

Revelation: Introduction

There are 66 books in the Bible and we have spent time in most of them over the past year, but there are a few that I have avoided, not because they don't have important things to say to us, but because I don't feel that I understand enough of what the book is saying in order to teach what it means and how its meaning applies to our lives. One of those is the book of Revelation, the final book in our Bibles, and one of the most difficult to decipher with confidence that we know what we're talking about. Some people are happy to speculate and say they think they know who the antichrist is, or the meaning of Babylon or the dragon or the beast, and it always comes down to something or someone who is around and making news today. I don't have that same confidence and so I have little to say about a book like Revelation in terms of what it predicts for our future. But I do think that it says a great deal that is relevant to our present, to how we live and interact with people today, and so I'm going to tackle this mysterious book over the next few weeks with a focus on the applications for living for Jesus in the midst of a world that is rejecting Him.

Some principles to begin with:

1. We can't understand what Revelation is saying to us today unless we first know what it meant to the people it was written to, the persecuted Christians of the later years of the first century. It wasn't written to us, although it has meaning for us. And so we must discover what it meant, what the applications were, for the first-century Christians of Asia Minor who were the ones this book was written for.
2. We can't understand what Revelation is saying to us unless we see it through the eyes of the person who has read the Old Testament. It is the Old Testament that gives us insight into the use of numbers in Revelation, that gives us insight into the parallels between this book and the Exodus of God's people from Egypt, and that gives us the framework of God's purposes in creating heaven and earth. We will return again and again to the Exodus, to Creation and to the significance of numbers, and will find that there are other Old Testament insights that are crucial to our understanding of this book as well.
3. We can't fully understand what Revelation is saying to us unless we know the situation that believers in the first century were facing. We will need to have a handle on the Roman Empire and how they did business with people who were not fully on board with their beliefs and values.

Each of these will come up time and again as we work our way through this book.

Let's begin with John's introduction:

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!" (1:1-8)

Let's look at this introduction closely, because it tells us the purpose of the book. "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him to show His servants what must soon take place." He doesn't say, "This revelation is written to show believers 2000 years from now what I'm going to do then", but "what must soon take place." I don't think we should ignore that verse, especially as it is the first verse of the book and the one that explains the purpose for its writing. The classic comeback is that, with God, one day is like a thousand years, so "soon" could mean almost anything, but I need to point out that John is not writing the letter to God, but to people, people who are facing persecution that is intense and frightening, and who need to be able to hang onto hope in the midst of it.

Again, at the end of verse 3, John emphasizes how soon these events are: Blessed are those who read and who hear the words of this prophecy and who take it to heart, because the time is near. Not, "the time for the fulfilment of this prophecy is more than 50 generations out", but "the time is near". This means that John is writing to people for whom this book is relevant in their day. If we are going to understand the Revelation, we have to first understand how it was relevant in the late first century -- certainly before we can hope to understand how it might be relevant for us.

Notice from the introduction the progress of revelation: God the Father reveals it to Jesus who reveals it to an angel so that the angel can reveal it to John who then records the revelation so it can be sent out to the churches.

Then, in verse four, we read the greeting: "To the seven churches in the province of Asia". These churches will be named in v. 11, all are in what is now western Turkey.

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.

Seven churches, seven spirits before God's throne. The number seven will show up time and time again in this book. It is one of the numbers of completeness, of perfection - the others are 3, 10 and 12 - but the number seven seems to relate to heavenly perfection. It is used fifty times in the Revelation, often with a focus on some aspect of God's person, power and authority. Are we to imagine seven different spirits

or something else? The reference to the seven spirits is most likely a reference to the perfection or completeness, of the Holy Spirit. "They" are mentioned four times in the early chapters of this book, but nowhere are they defined or explained.

The next paragraph is full of glory and praise to Jesus. Now, think about the situation that the people are living under. Everywhere, local politicians are falling over each other promoting the idea of building a temple to Caesar, a monument to Caesar, or naming something after Caesar. Caesar has called himself divine, has been promoted to god-like stature and is being worshiped everywhere. He is, very evidently, the lord of all the earth, and those who are being persecuted for worshiping a crucified Jew are bound to wonder if they're missing something. And so we read in this paragraph phrases like:

To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins . . . (He) has made us to be a kingdom and priests . . . to Him be glory and power for ever and ever! . . . He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him.

John is giving the believers a reminder of the hope that they have, that Jesus is risen, is the true Lord and is coming again.

Now, let's pick up the Introduction again, starting in v. 9:

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches - to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edge sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (vv. 9-17a)

You think Caesar is impressive, with his capital in Rome, with his palaces and statues and military sway over the whole of the western world? You think Caesar is the king of kings and lord of lords? Well, think again! The glorified Jesus stands supreme, with feet glowing like bronze, with a voice that sounds like rushing waters, holding seven stars in his right hand and with a double-edge sword coming from his mouth. His face is shining like the sun in all its brilliance and when I saw him I thought my life was over -- I fell at his feet as though dead.

This imagery of the glorified Jesus, in all His majesty and splendor, is repeated often in Revelation, as if to remind the struggling believers that Jesus is greater than anything!

Note the context for this passage: John is in exile, having been banished to the island of Patmos for his activities on behalf of the church of Jesus. He describes himself as being “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” which tell us that the church has already moved worship from the Sabbath of Judaism to the day of resurrection, the day when death was defeated and Jesus triumphed over the power of the evil one; the Lord’s Day. The veil is lifted for John and he is allowed to see things in the dimension of reality that is usually hidden from us. His commission is to record what he sees and send his testimony to the seven churches in Asia Minor, but the “seven”, because it is one of the numbers of completeness, may refer to the whole body of Christ; all congregations everywhere are to hear and understand what has been revealed to John. That’s not definitive, we can’t be sure, but that suggestion fits with the many uses of the number 7 in Revelation.

Continuing with the second half of v. 17:

Then He placed His right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in My right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Again, we come across the “alpha and omega”, only this time Jesus uses the phrase to describe Himself. If you ever wondered if Jesus has a different status, a lesser light than God the Father, it should be answered right here. Twice in chapter 1 we read about the First and the Last; once it refers to the Lord God and once to Jesus. This pattern is repeated in chapters 21 and 22.

Notice this other phrase Jesus uses to describe Himself in verse 18: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” Revelation reminds the scattered believers that the One who overcame death itself is their hope for eternal life itself -- He holds the keys. “Hades” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Sheol” which literally means “grave” or “dirt-pit” and which refers to the abode of the dead. It should not be confused with hell as there is no association between Hades and judgment or punishment.

Emperors come and go. They surround themselves with wealth and power and they satisfy their desires at the expense of others, but then they’re gone. Their power is a fleeting thing that can vanish in a moment. It doesn’t stand in the face of the one who calls Himself “the Living One”. Jesus says, “I am alive for ever and ever” and he holds the keys to death and Hades. The power of Roman Empire and the grandeur of its accomplishments is nothing in comparison to the victory of Jesus. His triumph is eternal and so the hope He offers is far superior to the hope that some would have in the might of the Emperor.

And with that introduction, John now relays the messages of Jesus to the seven

churches of Asia Minor. To each city, Jesus introduces His message with a self-description. In the letter to Ephesus, for example, He says, "These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. Then, He gives words of praise, encouragement for the good that He sees in them -- except to the church of Laodicea, which receives no praise. This is followed by words of warning, of correction; except in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, where no fault is mentioned. And each letter ends with a solemn exhortation and promise. These words are not meant only for the one church addressed in that particular letter, but apply to all who read the message John brings.

Here's the gist of those closing sentences in each of the letters to the seven churches:

Pay really close attention to what I'm saying and be an overcomer, a conqueror. If you can do that, you will receive a valuable reward.

The phrase, "He who has ears" or, as the New Living Translation puts it, "Anyone who is willing to hear", is really a call to pay close attention, to take this seriously. This is not a matter for carelessness or something we can dismiss lightly. This is revelation from the Holy Spirit and is vital for your perseverance in the truth of the gospel.

The second phrase that is crucial in the close of each letter is the call to overcome, to conquer, to be victorious. This is the central call of this book of prophecy. Those who would hear the words of this letter read to them were undergoing severe persecution and had since the days of Nero. Before that, their enemies had mostly been Jews who rejected the teaching that Jesus was the Messiah, the One sent by God to fulfill the promises of salvation contained in the Old Testament. But, as the church had grown and had gained influence in places like Corinth and Ephesus and Rome, it had attracted the attention of the emperors and, when the crisis of a great fire burning the capital city hit Rome, Nero blamed it on the Christians and imperial persecution began in earnest. How would the church respond in the face of imprisonment, loss of jobs, the scorn of the powerful and the threat of martyrdom? That is the central theme of these seven letters and we'll look at them individually next Sunday.

But the purpose and focus of this book as a whole is made clear from the beginning. Caesar is not ultimate and doesn't hold the winning hand -- Jesus is supreme, He alone has conquered death, and He is coming again and will be looking for a faithful people who have stood through trial and stayed firm in their faith.

The applications for us are probably too obvious, but let me summarize a few of them before we go to discussion:

1. The world in which we live is becoming increasingly unfriendly to Christian values. I recently cancelled my Bank of Montreal MasterCard, which I started using in 1975, because BMO has led a crusade against Trinity Western University. BMO says that the University's covenant on moral standards to be observed by students and staff is discriminatory against gays and lesbians and have said that they will refuse to do business with firms that have hired graduates of Trinity's programs. If that's not

blatant discrimination, I don't know what is -- anyway, I told them I was not going to use them for my business as they obviously don't like Christians and want to punish us for holding values that differ from the mainstream in Canada.

This story is still relatively near the beginning; I believe that this kind of discrimination against Christians will grow in the coming years. Will we stand up, or will we shrink into the cultural mainstream in order not to appear different? Will we say that we love Jesus more than Caesar, and refuse to bow down to worship the empire of the West? These are choices that are drawing closer for all of us; as I said some months ago, there will be a Supreme Court decision at some point as to which is the greater right under our constitution: religious freedom or sexual freedom - and I doubt that their decision is in doubt any more.

2. A second application we will encounter again and again in Revelation. This book is a call to worship, to honor Jesus as the Alpha and Omega, the Lord of His Creation, the Lion and the Lamb. In this first chapter, the call is to be in awe of the One "like a son of man" - the image takes us back to Daniel 7:13,14 where the son of man is described as being given "authority, honor and royal power over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey Him." In Revelation He is dressed in the garment of a priest, a long robe with a golden sash. The other aspects of the description of Jesus inspire fear and reverence: eyes blazing like fire, feet like bronze glowing in a furnace, with a voice like the sound of rushing waters and a face that shines with the brilliance of the sun. We are grateful for Jesus' love and compassion towards us, but we must not treat Him casually, like a buddy who makes no demands on us. He is King and we call Him "Lord" for a reason. He is worthy of honor, obedience and adoration.

3. A third application is simply the comfort and encouragement that we receive from this passage. John greets his readers with the words "Grace and peace from Him who is, and who was, and who is to come." He then gives glory 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." After appearing in glory to John, Jesus reassures him with the words, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last, the Living One." Our hope is in the One who was raised from the dead, who has gone before us to the place where the faithful will go in the age to come. In Him is righteous judgment, the gift of eternal life and the grace of forgiveness. Again, He is gloriously worthy -- and He is for us, not against us.