

Revelation: What is it & how do we Read it?

Revelation 1:1-3

Pastor Tom
January 14, 2017

For the first 40 years of my life, I basically avoided the book of Revelation. As a kid, I heard about all the scary things in the book. I tried to read it & didn't understand it. I had seen many people get into passionate and sometimes destructive arguments about it. I didn't see how it was relevant to my daily life so I avoided it. But over the last few years a couple of troubling developments moved me back towards Revelation.

First, I saw some Christians declare with certainty how the end times would unfold. I wondered how anyone could be so certain about the ways and timing of God when He so often does things in ways we don't expect. The disciples did not understand Jesus' first coming as a suffering servant until after the crucifixion and resurrection. They were with Jesus day and night for at least 3 years. On top of that, John, the author of Revelation, struggles to understand and react to all that's revealed to him even as he sees it. Twice, he bows down in inappropriate worship towards an angel and has to be corrected. So I began to think that we may need to approach Revelation with more humility and let God speak to us through this magnificent book.

The second area that troubled me concerned my own attitude towards Revelation. Did God want me to avoid a book He inspired? Was God okay with me staying away from Revelation in my own personal walk and public teaching just because it was controversial? The more I thought about it, I realized that this is not what God wants from me.

So, this brings us to Revelation today. I wonder what your experience has been with it. Some of you have studied a lot and may use it to try to interpret current events. Some may occasionally read it and even appreciate some of it. But overall we may leave it thinking "What was that all about," and "this doesn't have much to say about life today."

For the last several years, I more intentionally studied Revelation. This past May, I plunged in further by attending about 36 hours of lectures on Revelation at Taylor Seminary. I have learned that I have a lot more to learn. But I at least have a stronger understanding of this writing and how it can greatly impact our walk with Christ today.

I also believe a study of this last book is timely for us because of our focus on worship through 2017/18. Revelation is full of worship. It presents a choice each of us must make. Who gets our worship? Will it be the lamb that was slain and the eternal God as described in Revelation 5:13 – "And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and all that is in them saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'" Or will we worship the dragon or devil and his beast? Like in Revelation 13:4 – "And they

worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast saying, “Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?”

So we will enter into this mysterious yet exciting book for the first half of 2018. I pray that God will make clearer His revelation of Jesus Christ to us. I pray we will grow in knowing Him better so we can more effectively worship Him with our whole lives.

Today, we are going to just dip our toe into the book. We will look only at the first 3 verses which give answers to questions many of us might have about Revelation. What is it? What does it reveal? How can it help us today? With answers to those questions in mind, we will then proceed to the meet Jesus at His table – the one who gave this revelation to John to pass on to us. (Please find Revelation 1:1-3 in your Bibles – 867)

Revelation 1:1-3 (ESV)

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.

So we learn a fair amount about the nature of Revelation from these verses. **What is Revelation?** Revelation is an **apocalypse**. In fact the very first word of the book is “Apocalypse.” The apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Now in popular culture today, we think of an apocalypse as some devastating event that wipes out most of the world’s population and renders the world a wasteland.

But this is not the meaning of the biblical term apocalypse. The word means the uncovering of something hidden or the making known of what we could not find out for ourselves. So revelation is a good translation of the Greek apocalypse. A revelation reveals something hidden or unknown before the revelation.

Around the time of Christ, there was a fever pitch interest in apocalyptic literature among the Jews. Why? They were in a terrible state. They had been conquered by the Romans. They lived under military occupation. They longed for freedom yet saw no way they could attain such freedom. They wondered if there was some hidden power like God that would intervene on their behalf.

So an entire literature developed around 200 BC until the year 100 that is now known as apocalyptic literature. It basically was resistance or crisis literature. It spoke in symbolic terminology about the state of the world and the

possibility of change coming to it. The Jews in the first century were very familiar with apocalyptic terms and literature. So Revelation with all its creatures, symbols and numbers did not confuse them.

But apocalyptic literature is very foreign to us. We have nothing really like it. We have to work harder to try to understand what these symbols mean. We must also recognize that many of us cannot relate to crisis or resistance literature because we've lived in democracies. We've experienced a culture where you are allowed to protest and vote and express different opinions. But you couldn't do that under the rule of an empire. Some of you have actually lived under dictatorial or repressive or corrupt regimes where dissent was not allowed. Yet under such regimes, dissent still happens. Resistance occurs and sometimes writers put together thoughts that inspire the people. That's one purpose Revelation served. It is an apocalypse that unveils what God would do to give the people hope.

Revelation also contains **eschatology**. This is the teaching about last things. It reveals events or signs that will occur prior to end of history. So Revelation contains teaching about the future. The first parts of the Bible tell and explain what *has happened* in God's plan, and how to love in light of that. Revelation points forward to what will happen at the end of God's plan and how to live in light of it.

So Revelation tells us that history as we know it will come to an end. Christ will return and establish His kingdom on earth. This is good news because it points to a new world coming free from the suffering, evil and pain of our world. One author writes eschatology involves the belief that the resurrection appearances of Christ are not complete. We will all get to see Him at the end.

But Revelation is not only apocalypse and eschatology. Revelation is also **prophecy**. Notice verse 3. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this *prophecy*. In the Bible, prophecy is something that comes directly from God to the prophet. The first verse of Revelation emphasizes more clearly than any other New Testament book the divine origin of these words. "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants. He (Jesus) made it known by sending his angel to his servant John. So you see the chain of transmission – God made it known to Jesus who sent his angel who spoke and showed it to John. He wrote it down so we could receive it. I believe that this John is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and the letters 1st, 2nd and 3rd John and was one of Jesus' closest disciples.

Yet there is one more piece to answer the question "What is Revelation?" It is a **letter** – a circular pastoral letter. We will see in the weeks to come that John wrote this letter to 7 churches in what was called Asia Minor then

and today is known as Turkey. So John puts Revelation together in a pastoral way to encourage and shepherd the people of these 7 churches.

So now we know a little more of what we're reading – An Apocalypse or Revelation that talks about end times that comes directly from God in the form of a letter. Next question - What does Revelation reveal?

What does Revelation reveal? First, it reveals **Jesus Christ**. The first phrase – “the Revelation of Jesus Christ” can have 2 meanings. It could be a revelation about Jesus Christ. It could be a revelation from Jesus Christ. The phrases following show that the Revelation comes from Jesus who received it from God. But it is also accurate to say that this is a revelation about Jesus Christ.

Revelation portrays Jesus in ways that we have not seen in other parts of the New Testament. Here to he is the all-powerful son of man who shines like the sun. He is the Lion of Judah. He is the Lamb standing as though it had been slain. He is the only one in all the universe with the authority to open the scroll revealing the things of the end. He is the rider on the white horse who will return to strike down the nations. He is King of Kings and Lord of lords; the great Judge; the one who will come on the clouds for everyone will see. There is a lot of revelation about Jesus in Revelation.

But there is another major area of revelation. Verse 1 again – The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants **the things that must soon take place**. These things or events will precede the return of Christ and signal the end of history as we know it. This is where the eschatology or teaching about the last things will come in. Seals, trumpets and bowls which fill much of the book detail the events coming and the final judgment. These are the things that must soon take place.

Yet how could Jesus give this revelation of events that must soon take place if it's been 1900 years since John received this revelation? The world hasn't ended. Jesus has not returned. So was Jesus wrong? No. Several options exist that could explain the word soon. Soon could mean suddenly. Jesus might have meant that when these events occur, they will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Soon could mean certain without a date. So Jesus could be emphasizing the certainty that these events will happen but without a date attached to them. Soon could mean soon in the eyes of God for him 1000 years is like a day. But I think the strongest interpretation is known as prophetic foreshortening. That means prophets always saw the future as imminent or soon. It didn't matter how many years remained between the prophecy given and the prophecy fulfilled. The prophets warned people of their time to turn or

respond before it was too late. Since people have relatively short lives, everything coming was soon. I think Jesus adopts the posture of a prophet here to communicate to the listener that it is vital that they take this to heart.

So there are two major areas of revelation in Revelation. The servant becomes the triumphant King. We will see Christ revealed in a way unlike any other New Testament book. And we will see revealed the things that must soon take place. In the course I took last May, our instructor, Ralph Korner, pointed out the importance of keeping both Christ and the events of the end in front of us. He said if we know the person of Jesus without knowing the events surrounding his return, we will be ill-prepared to face the inevitable persecution of the devil, his angels and earthly followers. But knowing the events of the end without knowing the person of Jesus only brings fear as the events unfold. That was my experience growing up. Whenever people talked about Revelation, they focused on the scary events described in it. There was no talk of Jesus' presence with us or the supremacy of God over all things. So we were fearful and often didn't want to talk about end times. Keeping both Jesus and the events in mind will ensure we're prepared for the events without fear.

So we've learned a little about the makeup of Revelation – an apocalypse; eschatology; prophecy and letter. We've learned the two primary areas of revealing – Jesus Christ and the things that must soon take place.

What difference could the message of Revelation make in our lives today? You're just going through your week at work or at school or at home. You may just be trying to get through the week. You're just living your ordinary life. You may not really care about the specifics or details of some apocalyptic symbol. How might this book's message relate to us?

It gives **hope to a people oppressed by an anti-god power**. Sometimes when we watch the news all we hear about is war, disease, suffering and misery. We can wonder if evil is actually winning. But learning that God is supreme and ultimately works out His purposes can bring renewed joy and hope.

He is supreme over every power and force in the universe. So despite what the news says or what we see happening, God and His people will win. Revelation reveals this to us again and again to give us hope.

God's message from Revelation can also give **perspective to the cosmic struggle between good and evil**. Sometimes the struggles that we face are part of the bigger battle going on between Jesus, His angels and the Devil and his demons. We need to use the weapons God provides to do our part in fighting this battle. We raise up the shield of

faith with other Christians beside us. We swing the Sword of the Spirit – the word of God. We offer up prayer and asking for God’s intervention.

Instead of just laying down as victims, we can stand with the armor of God and the Lord leading us. If you have made it through this week standing, you are doing well. You are remaining faithful. Sometimes, that’s all God call us to do. Stand firm. You will never know until eternity how your life and choices may have played a role in the overall struggle against evil.

God’s message from Revelation also gives **encouragement by showing the power and sovereignty of God** over all that is happening. No matter how difficult our lives or the things of history, Revelation announces that God is still in control. He will conclude history in the way He has promised. Though the devil and his minions carry out their works and plans, God works all things together for good for those who love Him. Revelation reminds us of God’s supreme ability to take what looks like a disaster and bring something good out of it.

It gives **wisdom for times of hardship** caused by persecution for our faith. Some hardships are simply the result of living in a fallen world. Some hardships we bring on ourselves because of our sin. But the hardships talked about in Revelation are directly related to being God’s people.

In North America, we have not been well trained in suffering persecution for our faith like in some other parts of the world. But that is changing. More and more we are being marginalized. More and more, a godless view of society dominates. We are the scorned and the mocked. The Bible is dismissed as irrelevant and discredited. Even within Christianity, there is a lot of questioning of the Bible’s reliability and trustworthiness. Revelation reveals to us that this is not unexpected. It will encourage and exhort us to persevere in the faith even when things get tough.

It gives **strength to resist the temptation to succumb to the world’s pressures** and invitations to compromise.

Sometimes, we get into a fog about the temptations we face. We get so immersed in the culture that we aren’t even aware that we might be dabbling with sin. Or we can give up or give in to some temptation because we’re convinced everyone is doing it. And maybe they are! So why should we bother remaining faithful to the Lord? But then we get a picture of the all-powerful Lord from Revelation. We are reminded that He is coming on the clouds and everyone will see Him. Maybe we see or hear about His holiness. We are caught up in a worship service where we see

other Christians passionately pouring out their hearts to Him. We move again to worship, to repent of our complacency and to follow the Lord with renewed zeal. So, Revelation's message can renew our strength to resist temptation.

Revelation will teach us that God is still in control. God cares about all that is happening in the world and in our lives. God powerfully intervenes to accomplish His purposes. God provides resources from His glorious riches to enable us to live faithfully each day. God will see us through the darkest times to the other side.

The question today is will we receive this message?

Verse 3 states blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. **Through Revelation, God call us to Listen to its message and Keep His Word.** God did not include this book in the Bible so we could have our curiosities satisfied. God did not include Revelation so we could sit around and debate the exact meaning of a particular symbol. God wants us to hear and keep the commands found in this book.

Commands like (2:5) "Repent and do the works you did at first. (2:10) Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. (2:14) Repent from holding to the teaching of Balaam. (2:25) Hold fast what you have until I come.

(3:2) Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die. (3:3) Remember what you have received and heard. Keep it and repent. (3:15) Stop being lukewarm and repulsive to Christ. (14:7) Fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come.

(14:9) If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath. (14:12) Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commands of God and their faith in Jesus. (22:7) Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.

Will we hear? Will we keep His Word? Revelation is a dramatic and graphic book. It has strange creatures and awesome moments of worship. It gives glimpses of heaven and the depravity of man. Yet most of all, it brings hope. God is supreme. The Lord Jesus Christ will return triumphant. This revelation – this unveiling is to help us – to stay focused on what's most important in life. So I have an assignment for you this week. Read Revelation. It will probably take about an hour. Write down questions. Sent them to me or give them to me and I will try to address them. Pray for God to give us understanding. To that end, let us come to meet the one who gave this revelation at His table now.