

Revelation 1

The Book of Revelation

A survey was taken among church attendees as to what book of the Bible would they most like taught. Most people chose the Book of Revelation, which then prompted them to also do a survey among the pastors of churches as to what book of the Bible they avoided teaching the most, again it was the Book of Revelation. This writer has waited forty-two years to teach passage by passage through this book. It is a godly fearful thing to put words into print about this particular book, because the Lord gives a warning to writers and teachers of the Book of Revelation: ¹⁸**I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 22:18-19).** Of course, most teachers of Revelation have no intention of taking away the words, they just don't want to misinterpret it. As I have travelled through 32 different nations on five continents, I have become aware how little is the amount of literature and teaching material on Bible topics that many nations have. My intent in writing, therefore, is to reach out to the nations of the world that cannot access many of the commentaries, books and study guides we have in the West. I dedicate my work to them with my prayer that God's Word will bring much fruit.

Introduction

Most scholars believe that the author, John (v. 9), is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and the three epistles or letters that bear his name in the New Testament. Some people call this book, the book of Revelations, plural, but the Greek word, *apokálypsis*, translated as Revelation (v. 1), means uncovering or unveiling. The word is not plural, but it is in the singular voice and could be translated as The Book of the Unveiling. Perhaps we can liken it to Michelangelo chipping away his statue of David under a veil, so the Holy Spirit wants to pull away the covers and reveal the Lord Jesus as He really is and for His church to know God's plan and purpose for the earth.

Some people are scared to read this book because of some of the fearful things within its pages. Others look at the book and find it difficult to understand because of the symbolic pictures, but God wants His people to understand the prophecy. He said, **"Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near"** (Revelation 22:10). More than five hundred years before Christ, the prophet Daniel was told that one of his prophecies would not be understood until the end times: **"but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future"** (Daniel 8:26), but in our day most students of biblical prophecy agree that the end-times are upon us and God is opening His people's minds to the person of Christ and the unveiling of His purpose for this world. Let's look at the first three verses and then continue our introduction of the book:

¹The 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, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³Blessed 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 (Revelation 1:1-3).

The passage above points out that the purpose of this book is that God wants His people to know the things that must soon take place (v. 1) and guarantees a blessing to all who read aloud and who hears it and puts into practice the words of this book (v. 3). It is an important book for all believers to read because the Lord stated a blessing also at the end of the book: **“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll”** (Revelation 22:7). I would encourage us, therefore, to obtain the blessing by finding time to read aloud through the prophecy of this book.

One of the reasons people have a hard time understanding this book is that there are many allusions, intimations or typology to the Old Testament, and, unfortunately, many Christians do not give time to reading the Old Testament. For instance, what we read about in the beginning in Genesis ends in Revelation. In Genesis is written the beginning of heaven and earth, in Revelation the realization or fulfillment of heaven and earth. In Genesis we read of the entrance of sin and the curse, in Revelation we have the end of sin and the curse (Revelation 22:3). In Genesis we see God’s enemy, Satan, disrupting God’s people and the earth, in Revelation we have the destruction of Satan (Revelation 20:2, 10). In Genesis we see a departure from the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:23), in Revelation the Tree of Life is regained (Revelation 22:2-3). In Genesis, death comes on the scene, but in Revelation there is no more death: **“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”** (Revelation 21:4 emphasis mine). In Genesis sorrow and pain enters, and in Revelation crying and pain is banished (Revelation 21:4). In Genesis Paradise is lost, but in Revelation Paradise is regained (Revelation 21:10). In Genesis a Savior is promised (Genesis 3:15), while in Revelation that Savior, Messiah, will walk with us and, **“They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads”** (Revelation 22:4). The Book of Revelation is the climax of all the longings of mankind.

Outline

We have an outline that John himself gives us in the first chapter:

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this (Revelation 1:19).

We have a prologue (1:1-8), then **“the things that you have seen,”** past tense, refer to the vision of the Lord Jesus in all His glory in chapter one, verses 9-18. **“Those that are”** refer to the Lord’s corrections and admonitions of the seven churches in chapters 2-3. The reference to **“those that are to take place after this,”** refers to chapters 4-21, the things that are soon to take place, i.e., the prophetic events that culminate in the return of Christ and the setting up of His kingdom, and God’s judgment of sin. Then finally there is an epilogue in chapter 22.

Other things that are helpful to know as we study this book, is that the writer, John the apostle, is commonly estimated to be 92 years old at the time of the writing of Revelation and was one of a team of leaders at the church at Ephesus, one of the seven churches in the province of Asia, and perhaps had some sort of oversight over the other six churches mentioned, being all in the same area of what is now Southwest Turkey. The place where John writes from was the island of Patmos, an island 30 miles off the main coastline of what is now the country of Turkey. According to the historian Eusebius, John was banished there by the Roman emperor Domitian in the year AD 95

for refusing to worship Domitian as a god. He was released eighteen months later by the emperor Nerva after Domitian was assassinated. The time of the writing is estimated to be A.D. 96, a time when many of the churches were going through persecution by the Romans.

Greeting to the Seven Churches

⁴John 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,⁵and 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 ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, 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. ⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:4-8).

John pronounces blessing on the seven churches from Him who is and who was and who is to come, the only One outside of time and existing in the past, present and future (v. 4). He writes of Jesus as *the Alpha and Omega*, the Greek beginning and ending letters of the alphabet (v. 8). Christ was there in the beginning of creation, and “**without him nothing was made that has been made**” (John 1:1-3). He is the Bridegroom and the culmination of God’s plans for mankind.

He then calls Jesus by three names, *the Faithful Witness*, the One who always tells the truth about this world and where it is going. Secondly, He is called *the Firstborn of the Dead*, perhaps because He is the first of all human beings to conquer death, being fully God and fully man at the same time. Perhaps He is also called the firstborn because the firstborn of the clan of Abraham carried his blessing down through each generation (Genesis 12:2-3). Jesus is the firstborn head of the church and we Gentiles are adopted and grafted into the branches of the Tree of Faith. Jesus has inherited everything from the Father and freely shares His inheritance with His church. Thirdly, Christ is also called *The Ruler of Kings* (v. 5). Every knee of presidents and kings will bow before Him and all will be subject to Christ.

Verse 6 calls us a kingdom of priests to our God and Father. What is a priest and what comes to mind when the Lord speaks of such things about His people?

All earth’s inhabitants will see Christ coming with the clouds (v. 7), which could be a reference to the visible Shekinah presence of God that came upon Solomon’s temple when it was dedicated (1 Kings 8:10-11), a cloud that withdrew from the temple of God in Jerusalem after their gross sin and idolatry (Ezekiel 10:18). When the Israelites came out of Egypt and wandered for forty years in the wilderness, God led them by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire at night. Similarly, Jesus coming with the clouds could be referencing believers with the Lord in heaven mentioned as the “**great cloud of witnesses**” (Hebrews 12:1). This great cloud of believers is those who have died and are with the Lord and will come with Jesus when He comes: “**For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we also believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him**” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

It could also be both that is happening, the Shekinah glory cloud on the returning Messiah and those coming in the clouds with Him. There will be those on earth who will see this glorious sight

in the midst of the darkness of that Day and will begin to mourn their rebellion and search for a cave to hide from His wrath (Revelation 6:16). Also, the people of Israel, they who pierced Him will see a vision of Him over Jerusalem: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn” (Zechariah 12:10).

In the Spirit on the Lord’s Day

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (Revelation 1:9-11).

John here tells us that he himself had undergone the distress and tribulation of that day under the Roman emperor Domitian’s persecution of believers (v. 9). Many people today think of tribulation as being a time of wrath in the end-times, but the Greek word, *thlipsis*, translated tribulation (KJV) or distress (NIV), means a heavy downward pressure, a word signifying affliction, trouble, and distress and a time of great difficulty for believers. Tradition tells us that John was boiled in oil, and when he didn’t die from it, the Romans banished him to the island of Patmos. John was reminding them that he also was called to live out his life in patient endurance in suffering persecution.

What does John mean when he says he was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day?

By the Lord’s day, John was probably meaning the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2), the day of Jesus’ resurrection and the meeting and memorial day to the early believers of Christ’s victory over death. We cannot know for sure if the apostle John was still in his physical body on earth when he saw the vision of things in the heavenly realm, or if his spirit left his body for a time. We know that Paul the apostle had a similar experience when he stated he was caught up to a heavenly place:

²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

The evangelist, Philip, after he shared Christ with an Ethiopian eunuch was lifted up bodily and transported to Azotus, where he carried on his mission of preaching (Acts 8:39-40). Elijah was also lifted up bodily with his servants searching the nation for him (2 Kings 2:16).

Whatever his experience was, John heard a loud voice like a trumpet (v. 10). This takes the Israelites back to the trumpet sound when God came down on Mount Sinai. The Israelites could not bear God’s voice speaking to them and asked Moses to speak to God for them (Exodus 20:18-19). When John heard the trumpet sound he turned and saw the Lord Jesus standing in the middle of seven lampstands in all His glory:

The Vision of the Son of Man

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. ¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:12-20).

What stands out to you about this appearance of Jesus and what was John’s physical reaction to the Lord Jesus in the heavenly realm?

When Jesus walked the earth in the veil of flesh, he seemed like an ordinary man, and so He was. He had to become fully human, in order to take the place of humanity and pay the price of death for all men, but now John was seeing the Lord as He really is today, the glorious King of Heaven and Earth. Verse thirteen describes Jesus as wearing the long robe and golden sash that were worn by priests in the Old Testament (Exodus 28:4), for Christ is our high priest representing us before the Father. Verse 14 reminds us of the prophet Daniel’s vision of God: “As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire” (Daniel 7:9-10). This is the same One whose face believers will one day see (Revelation 22:4). He is also called the first and the last (v. 17), identifying Him with the LORD spoken of in Isaiah 44:6, and 48:12. The wonderful comforting thought is that Jesus has the keys of Death and Hades. In those days to have keys spoke of having great authority and Jesus is the One who can close or open those doors. Nothing can happen to the believer that is unknown and outside the control of the Lord Jesus. He has conquered Death and Hades.

What is meant by the symbolism of Christ walking in between the seven candlesticks?
What difference does it make that Christ has the keys of Death and Hades, and how did He come to have them?

The seven lampstands represent the seven churches to whom John is to write (v. 20). Jesus is seen in the midst of the seven churches. He is the light that emanates from the church if each church is given over to His leadership. There are some churches that are lifeless, and their light has been snuffed out (Revelation 2:5). There is a spiritual war raging against the church, and the enemy wants to seat ungodly men into positions of leadership in the church, just as he did by getting Annas and Caiaphas into the High Priest position over Israel. When ungodly men rule over the church, the light of Jesus from the church becomes darkness.

The seven stars the Lord holds in his hands (v. 16) are the angels of the seven churches. In chapter two and three, John is told to write to each of seven angels, but how can one write on a scroll to angels? The word *angel* is a translation of the Greek word that means *messengers*. We have two places in the Scriptures, Luke 9:52; Matthew 11:7-10, where human messengers were spoken of using the Greek word *angelous*, the word usually translated into English as angels. It could be that John is told to write to what we now call pastors, the chief messengers of the churches, the ones who hold the main responsibility for teaching and oversight in the church. The prophet Daniel likens those who lead many to righteousness as the **stars** (Daniel 12:3). It is this writer's belief that each church is to have a group of elders who have equal leadership responsibility for the body of believers, but there must be one of the elders who "drives the bus," a first among equals. President Ronald Reagan used to have a plaque on his desk that said, *The Buck Stops Here*. If all the elders try to drive the bus, the end result is chaos. One godly shepherd (pastor) is required to take responsibility for the direction, under the Lord's headship and leadership, for the guidance of the church. **"Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain"** (Psalm 127:1). May the Lord use each of us studying the Book of Revelation to be built up as a spiritual house of worship and devotion to Him.

In closing this study, it would be a good thing to ask God to give you a new awareness of who He is and what He has done for you.

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