that should divide us. The humanity and deity of Jesus, His substitutionary death on the cross for our sins, His resurrection from the grave. If you don't believe these things, you are not a Christian. These first-order doctrines divide Christians from non-Christians.

And then there are other doctrines that divide different churches in healthy ways. Think about baptism. Baptists believe in the baptism of a believer by immersion. Presbyterians believe in the baptism of infants by sprinkling. Are both Christians? Absolutely. Though I believe in a Christian's baptism by immersion, I love, respect, and honor Presbyterian brothers like we have at Briarwood or Oak Mountain or Covenant. A couple of pastors from these churches have actually worshiped with us this summer, and I honor them. I just think they're wrong on baptism. And they think I'm wrong.

So can we partner together in the spread of the gospel in this city? Absolutely. Are we going to be in the same local church? Probably not. I have biblical convictions that would keep me from baptizing an infant. They have what they call biblical convictions that warrant them baptizing an infant. And it's good that we don't compromise on our convictions. So that's more of a second-tier doctrine.

But then there are third-tier doctrines and beliefs that even Christians in the same church or the same family have differences on, and views on the millennium or revelation would fall into this category. Some of you have studied Revelation and you have convictions about how to interpret it and how to understand the millennium that will be different than what I teach as we walk through this book. Does that mean we need to divide or break fellowship with one another? Absolutely not.

Someone once said, "The millennium is a thousand years of peace that Christians like to fight about." That's not good, and it cannot be the case here. As we walk through this book, you will have opportunities to discuss different things in your small group. I've put resources online* that you can reference (which, by the way, represent different views on these issues). My goal is not to say, "Well, obviously here's the way it is..." No. My goal is for us to open up this Word week by week and look at each text within its context.

Two important contexts...

Two important contexts in particular. And this applies to all Bible study, but it's particularly important here in Revelation. First, we need to look at every text within its specific historical context. A basic rule to remember for interpreting the Bible is this: a text can never mean what it never meant. Which means that just like we were talking about earlier, we've got to put ourselves in the shoes of the first people who read or heard this book and as best as possible understand what it was saying to them. Then, and only then, can we begin to cross

the bridge of time to understand what it is saying to us. And this is so important in Revelation because these Christians in the first century would have understood all these symbols and images, so we've got to try to get into their shoes and think about things from their perspective.

So let's start this morning. Imagine for a moment that you are a Christian living in the first century in one of these churches that's specifically addressed in Revelation. Imagine that you are living in a day when it wasn't easy to be identified with the church, much less proclaim Christ. You face danger on every side. Jewish persecution, Roman persecution. There are members of your church imprisoned right now in dark dungeons. Others have been hung on crosses. Some have been thrown before wild beasts. Many have been beheaded. John writes this letter to you from an island where he's been exiled. You are facing daily pressure to bow down and worship the Roman emperor, and if you don't, you may lose your job, your family, or your life. And all inclinations are pointing to the fact that things are not getting better; they are only getting worse.

These are the shoes we must stand in when we open up this book. Not that Revelation doesn't speak to us in our shoes, but we can't understand what God is saying to us in this text until we first understand what God was saying to them.

So we've got to look at each text in its specific historical context and then in the overall biblical context. This book is the climax of the New Testament and it contains 400 plus allusions to the Old Testament. So wherever we encounter obscure passages in Revelation, we have a whole Bible that's ready to help us understand them. This is another good principle for studying the Bible: always move from the clear to the obscure. Meaning start with what you do know in Scripture (what is abundantly clear in God's Word), and then move to what you don't know (what is more difficult to understand in God's Word). If you start with the obscure, the difficult, you'll end up twisting what you already do know to make sense of what you don't know, and that can be dangerous.

So here's the deal. My goal is not to say today, "Alright, guys, here's the interpretation we're going to go with, and here's the millennial view I'm going to advocate." No. My goal is for us, week by week, to walk through this Word in its specific historical context and overall biblical context, and as we do, just ask the question, "What seems to be the clear, plain, straight meaning of this passage?" And when we do this, I've got a feeling that we're going to realize that the point of this book is not to lead us to a certain position or view anyway.

One significant reminder...

One significant reminder. This book was not written to create confusion for the Christian, cause division in the church, or promote speculation about the coming of Christ. Now that might catch some of you off guard, but let me say it again. Revelation was not written to create confusion for the Christian. (Revelation 1:4: this book was written to bring grace and peace!) It was also not written to cause division in the church (we've talked about that). And Revelation was not written to promote speculation about the coming of Christ. Now that's what many people think the purpose is, that the purpose of Revelation is to drive us to charts, map out the end of the world, speculating and debating about how this or that will take place. That is not the purpose of this book. In fact, I don't even believe the purpose of Revelation is primarily to address the future at all. It certainly speaks about the future coming of Christ and the end of the world, but that's not the primary purpose the book was written.

Why was it written?

To give unshakeable hope to suffering Christians

Then why was it written, you might ask. This book was written to give unshakeable hope to suffering Christians in the present. John is writing, God is revealing truth to the hearts of brothers and sisters who are suffering in the first century, and the world seems to be falling apart around them. The church is under attack, Christians are losing their lives, and they're wondering, "What is going on? Does God see our tears? Does God hear our prayers? Why are our enemies prospering while we are suffering?"

And God gives John a vision to say to the church: "Children, things are not what they seem. You may think that things are out of control as you see the beast come up out of the abyss to make war with you and persecute you and kill you, leaving you for dead. But take heart. Christ has conquered death, Christ has conquered hell, Christ has conquered Satan, and Christ is in control. And He does see your tears, He does hear your cries, and He will raise you up to reign with him as King forever and ever and ever." John writes this book to give unshakeable hope to suffering Christians.

And this is where I want you to begin to feel the wonder of this book in your life. You and I may not be experiencing persecution today like the first people who heard these words, but we are all familiar with suffering in various ways. I was studying this text this week while I sat in a waiting room of a hospital where our Global Disciple-Making Pastor Jonathan had been rushed to the emergency room because of a seizure. After his journey over the last year-and-a-half through a brain tumor and surgery and serious infection, I get a call that he's had a seizure. Thankfully we found out it wasn't more serious than it was. His CT scan was clear. The doctor said it was a breakthrough seizure, no seeming long-term effects, and Jonathan was back on his feet in the next day or two. But we didn't know that at that point in the emergency room, and so I'm sitting by a bedside with tears and we're praying, "God, why? Why does this continue? Things were going so well. Why are we back at this point? Is this ever going to end?"

This on top of two of our staff members whose dads have died unexpectedly over the last two weeks. A brother and a sister and their families wondering, "How, why did this happen?" And their cries are echoed in thousands of other ways all across this church. "Why cancer in me, God? Why is my marriage falling apart? What is happening to my son or daughter? Why did I lose my job? Why do I feel so lonely? Do you hear my prayers? Do you see my tears?"

And the book of Revelation is written to say to every single suffering Christian all across this room: Christ is in control. And Christ has conquered all. And Christ is reigning now at this point. And He does hear your prayers, He does see your tears, and one day He will return, and He will wipe every tear from your eye, and all of these hurts and all of these pains will be gone, and the new will come. Let the book of Revelation over the coming weeks give you unshakeable hope.

To encourage unwavering holiness in a seductive culture.

This book was written to give unshakeable hope to suffering Christians, and at the same time to encourage unwavering holiness in a seductive culture. These first-century Christians were tempted to turn away from Christ in the middle of all these things. They were tempted to compromise in order to save their jobs or families or lives, and some of the teachers in the church were saying they should compromise. And then, in addition to the threat of persecution, there was the lure of pleasure in the Roman Empire. Sex and success, money

and materialism. Some of the supposed Christians were falling away, giving themselves over to the seductive power of worldly pleasures.

And so God through John calls them to holiness. Ten different times in Revelation, we see the people of God urged to keep the commands of God. It's interesting. The book doesn't end with a vision of heaven. That's what you think it would end with, but it doesn't. Yes, we see the picture of a new heaven and a new earth for God's people, but right after that, to close out the book, John gives repeated exhortations to holiness in the church. Eight of the last fifteen verses in Revelation are calling God's people to obey, to stay faithful.

Revelation as a whole is filled with promises of blessing for the faithful. Seven of them actually—a picture of perfect blessing. The first one is here in verse 3: "*Blessed is the one who reads, blessed are those who hear, and [follow this!] who keep what is written in it*" (Rev. 1:3). Do you see this? The purpose of the book is not to promote speculation about the end of the world. The purpose of the book is to call people to obey Jesus today. That's the point. So put the chart away, brothers and sisters, and look at your life. Are you following Jesus? Are you walking faithfully with Jesus? Or are you giving in to the ways of this world?

Revelation is filled with promises of blessing for the faithful, and it's filled with warnings of judgment for those who are falling away. This book gives us some of the most frightening, terrifying pictures of the wrath of God in all of Scripture. And do you know what's most scary about that? This book was written for the church. The clear message of Revelation is that there were men and women in the churches of Asia Minor who claimed to be Christians but were wandering from Christ and denying Christ and running after the world. So God gives them visions of wrath to warn them of impending judgment. This book is a serious, somber warning to false Christians who are faking it in the church, evident in their falling away. God is calling them to repent and turn from their sin.

So, church, let this book be a wake-up call to us all. Sin is not to be toyed or trifled with. Disobedience to God is damning. Turn from sin. Run from the ways of this world. For Christ is coming to bring blessing on the faithful and judgment on those who have fallen away. That's the point of the book! You can explain every phrase, identify every allusion to the Old Testament, trace every connection in Revelation to the rest of the Bible, and uncover every mystery that is here. Yet if you still are lured by sex and pornography and possessions and pleasures and safety and security and the comforts of this world, then you miss the entire point of the book.

To refute deception in the church.

Along these lines, Revelation was written to refute deception in the church. As we'll see, there were false teachers who were leading the church astray, and Revelation addresses them and warns Christians of the danger these teachers pose to the church.

To fuel mission among the nations.

And then Revelation was written to fuel mission among the nations. There is a decided emphasis all throughout this book on the glory of God in Christ being exalted not just among the people of Israel, but among all nations, tribes, and tongues on the earth. This book is about a Savior who has purchased people for God from all the peoples on the planet, and God is strengthening his church—not just so that they can survive amidst persecution, but so that they will thrive in mission. After all, you don't get persecuted if you don't proclaim the gospel. It's only as they proclaimed Christ that they were persecuted as Christians, and this book was written to give them boldness in their proclamation of the gospel to all peoples, even if it would cost them their own lives. So again, put the charts

away, put the speculation aside, and preach the gospel to the lost. That's the point of the book of Revelation.

How is all of that accomplished?

Through a grand portrait of God's greatness.

Now how is all of that accomplished? How does this book give hope and encourage holiness and refute deception and fuel mission? In two primary ways (and this is where we'll close quickly). One, through a grand portrait of God's greatness.

Revelation 1:4, "*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come...*" Revelation 1:8 is one of only two times in the whole book where we see God speak directly. He says, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*" Oh, yes!

Behold your God. He is sovereign over all history. Oh, I love this. John's opening greeting to the church in verses 4-8 is bookended by a declaration of God's eternal sovereignty. And notice how it doesn't go chronologically like we would expect it to go. We expect it to say, "Who was and is and is to come." But, no, it says, "Who is..." Don't miss it. The emphasis in the book of Revelation from the beginning is on the present. Suffering Christian, God is. God is with you now, not just in the future. The One who has existed forever in the past, and the One who will come to rescue you in the future, He is with you now.

And He is in control. He is sovereign over everything. He is the Alpha and the Omega—first letter of the Greek alphabet, last letter of the Greek alphabet. God is saying, "I control the beginning, I control the end, and I control everything in between."

He is sovereign over all history, and He is supreme above all things. He is "the Almighty." Oh, mark this down from the start of this study. We're about to read stories about the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, good and evil, but this is not some dualistic battle between two equal but opposing forces. No, this is not dualism; this is domination. This is not *Star Wars*—good versus evil. How's it going to turn out? We know how it's going to turn out because God is almighty. From the beginning, God makes clear that He has power over all the forces of evil.

Do you see how this grand portrait of God's greatness... (And it's just starting here in Chapter 1; we're going to see it throughout the book.) Do you see how it gives hope to suffering Christians? Suffering Christian, how do you know that your hurt will one day turn to happiness? How do you know that your pain will one day turn to joy? How do you know that death is not the end? Because God is almighty. He is sovereign over all history and He is supreme above all things and He will bring all the things in this book to pass. Guaranteed because of His greatness.

Through glorious pictures of God's gospel.

The second way Revelation accomplishes these purposes we mentioned is through glorious pictures of God's gospel. So in verses 4-8 you've got bookends portraying God's greatness, and then sandwiched in between you've got the gospel, which I want to propose is the primary theme of the whole book. After all, it's the primary theme of every book in the Bible. It's the center of the whole Bible, so why would Revelation be any different?

One commentator, Michael Wilcock, said:

"And now John was again to receive...a genuine message from God, which in due course [would] be read aloud in Church meetings like other inspired Scripture. It would in a sense be nothing new; simply a recapitulation of the Christian faith he possessed already. But it [would] be the last time that God would repeat the patterns of truth, and he [would] do so with devastating power and in unforgettable splendor."

This is the theme of Revelation. Verse 5, *"Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen"* (Rev. 1:5). This is what I want to show you in the book of Revelation over the coming weeks. I don't want to show you charts and speculations and opinions and ideas and current events. I want to show you Christ.

Another great commentator on Revelation, Dennis Johnson, said:

"We need to see Jesus—to meet his blazing eyes of heart-searching holiness, to wake up at the trumpet blast of his voice, to respond to his jealous demand for exclusive and passionate loyalty. Shocked insensible by the impact of his splendor, we need then to hear his words of compassionate comfort, quelling our fears and quaking our hopes. Every congregation, whatever its struggle at its post on the battlefield, needs to fix its eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

Church, the book of Revelation beckons us to look to the past. So not just the future. Revelation is not just about the future; Revelation is about the past. It's not about a coming kingdom because the King has already come! Look to the past, John tells us from the start. Jesus is the conquering Savior who redeems. The faithful witness who persevered all the way to the cross and died, the sovereign Lamb of God who was slaughtered for our sins. Yet He rose from the grave, the firstborn of the dead. He is resurrected. He is the conquering Savior. It looked like defeat, but it was victory.

Some of you have come in here tonight and you are not a follower of Christ, and you feel like you have walked in on the apocalypse in this room. Amidst all the stuff, more than anything else, just hear this. I, you, we have sin in our hearts that separates us from God who is holy and perfect. We in our hearts have rebelled against Him and are separated from Him forever. But God has sent His Son to pay the price for your sin, to experience the separation that you were due, to die for your sin. He has died on the cross and has risen from the grave, in victory over sin and death. So everyone who turns from their sin and trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord will be reconciled to God forever, to enjoy him forever and ever and ever. I invite you to look to the past and see what Christ has done on behalf of sinners and cry out for Him to save you.

Non-Christian and Christian alike, look to the past. This is the central moment of all history—the cross of Christ on which He died and from which He rose in victory over death. This is what makes hope possible! This is what makes holiness possible!

So John, from the start of Revelation, is saying, "Look to the past and look to the present." Jesus is the cosmic Lord who rules. He is *"the ruler of kings on earth"* (Rev. 1:5). Get this, mark this down, don't forget this. The message of Revelation is not that Christ is coming to rule one day; the message of Revelation is that Christ rules today! First-century Christians experiencing persecution under the Roman emperor, remember this: Jesus holds that

emperor in the palm of His hand. He has, Matthew 28:18, all authority in heaven and on earth today! It's been given to Him. And today, Jesus is ruling the world for the good of His church and the glory of His name. Unshakeable hope in that reality.

See it from the start in Revelation. We don't just have hope in the future; we have hope in the present! And then, in light of Christ's redemption in the past and rule in the present, look to the future. He is the coming King who will reign forever. He is not coming to do some new or different work. He is coming to complete, to consummate the work He has already begun in the past, and the work He is doing in the present.

Look to the past. Jesus is the conquering Savior who redeems! Look to the present. Jesus is the cosmic Lord who rules! Look to the future. Jesus is the coming King who will reign forever. See Jesus!

See Him and feel His affection for you. He loves us. He loves us. Present tense. Suffering Christian in the first century, He loves you. Suffering Christian in the twenty-first century, He loves you. Let that just soak in right where you are. Are you hurting? He loves you. Are you in pain? He loves you. Are you confused or worried, tired or weak? He loves you. He loves you today.

Feel His affection for you. Experience His liberation of you. He has freed us from our sins. Not just forgiven us, but freed us! He has set us free from our sins. Live in that. Experience that. By his grace, leave sin behind. You're free!

Feel His affection for you, experience His liberation of you, and realize your position in him. He has made us a kingdom. Now what does that mean? In one sense, we know that He is our King, and we are His people. But that's not all that this picture means in the book of Revelation. Revelation 5:10 uses this same phrase. There John writes that "*we have been made a kingdom and priests to our God, and we shall reign on the earth*" (Rev. 5:10). This just blows you away.

Church, we are not just people under his rule; we're participants in his reign. We are resurrected with Jesus, exercising rule with Jesus, advancing a kingdom with Jesus. And we're priests to his God and Father. We have access to God through Christ. Hope in him, walk in holiness for you have access to God, a privilege the Old Testament people of God longed for and only a small number of priests experienced. You and I have access to God every moment of every day. And we not only have access to God; we're also now ambassadors of God. Serving God and representing Him to the ends of the earth, proclaiming him to the peoples of the world.

Realize your position in Him, and give your adoration to him. "*To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen!*" (Rev. 1:6). The revelation of Christ leads to the worship of Christ. At significant points all throughout Revelation, we're going to hear myriads and myriads, thousands and thousands of angels singing the praise of God, multitudes of men and women and countless creatures all over the world giving glory to God. Oh, church, as a result of studying this book, let us join in the heavenly chorus. May this book lead us to sing louder and lift our hands higher. May hearts of praise be set on fire by this book. Give your adoration to him.

And then, in light of all this, live with anticipation of him. Verse 7, "*Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen*" (Rev. 1:7). Oh, I wish we had time to study the Old Testament allusions here, but we don't. Just write down Daniel 7:13 and

Zechariah 12:10. Daniel 7:13 prophesies the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with glory and honor, and dominion over all things, peoples, tribes, and tongues. And then Zechariah 12:10 prophesies a people mourning, or wailing, in sorrow over their sin—in particular over one they have pierced.

Here, Revelation envisions all the tribes of the earth mourning, or wailing, in sorrow over their sin—in particular over the Savior whom they have pierced. Now obviously, we were not all physically present at the cross of Christ, and we did not pierce his side with a physical spear, but the picture here is of men and women from every tribe on the earth, men and women like you and me, who realize that our sin led our Savior to His cross. And this reality this brings us to our knees in humility.

To use the language of this text, let us humbly wail over your sin. Christian, weep over remaining sin in your life. Weep over continuing disobedience in your life. Do not be satisfied with sin. Do not be casual with compromise in your life. And non-Christian, let today be the day when for the first time you express sorrow for sin in your life and you receive the love of Jesus the Savior and King. Then let us rise, by His grace, and live, for His glory, and as we do, let's patiently wait for his return.

* NOTE: A list of additional resources to assist you in further study of the book of Revelation and eschatology are available as a PDF download at Radical.net/Revelation. Click on the "Materials" button under any message in the series for this and other weekly resources.

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