

All Things New: The Revelation
By Jason Huff
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Exodus 19:5-6; Luke 18:15-17; Revelation 1:1-8

Our final Scripture reading today is Revelation 1:1-8. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and inspired Word. “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw-- that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."”

Today, we start a new journey together. We’ve journeyed for the past year through Acts and the history of the early church. We’ve seen how God worked through the lives of many Christians, especially Paul, to make news of His Kingdom known. Now we continue the journey through the final words of the New Testament into a future yet to come.

The book of Revelation is tough. It is so controversial that the Orthodox Church doesn’t ever read it in its worship services. It has puzzled scholars for centuries. Despite that, it’s incredibly popular. The *Left Behind* series, a set of fictional novels that take the book of Revelation as a road map to the future, has sold over 80 million copies, spawned 4 movies, and has over 40 spinoff books for kids. As one commentary put it, “Pastors quickly learn that there is no better way to boost regular attendance than to preach on Revelation.”

Even the secular world is interested in the end of the world. Sometimes it involves meteors, plagues, natural disasters, zombies – but there’s a gigantic market for stories about humanity biting the dust. Some recent ones are comedies, maybe because modern culture isn’t as worried about Jesus Christ coming back as it used to be. But with the symbolism, the catastrophes, Revelation is always a hot topic.

So why the book of Revelation? Why now? I was thinking and praying about what we should study next, and I’ve had it in mind that we should return to the words of Jesus. It’s been three years since we studied the gospel of Matthew, and while we had a short series about Jesus around Easter 2018, we haven’t read His words together in a while. Romans and Acts were great studies, but we always need to be hearing the words of Jesus. Without knowing my thinking, Catha suggested Revelation. At first, I was leery, but then I realized – this is the only book outside the gospels to have the words of Jesus to His people. We need to hear them. We need to hear Jesus’ final words to the church and how they relate to us still.

As we dive into the book today, I'm going to lay out my guiding principles as we explore Revelation together. You might disagree with my interpretation, I might just get things wrong, but you'll know where I'm coming from. So then, how are we going to go about interpreting Revelation? Here are a couple of principles I am following...

The first is, *the interpretation has to make sense to the first century church*. Revelation was written somewhere between 60 and 90 AD. It was meant to guide, comfort, and challenge the believers from that era. Any interpretation that demands that all the major events in the book have to happen 2,000 years later just doesn't make sense. You will see events and people in the book and say, "Wow, that sounds like someone from history." Probably does. I've heard countless interpretations of Revelation over the years that included everyone from Abraham Lincoln to Mikhail Gorbachev. All of them haven't panned out. They wouldn't have made sense to the original listeners. There's a reason why it seems the events of Revelation can point to multiple points in history, and that moves into my second interpretive principle.

That is, *our interpretation will take into account the type of book Revelation is, the cyclical nature of Revelation, and how the cycles eventually end*. Revelation is in a particular form of writing known as apocalyptic literature, which means it doesn't play by all the rules of typical storytelling. It moves back and forth in time. It will tell us the story from one angle, then another and another, sometimes referencing the same events, sometimes different events.

Now this might seem weird or confusing, but it's not – we just have to remember the kind of book we're reading. Just like we don't read poems the same way we read a newspaper, we don't read Revelation like we would history in Acts or theology in Paul's letter to the Romans. The ancient world was familiar with apocalyptic literature – Revelation wasn't the first – so they had some clues to go on that we have to piece together to understand it.

Think about a modern mystery novel. Events start to go into motion, and then, there's foul play. Maybe the detective showed up before the crime, maybe after. He starts investigating. And as the story goes on, we might have characters describing what happened from their point of view, going back in time to tell what they saw. We have to go backwards in some way, some time, in order to solve the mystery. We might have different chapters told from different characters' vantage point. This doesn't surprise us because it all follows the conventions of a mystery, what we can expect in a mystery novel. In the same way, when we read Revelation as a person in the first century might have, we'll understand it better.

We'll witness several cycles in Revelation. Some things described may have already taken place, while some may be in the future. The cycles often repeat throughout history, which is why you might see an evil figure and say, "Wow, that sounds a lot like Adolf Hitler...but it also sounds like Napoleon or Genghis Khan or Mohammed or one of the popes." Revelation may be about the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD and the destruction of the temple. Yet there are echoes of the same events throughout history. Revelation points to real events, but we have to look carefully to notice that it may point to multiple events with a single symbol. We can't expect a 1:1 ratio; we can't expect to make everything fit into our point of view. We're seeing events from God's point of view, outside of time and space, and at times, it just won't make sense to us unless we take it at face value.

All of these cycles, though, have a final endpoint. There is a final resolution. The Kingdom of God is here, it is immanent, and in God's perfect timing, the Kingdom will come in all its fullness, once and for all. A true, literal end to this world is coming, when God will set aside the old heaven and earth and create a new one in total perfection. We'll learn more about that at the end of the book.

Here's my last interpretive guideline – *Revelation's meaning is not first and foremost about a timeline of events, but about our glorious God, His Son Jesus, and how we should live in light of Christ's return.* God didn't give us a book so we'd know when to get the cellar stocked and the guns loaded, which is how some people have read it. Even in the era of the prophets, God sent specific messages about future events to His people – a warning to specific countries surrounding Israel, and to Israel herself. Even vague references to the Messiah became clear when Jesus came. Revelation is deliberately very vague so we don't read it as a newspaper account of events to come.

Instead of a book to make us say "Oh, everything on the timeline has shown up, the second coming of Christ is finally here," it's preparation for us in every age, a book that should have us thinking, "Am I ready to meet Christ? What might I do to prepare myself and others for His arrival?" We're also going to see the majesty of the Father and Son in such a way that many weeks, we won't have an immediate application or any sort of moral or spiritual lesson. We will be inspired to worship, to confess our sins and join God in His Kingdom business. It may not all make sense immediately, but we need to come to it like a child – ready to accept God at His word and to trust that He will bring everything about in its perfect timing.

With all that in mind, let's dig in. We may look more at specific words and phrases as we go along in Revelation, because a lot of it has meaning we might overlook or might not understand. This book is "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." The word "revelation" here in Greek is *apocalupsis*, which is why the book is sometimes known as the Apocalypse. But the word does not mean "the end of the world." It literally means "uncovering." What we're about to read is the revealing, the uncovering, of secrets. It is the revealing about Jesus Christ and from Jesus Christ – about who He is and what He will do, and it is relayed from, relayed through, Jesus. While you might say that there are many secrets revealed, it's really only one gigantic revelation, which is why the book isn't in the plural. And while it's John's book, it's Jesus' message.

God gave Jesus the revelation so that His servants would see events that would "soon" take place. Now not everything in Revelation is "soon" to us; after 2,000 years, you might expect things to have happened sooner. But my interpretation is that much of what was revealed did happen when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and other cycles have taken place, so "soon" is true. Every generation has prayed that the end of the book would be "soon" to them.

"He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw -- that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." We won't see that angel for a while, but he does appear closer to the end to relay ideas and concepts as Jesus Himself is directly taking part in them.

But perhaps what is most important is that the revelation was the apostle John. Probably the youngest apostle, he is still alive to write this final book – and if church history is correct, the only apostle not to be martyred. The name John by itself is enough to tell us that the book has the authority of one of the 12 and shouldn't be taken lightly. He tells us that it is complete; everything he was allowed to write down is here.

“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” This is unique: simply reading Revelation promises blessings. But to receive the blessing, we must take it to heart – in the Greek, to guard it, to keep it. Revelation reminds us to follow Christ now because His return is near. We always think we have more time, but we don't. Those of us who live to be 100 will only experience a tiny fraction of human history. In an era when Christianity is under attack around the world, even in our own country, it is just as relevant. Time is of the essence.

“John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Revelation has an immediate audience – seven churches in the province of Asia. This is the first *number* we run into, and it's important – seven. Seven stands for completeness and wholeness. There are more than seven churches in Asia, but the seven stand for the whole.

“Grace and peace” – these are the cornerstones of the Christian faith. God gives us grace in Jesus Christ so that we might stand in His presence and be accepted rather than condemned. Our whole salvation rests upon the grace of God to us. Peace is what we receive when we know we have been brought into the Kingdom of God and that nothing can take us away from Him. We often forget because our world wants to take away our hope, so it's a good blessing on any Christian and any church to be reminded of who we are: the people of grace and peace.

Grace and peace come from “him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” God defines Himself throughout Scripture as the Great I Am, the One Who Is. Abraham was, I am. Notice too the original language – the very first thing we here is that God is. “Was” isn't first but “is.” God transcends time. He is there for every generation. He existed before time and will always exist.

The next one is tricky – I prefer another possible reading that says “the seven-fold Spirit before his throne.” The idea here is the Holy Spirit. There are not seven Holy Spirits, but one Holy Spirit who works in many different ways but is complete and whole in and of himself – again, the seven pointing to completeness. The Spirit does many things, but is one unified Spirit.

Then there's Jesus – the faithful witness, the One who could tell us about the Father because He was with the Father before the creation of the world, and the one who witnessed to us what a perfect life was. He is the firstborn from the dead – His resurrection is the proof that His blood saves us, and it is the promise that we too will one day rise as He rose. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth – no matter what earthly powers do, they are subject to Him. He lifts them up into positions of power and takes them down. He, not earthly powers, is in control.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” We honor Christ because He loves us. That’s demonstrated in all He did to free us. That’s the heart of the gospel. Jesus died in my place that His righteousness, His goodness, might be counted as my own.

But not only that! We often forget; we think that’s the end of the gospel, to be with Him in eternity rather than condemned. But there’s more. He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father. What does that mean? 1 Peter 2:9 puts it this way: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” What does a priest do? He serves before the Lord, offering up sacrifices, praying for God’s people. In eternity, we will be priests – the kind of work I do today as a pastor will seem so small in comparison to the good work we will do before the Lord.

But we serve as *royal* priests; because Christ saved us and made us His brothers and sisters, we are co-heirs with Christ; we will reign alongside Him. We don’t know exactly what that will look like, but it means our work in eternity won’t be as God’s slaves but His friends, His companions. It will be good, meaningful work as priests, as kings and queens. In the new heaven and the new earth, we will be so much more than even the greatest person now. Yet we won’t be concerned with power and glory, as earthly rulers do. Because God will have fully remade us, our hearts will be in the right place. And we will fulfill the promise of God to the Israelites through Moses that His people will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We’ll hear more about this in chapter 4.

Moving on...John writes, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” John is referencing two Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and the coming Day of the Lord. One is from Daniel 7, where the Messiah comes with the clouds. We’ve all heard of Daniel, the man during the Babylonian exile who was thrown into the lion’s den and survived. But he was a great prophet as well, and he wrote about the final coming of the Messiah. It also references Zechariah 12:10, where the nations mourn over the Messiah they have pierced. There is continuity between the Old and New Testament. This revelation of Jesus is directly related to the prophecies that came before it – what the prophets of old once glimpsed in part, now we’re going to get to see in greater detail.

Finally, God again states for us who He is – “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. To us, it would be like saying, “I am the A and the Z.” More directly, God is saying He is the first and last. He holds everything together; He is Almighty. Nothing has power over Him. In just a short period of time, the nature of God is restated twice. We need to know He is sovereign, the perfect King; nothing can unseat Him. It is not a question that He rules over all. The question for us is, will we fight Him or joyfully accept His rule over us?

That’s where we’ll stop for today, but I encourage you to stay faithful to worship on Sundays. Not only do we owe God our worship and praise, not only do we benefit from being together in worship of the Almighty, things get even more fascinating from here!