

REVELATION

Part 1: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”

Revelation 1:1–8

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Summary

Join us as we begin a journey through the final book of the New Testament canon—the book of Revelation. Together, we will discover what Revelation is and is not about. Revelation is not primarily about terrifying end-of-time catastrophes. It is a book about the eternal triumph of resurrection life. It is not meant to incite scary theories concerning the future. Rather, it is meant to inspire a certain hope for now and for all of time—a hope that is only possible because of Jesus Christ!

Scripture Reading

“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’” (Revelation 1:1–8, ESV).

Introduction

Today, we begin a journey through the final book of the New Testament canon—the book of Revelation. I’ve been excited about leading our church family through the book of Revelation for months now. However, I must say, I approach this sermon series with more of a sense of fear and trembling than I have any other during my tenure as pastor of this church. And that is not because I am afraid of the book of Revelation—it is because I believe Revelation is perhaps the most misinterpreted, misused, and misunderstood book in the Bible.

Many in our culture treat Revelation like a Christian version of an astrological horoscope. Overconfident preachers, YouTube prophets, book writers, and even some pop-culture entertainment add fuel to the fire by making wild speculations and predictions about current or near-future events.

For example, there was once an American author who wrote a book claiming that he knew the exact year that the supposed rapture would occur. The author made his case so convincing that the book became a sensation, selling more than 4.5 million copies.

The name of the book? *88 Reasons the Rapture Will Happen in 1988* [88 Reasons].¹

And now we look back on that and say, “How silly, right?” But there still is an entire industry of people who garner quite a bit of attention and profit by continuing to predict the exact day of Christ’s return, the exact identity of the antichrist, or the exact catalyst for the battle of Armageddon.

For many, there is an attractive allure for such discussions. There is something in us that craves secret knowledge of the future. But there is reason why the book is named Revelation and not “*Speculation*.” I would even argue that speculation almost entirely misses the point of Revelation. As the Apostle Paul writes elsewhere in the New Testament, fixating on endless speculation can distract Christians from stewarding their mission and advancing God’s work (cf. 1 Tim 1:4).

I’ll tell a quick story to illustrate the point. In 1999, the football teams of the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma were preparing to face off in the famous Red River Rivalry game. That particular year, Texas had a pretty strong team. Oklahoma did not. But in rivalry games, anything can happen.

As it would happen during the pre-game warm-ups, an Oklahoma player was near the Texas bench. He was seen folding a piece of paper and putting it in his waistband before running through the tunnel and back to the locker room. Only the piece of paper fell out of his waistband. A nearby member of the Texas staff went to pick the paper up, and—lo and behold!—it was playscript for Oklahoma offense!

Immediately, the document was rushed into the Texas locker room. And at once, the Defensive Coordinator started pouring over the playscript and consuming all of the secret knowledge that had just been handed to him. He even focused his time and energy on adjusting the Texas defensive strategy in preparation for what he knew was coming.

But when the game began, something went terribly wrong. Every time the Oklahoma offense got the ball, they burned Texas on every play. Before anyone could blink, Oklahoma was beating a much stronger Texas team 17–0!

¹ *88 Reasons the Rapture Will Happen in 1988* by Edgar C. Whisenant.

And there was a reason for this. The playscript had been written by Oklahoma's brand-new, relatively unknown Offensive Coordinator—a man by the name of Mike Leach [Mike Leach]. And the playscript was fake! It was a *decoy* designed for the explicit purpose of distracting Texas from using its original game plan.

Now, Texas did eventually when the game that year. But it was only after they realized that focusing on the playscript was nothing more than a distraction that needed to be literally wadded up and thrown in the trash so they could go back to their original game plan.

I say this because there are many who would want to convince you that they have the secret play-by-play knowledge of the future. They will claim to have insight that no one else has on Revelation and the end of time, and if you let them, they will *leech* your time, attention, and money. But more importantly, they would distract us from the central mission of declaring and displaying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, throughout this year, we will resist the temptation for hyped-up speculation on current events. We are not going to attempt to make one-to-one connections between the visions of Revelation and a for-profit cable news cycle that is designed to rage and fear.

But I can promise you this: the truths that we will explore and unfold from this book will still be real and relevant in the next new cycle. For the truths that we will examine in Revelation are truths of that speak to all of the church and across all of time.

That may mean that we need to leave some of what you have previously read or heard about Revelation in the waste bin. And that might be challenging for some of you. For others, that might be immensely refreshing and encouraging.

Together, we will discover what Revelation is and is not about. Revelation is not primarily about terrifying end-of-time catastrophes. It is a book about the eternal triumph of resurrection life. It is not meant to incite scary theories concerning the future. Rather, it is meant to inspire a certain hope for now and for all of time.

But I do want to challenge all of us to read Revelation with a fresh mindset that is eager to be challenged, to learn, to receive, and to respond. And we should be encouraged to do this by the very words of Revelation itself. As verse 3 promises, "*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*" (Rev 1:3).

Today, our reading is a section of Revelation known as "*The Prologue.*" It is a portion of Scripture that is filled with immense beauty and power. But even more, it gives us vital information about what Revelation is so that we can read Revelation for what it is instead of what it isn't. As we will see, that we must learn about Revelation to read it responsibly: Revelation is 1.) Apocalyptic, Revelation is 2.) Prophetic, and Revelation is 3.) (*profoundly*) Christ-centered.

Exposition

1.) Apocalyptic

In the Greek text, the first word is “Ἀποκάλυψις” (apocalupsis) or “apocalypse.” This immediately signals that Revelation is a part of a genre or literary style known as “apocalyptic literature.”

When you hear the word “apocalyptic,” you typically think about “the end of the world.” Indeed, apocalyptic literature often addresses topics like the final judgment and the end of history. But apocalyptic literature is about so much more. In the Bible, the apocalypse isn’t only about the future—it’s about our past, present, and future.

The word apocalyptic literally means “to unveil and reveal.” That’s why, in our English translations of the Bible, we typically translate the word “apocalypse” as “*revelation*.”

As our text begins, *“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”* (Rev 1:1–2).

The apocalypse thus imparts to us spiritual vision and a new way of seeing. Apocalyptic literature allows us to look behind the curtain and see the hidden spiritual reality behind all things.

I’ll again borrow an image from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* that some of you will remember from the time we spent in the Old Testament book of Daniel last fall.

In the film, a girl named Dorothy and her friends journey to a magical place called Emerald City, where they seek wisdom and protection from a legendary wizard named Oz. When the travelers come into the presence of Oz, they are overwhelmed and frightened by his appearance [Show *The Wizard of Oz*]. His head is monstrously large and green. His voice is loud and terrifying. Fire and smoke surround him. The wizard demands silence as he speaks and absolute obedience to all he commands. And all who see him tremble before him and obey his every word.

But toward the end of the film, a discovery is made: off in a quiet corner, where the image of the imposing Oz flashes and thunders, there is a drawn curtain. And behind the curtain [Show *The Man Behind the Curtain*], is an elderly man who controls the sights and the sounds of behind the great and mighty wizard.

It becomes evident that, for all of the fanfare and pyrotechnics and booming sounds, the wizard is a farce. The truth behind the mirage is a relatively weak and unimpressive man who simply knows how to put on a good show. And as his secret is exposed, he cries out, *“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!”*

But in apocalyptic books like Daniel and Revelation, God very much desires for us to look behind the curtain. In apocalyptic Scripture, the Holy Spirit lifts the curtain that veils our fleeting, physical world so that we might see what is transcendent and true.

However, spiritual and eternal truths are big and hard to grasp within the confined limits of our language and understanding. Thus, apocalyptic literature is often filled with colorful images and visions that often carry multilayered and highly symbolic meanings.

Now, just because Revelation is often symbolic does not mean that its truth is any less real. In a sense, Revelation reveals truths that are *more real* than anything we could ever see by just looking at the material world.

For example, for the Christians of the first century, the power and might of Rome were everywhere they could see. It was seen in the monuments and temples that were in every major city. It was seen in the legionaries who enforced Rome's power throughout the world. It was on every piece of currency they used to buy and sell.

Much of Revelation is a direct challenge to the power of Rome, but interestingly, John (the author of Revelation) never even uses the word Rome in the entire book! Instead, he lifts the veil. He shows us, and he shows the early Christians, that Rome is just Babylon reborn. Rome is just another version of the city of man that would exalt itself to heaven in defiance of the authority of God. And like Babylon, Rome—along with all empires of men—is doomed to defeat and destruction.

Meanwhile, the churches to whom John writes in Asia would have looked unthreatening and unimpressive when compared to the power of Rome. Such churches of the time would have been very small, likely only able to meet in houses and marginalized by the rest of the society around them. But John lifts the veil to show that in reality, these simple communities of Jesus-followers are building something that will last into eternity long after the empires of men crumble into dust. Each of these little churches is an embassy of the New Jerusalem—the true Eternal City.

Likewise, for Christians of the first century as well as Christians of the twenty-first century, the world would condition us to believe that the way to win is only through the power of coercion, brutality, deception, and violence. But Revelation will show us that this is the way of the dragon, the serpent of old that led our first parents into the first disobedience in Eden that fractured God's good creation and gave birth to all our woes.

Against, the powers of this world, the way of Jesus—the way of sacrificial love and gospel proclamation—seems like weakness. But Revelation lifts the veil to show us the dragon is doomed and it's the Lamb who was slain who will prevail.

Revelation is a timeless call for Christians to walk in the way of the Lamb in a world where beasts and Babylons are constantly vying for the attention, affection, and allegiance of our hearts.

For as we will see, it is the Lamb who was slain who alone is worthy. It is the Lamb who was slain who unseals the scroll of history and time. It is the Lamb who will ultimately prevail, bring forth the heavenly city, and make all things new.

The apocalypse of Jesus is meant to reveal what is real and true; over against the pretensions of kings and kingdoms of men. It shows us the spiritual reality behind the physical. And in an age of misinformation and disinformation—with AI Deep Fakes and Fake News—the question of what is real matters more than ever for the people of God.

I pray that we walk through this book that the Spirit of God will give us eyes to see the real and give us the wisdom to discern the truth from deception.

2.) Prophetic

Verse 3 tells us, “*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy...*” (Rev 1:3).

When we say the word prophecy, we automatically think about specific predictions that foretell the future. And it is true that, in the Bible, prophecies often involve future visions or predicative proclamations. But again, predictions are not the *essence* of biblical prophecy.

Now, in the ancient Near East, within the nations that surrounded ancient Israel, people loved some old-fashioned prophetic predictions. Kings of the ancient Near East would even have official prophets and magicians who were members of the royal court. Their job would include interpreting omens, practicing divination, studying astrology, and, of course, speaking on behalf of one or more gods.

But in reality, the pagan prophets were just propagandists for the powers that be. It was their job to proclaim that their king had a divine mandate to rule. And who could possibly oppose a king that was backed by a god?

They were also ancient hype-men who would get soldiers pumped up before going into battle for the king. They would also make decrees about divine favor and destined victories in upcoming battles. The Assyrian prophets were so convincing that the Assyrian armies often thought they were invincible. Spoiler: they *weren't*.

But the Israelite prophets were different. They were not pawns or puppets of kings. They were representatives of the one true God. They were people who encountered God and were given his very words to speak to his people. Their primary mission was to call the people of God toward faithfulness to the law (and covenant) of God.

The Israelite prophets did not speak what the king wanted to hear. They spoke about what is righteous and true. That meant they were fearless in speaking truth to power, even going so far as to confront kings on behalf of God.

There is even a moment in the book of Kings when a King of Israel sees a prophet coming, and he says, “I hate this guy. He never prophesies anything good about me, only bad” (cf. 1 Kgs 22:18).

But the Old Testament prophets were also unique in that they did not only speak to and about the kings. They also spoke to the everyday people of the nation. They called God’s people to repentance and justice. They would point people to the hope of God’s anointed Messiah and the kingdom that the Messiah would bring. And they would warn people of the coming Day of the Lord when all would be judged by God and held to account.

John stands in line with that prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. He is speaking the very word of God to the people of God. His words are filled with challenge and correction. He often speaks words of rebuke and words of warning. At times, he urgently calls the churches back to faithfulness when they have strayed.

But the goal of John’s prophecy is not to provoke people toward fear or morbid fascination with future terrors. Instead, John’s visions are meant to fill us with a hunger for holiness, an urgency for evangelism, and hope for the future that cannot be defeated by our circumstances. John also wants us to live with a mindfulness of Christ’s glory, an expectancy for the coming kingdom, and a holy fear of the Lord that shapes the way we live each day.

When we understand the prophetic nature of this book, we will see that Revelation is not primarily about Christian predictions—Revelation is a book about Christian *discipleship*.² It is a book that is meant to show the people of God who we are called to be both now and in eternity.

3.) Christ-centered

In order to understand Revelation rightly, you have to understand that it is a book that is not centered around complicated charts and cryptic puzzles. It is a book gloriously centered on Christ. The wonder of Christ shines on every page and throughout every vision. It has even been said that nowhere in all of literature is there a more astonishing powerful, and majestic depiction of Jesus.³

in Revelation, Jesus is no mere human teacher or moral example. He is the one “... *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*” (Rev 1:4–6).

² Scot McKnight and Cody Matchett, *Revelation for the Rest of Us*, 3–4.

³ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 13.

Think about this for a moment. John knew the very real, very human Jesus. He walked with him, talked with him, and shared meals with him. He listened to his teachings, and he beheld his miracles.

He also witnessed Jesus die on the cross. He witnessed him live again after his resurrection. And he witnessed him ascend to heaven.

But here in Revelation, John unveils the transcended truth about Jesus of Nazareth. And that unveiling entail a dramatic reversal of everything that the Roman world would have thought about a Jewish rabbi that the empire had executed.

John tells us that the one who was falsely accused is the true and “faithful witness.”

The one who died on the cross is “the firstborn of the dead” and the one who defeated the power of death.

The carpenter’s son from Nazareth is the rightful “king” of the cosmos.

The one who was bound and scourged is the one “who has freed us by the power of his blood.”

The one who was condemned by kings and priests is the one who has “made us a kingdom” of priests to his God and Father.

The one whom John himself witnesses ascending into the clouds of heaven is the one who is also returning with the clouds of glory.

Now, this is a significant image that deserves some unpacking. In the Old Testament, the cloud was a representation of God’s presence with his people. This is why there was a cloud at Mount Sinai when God gave his law to his people (Exod 24:15–18). This is why there was a cloud in the wilderness that led the people of Israel to their promised land (Exod 13:21). This is why there was a cloud when God’s glory filled the ancient temple of Jerusalem (2 Chr 5:14). When John says that Jesus coming with the clouds, he is saying that Christ’s return will bring forth the fullness of God’s presence with his people forever (cf. Rev 21:1–4)!

At the same time, this image of the clouds is a reference to a biblical figure known as the “Son of Man.” The Son of Man is a central image in the Old Testament book of Daniel (Dan 7:13–14). It is also the number one title Jesus used to refer to himself during his earthly ministry.

One of the most crucial times that Jesus does this is during his trial before the religious leaders of Jerusalem, just before his brutal death on the cross. Earlier that evening, Jesus had been arrested in the dead of night and abandoned by his friends. Now, he is being slapped, mocked, and abused as he stands trial before men who despise him.

The high priest asks Jesus, “Are you the Christ?” The Greek word for Messiah. He is asking Jesus, “Do you claim to be God’s anointed king that will deliver us from tyranny and bring forth the kingdom of God?”

By the time of Jesus’s life, the term “Messiah” had devolved into a political word. Most Jewish people believed the Messiah would have to be a political leader and a military warrior; a strong man would defeat the Roman Empire and establish a Jewish Empire to the glory of God. It’s sad to say, but for many Jewish people, this was their greatest hope. They had been so conditioned and formed by the world around them that the only salvation they could envision was political salvation.

Thus, the High Priest did not want in any way to accept Jesus as the Messiah. He just wanted to bait Jesus into making a statement of treason and rebellion against Caesar and Rome so that he could be put to death.

So the High Priest asks, “Are you the Christ?”

And Jesus says that “Sure, you can call me the Messiah. *But you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven* (Matt 26:64).

When he hears these words, the high priest tears his robe in rage. Jesus is not just claiming to be a king. The priest knows he is claiming to be much, much more. According to the words of the prophet Daniel, the Son of Man is the one who stands at the end of history. He is the divine judge that will bring forth perfect justice, the one to whom the Ancient of Days gives power and glory and dominion, and the one who is coming with the clouds.

That is why it is so powerful for John to write these words: “*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 1:7–8).

John wants us to see something that the rest of the world cannot see.

The crucified one will one day conquer. The judged one will judge the world. The one who humbled himself to death will reign in glory and be given the name that is above every name (cf. Phil 2:9). For he is the eternal one; the everlasting one; the one without beginning or end. He is the Almighty!

Conclusion

Do you see now what this book is all about? It is not the revelation of a secret code. It is not the revelation of the meaning behind the latest technology, the latest political contest, or the latest geo-political event. It is not even primarily the revelation of the end of time.

It is the revelation of *Jesus Christ*.

For if we see Jesus for who he is it will change the way we see everything. It will change the way we see God, the way we see ourselves, the way we see our world, and the way we see history. As the great C.S. Lewis once wrote, *“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”*⁴

So in a year when our surrounding culture will grow intoxicated with fear and rage and lust for power; when the kings and kingdoms of men call for our attention, affection, and allegiance; when the rest of the world will see political contests as apocalyptic; I pray that we would be a people beholden to the true apocalypse revealed in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return of Jesus Christ.

My hope for you—my hope for all of us—is that as we delve into the mysteries of Revelation, we will see a bigger vision of Jesus, that we will know a bigger hope that flows from that vision, and that we will faithfully bear witness to that hope with words and lives.

AMEN.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*