

Intro to Revelation, Part 1

Revelation 1:1-8

The Book of Revelation. A nightmarish vision of the end of the world: locusts the size of horses, a red dragon, the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, Lake of Fire, and the Mark of the Beast. Seriously?!! Why on earth would a church like *ours* devote an entire year to a book like *this*? I mean, isn't Revelation just for religious fanatics, horror films, people who shout on street corners, and TV preachers predicting the end times? If you're feeling uneasy about this, *I get it*. The Book of Revelation is without question the strangest, scariest, confusing, and perhaps most misunderstood book in the entire Bible. It's also perhaps the most polarizing, in that most Christians fit into one of two camps: either totally *obsessed* with it, or *avoiding* it altogether. But as we begin our year-long journey through *Revelation*, we need to resist falling into either of these two camps; not becoming obsessed, on the one hand, but appreciating that Revelation is a book sincere Jesus-followers ignore at their peril. Frankly, despite its strange style, Revelation is a literary masterpiece and perhaps one of the most relevant books for a church like ours, one that can uniquely challenge, inspire, and shape our Jesus-following. But to properly approach it, we need to begin by letting *the Book of Revelation*, and its author *John*, speak for themselves, to tell us what this book is all about, and how to read it. So, buckle up, seats forward, trays in their upright position, as we open our Bibles together to page one of the Bible's final chapter:

"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."

Revelation 1:1-2

The book's *title* comes from its very first word, which in the original Greek is *apokalypsis*, from which we get the word *apocalypse*. These days, we use the word *apocalypse* to mean a

cataclysmic event signaling the end of the world as we know it, like a scene out of *Mad Max* or *The Walking Dead*. Maybe that's how you see *Revelation*, but it's actually *not* what the word *apokalypsis* meant to *John*. In *John's Day*, *Apokalypsis* was the word for the raising of a theatre curtain or the lifting of a bride's veil at a wedding; *revealing* the previously *unseen*. In that sense, releasing all the Epstein Files would be *apokalypsis*. Ripping the wrapping paper off a gift is *apokalypsis* – the *unveiling* (or *revelation*) of something previously *unseen*. That's our first clue to understanding this book; not as a shadowy book of secret codes and hidden meanings, but as a lifting of the veil, a pulling back of the curtain to *reveal*, not *conceal*, something.

But if that's the case, why all the strange imagery? Why doesn't John just say what he means? Well first, John is writing while exiled for promoting a vision of Jesus just like the one in this book, to a people persecuted for following Jesus. Wrapping his message in creative imagery likely gave it a better chance of slipping past the Roman censors. But its images weren't foreign to *John's* readers, as they are to us; they were familiar, much like how we communicate through memes and pop-culture references. Someone from another time period would be confused by them, but, to us, their meaning is *obvious*. In much the same way, as a skilled writer, John is using the language and images of a common *literary genre* of his day called, *apokalypsis*; a kind of ancient Jewish and Christian science-fiction, many examples of which survive to this day.

See, at the time, many faithful Jewish people, whose history was marked by centuries of occupation and slavery, first in *Egypt*, then *Babylon*, *Assyria*, and most recently *Rome*, had lost all hope in God liberating and restoring Israel. In the same way, many Christians by the end of the first century had begun to wonder why, in the years since Jesus, evil seemed more rampant than ever, with many believers facing *persecution* and even *death* at the hands of the Roman

Empire. In this climate, their dreams began to shift from *deliverance* to *destruction*, from visions of *redemption* to *revenge*. Drawing on exaggerated Old Testament images, they wrote fantasy novels about God descending to pour out wrath upon the nations, to destroy of the world and the wicked with it. These writings were explicitly dark, cynical, and hopeless. And as John begins *his* apocalypse, he places this scroll alongside these other literary works, leaving his readers to wonder if he too shares this pessimistic view of the future. Yet, as we'll see, while John uses elements of the apocalyptic genre, he consistently breaks its rules and subverts its themes, to tell instead a story of unimaginable *hope*, not the destruction of the world, but its deliverance, healing, and re-creation. In a sense, *Revelation* is like the movie *Shrek*, which begins "*Once upon a time...*" (placing it firmly in the classic *fairytale* genre) but then tells a story where a swamp-dwelling ogre is the hero, the prince in the castle is the villain, and where love's true kiss turns a beautiful princess into a beastly bride. Shrek's genius is how it *uses* the fairytale genre to *subvert* classic fairytale messaging about *beauty* and *beasts*. It's an *anti-fairytale*. And similarly, *Revelation* is an *anti-apocalypse*, using and yet subverting the grim, vengeance-soaked genre to envision a future filled with *hope*. That's why we need to learn to read *Revelation*, not *literally* but *literarily*, seeing John's masterful *use* of the genre, and noticing where he intentionally subverts it for effect. We need to appreciate that *Revelation's* message is revealed as an *Apocalypse* that intentionally bucks against the traditional apocalyptic worldview.

Next, John says that, in addition to being an *Apocalypse*, *Revelation* is a *Prophecy*.

"Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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." (Revelation 1:3)

The word *prophecy* may conjure images of a fortune-teller with a crystal ball predicting the future – *and maybe that's how we've thought of Revelation* – but that's not what biblical

prophecy is at all. In fact, *prophecy* is another literary genre, common in the Old Testament. *Prophecy* isn't *prediction*; it's not *fortune-telling* so much as *forecasting*, like a meteorologist who sees clouds forming on the horizon and issues a storm warning. Prophets were perceptive people who saw reality clearly and, trained in the scriptures, recognized the patterns in human behaviour. When they saw leaders abusing their power to oppress the vulnerable, they knew where the story would lead; *they'd seen it before!* So, they spoke truth, warning of how resisting God's ways always leads to trouble. But they *also* envisioned how God would one day realize the full potential of the human project and, drawing on images from the creation story, anticipated a day when God would put everything back to how it was in the beginning, believing that, if God is who God claims to be, such a day is *inevitable*. By calling it a *prophecy*, John isn't describing Revelation as book of *predictions*. (I mean, he promises a blessing for those who hear and obey its message. You can't *obey* a prediction, like a fortune cookie; you can only wait to see if it comes true, *which is kind of pointless*.) Revelation isn't a book of *predictions*, revealing the 25 reasons why Jesus is coming back in 2025; it's a *prophecy* in the Biblical tradition, intended to *instruct* us with insightful clarity about the reality of the world as it *is*, as it *should* (or *shouldn't*) be, and as it one day *will* be. And in classic prophetic style, it uses rich symbolism, colourful poetry, and intense word-pictures designed to instruct our hearts by inspiring our imagination.

So, Revelation is an *Apocalypse* that's not *apocalyptic* but *hopeful*, it's a *Prophecy* that's not *predictive* but *instructive*, and finally, Revelation is *a letter*. In verse 4, John writes,

"John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: grace and peace to you"

Revelation 1:4

Revelation begins and ends with all the hallmarks of a Greek letter, the most common literary genre of the New Testament. In fact, Revelation is a *letter* that contains 7 *letters* to 7

churches, each of which we'll look at this fall. For aspiring Bible-nerds though, the number 7 should leap off the page with significance. Rooted in the Bible's 7-day creation story, where the seventh day is *blessed* and declared *holy* and God's work is *completed*, Biblical authors began to use the number 7 to mean *whole* and *holy*. So, while the 7 churches were 7 actual local house-churches known personally by John, these letters were written to the *whole* church, including *us*. And just as Revelation is an *Apocalypse* that's not *apocalyptic* but *hopeful*, and a *Prophecy* that's not *predictive* but *instructive*, it's a *Letter* that, while penned by *John*, is authored by *God*.

"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 1:4-5)

There's a lot to unpack here; In less than 50 words John has written a master's thesis on the *trinity* – the Christian belief that God is at the same time *three* and *one*; *Father, Spirit, Son*. First, John refers to God, *the Father* as ***"the one who is, was, and is to come."*** John is expanding on God's given name in Exodus 3:14, *Yahweh*, which is simply the first-person conjugation of the Hebrew verb, *To Be*; literally, *I AM*. It's a name identifying God as *eternal, ever-present existence*, the one who always *is*. John stretches this name from *I AM* to *"I Am, I Was, and I Will Be"*. Past. Present. Future. To these churches, bent beneath the weight of Roman cruelty, John reminds them that God has *always* been there, God is present to them *now*, and God will always be with them *in the future*, no matter what. From Eden to Eternity, God was, is, and will be *with us*. It's a theological term called, ***OMNI-PRESENCE***; God who is *all-present*, with us always, everywhere.

Next, John says this letter is also from the *Spirit*, or ***"the seven spirits"*** of God. Now, even Bible-nerds in the room are likely wondering, what the heck is John talking about? *7 spirits of God*?! Well, first remember what we already said about the number 7 representing *wholeness*

and *holiness*. John is referring to the *Holy Spirit*, borrowing an old idea from the *Book of Isaiah*, where Isaiah describes Israel's reality of being exiled and enslaved (*just like these 7 churches*) as being like a tree that's been chopped down. But with prophetic hope, he imagines a day when,

***"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord— and he will delight in the fear of the Lord."* (Isaiah 11:1-3)**

Here, God's Spirit is described as having 7 functions: *wisdom, understanding, counsel, might* (literally, *mastery or know-how*), *knowledge*, and *the fear of the Lord*. Now, I know what you're thinking: *that's only six!* Yes, but the *sixth* one – *the fear of the Lord* – is listed *twice*, for emphasis, and in the Jewish scholarly tradition, this poem was understood to refer to the seven-fold offices of the Holy Spirit. But what you notice is that these 7 descriptors all point to a single common theme: wisdom, rounded out as *knowledge, know-how, understanding, counsel*, and the doubled *Fear of the Lord* (which Biblically is *the beginning of wisdom*). They all point to the primary role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Back in John's gospel, he records how Jesus described how the Spirit would ***"guide you into all the truth."*** (John 16:13) John is reminding the church that the Spirit *knows* what's going on, and will guide them with wise counsel, understanding, and insight. The theological term for this is **OMNISCIENCE**; the God who is *all-knowing, all-wise*.

Third, John says this letter is coming ***"from Jesus Christ,"*** who is, ***"the faithful witness,"*** ***"the firstborn from the dead"*** and ***"the ruler of the kings of the earth."*** Each of these 3 titles is from **Psalm 89**. First, the *Faithful Witness*. Here, *faithful* means *accurate*, like when a movie is *faithful* to the book. Just like in **Psalm 89** where, *faithfulness* is repeatedly paired as a synonym with *love*, Jesus is a faithful representation of God's love, particularly in his others-oriented, self-sacrificing death on the cross. The title *Firstborn from the Dead* refers to the *resurrection*, where

Jesus conquered sin, death, and evil once and for all. Finally, Jesus is the *Ruler of the Kings of the Earth*. If you were here *last* September for the launch of our study in *Acts*, you may recall how Jesus ascended to God's throne to rule over Heaven and Earth, as King of kings and Lord of lords. By drawing our attention to these three events – *the cross, resurrection, and ascension* of Jesus – John is envisioning *Jesus* as having true and total authority over the entire cosmos – a theological term known as **OMNIPOTENCE**; God all-powerful. But he's also indicating something about the destiny of Jesus-followers in the rest of this book. That, like Jesus, the church will be called to suffer as faithful witnesses, even dying, but that death will not be the final end; they too will be resurrected and ultimately ascend to rule and reign with Jesus for all eternity.

John wants his readers to know that, with all they're facing, the triune, *Father-Spirit-Son* God is *with them*, with unlimited *wisdom, power, and presence*; to give them confidence that God knows their plight, sees their fear, and feels their pain, and can lead them through their apocalyptic moment with the power of *hope*, with wise prophetic *instruction*, and with the intimate, empathy-soaked presence of a *love-letter*. And at this point, John is so overwhelmed by Jesus that he turns from *description* to *doxology*, his pen almost singing as he writes:

"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 peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him.' So shall it be!" (Rev 1:5-7)

If you're noticing all the quotation marks, there's a reason. John has stitched together a slew of Old Testament verses, giving us essentially a syllabus of his source material: *Zechariah, Isaiah, Daniel*, and *so on*. For time, we can't unpack them all now – *we'll begin teasing some of them out next week* – but what I want us to see for today, in the spirit of a series *intro*, is that Revelation assumes a moderate-to-high level of Biblical literacy. In his commentary, G.K. Beale

points out that, of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 (*nearly three-quarters*) quote the Old Testament. Additionally, there are more than 500 *allusions* (not direct quotes, but clear references) to Old Testament passages – *more than one per verse!* Put it this way: Revelation is the *last* book of the Bible for a reason; it assumes you've read the *rest* of the book, and doesn't make a whole lot of sense if you haven't. This is what happened to me when I saw *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1* in the theatre. Having not read the books or seen any of the films, I thought part *one* would be a good place to start. Little did I know it was part *one* of a *two-part finale*. The movie begins with the death of a beloved creature named Dobby, which meant *nothing* to me because I didn't know who anyone was or why this scene mattered. Sadly, this is often how people read Revelation, resulting in confusion and misunderstanding, like assuming that unlocking Revelation's meaning requires paying close attention current events, like Y2K, Covid-19, or wars in Russia and the Middle East. Revelation's cast of characters aren't drawn from the pages of the *newspaper*, but from the pages of *scripture*. Revelation offers a glimpse of what's coming by challenging us to look to the past; to recognize how God is at work *today*, by reflecting on how God has always been at work in human history, particularly in Jesus.

Finally, John concludes his intro by giving the last word to Jesus himself, who says:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'" (Revelation 1:8)

Using the *first* and *last* letters of the Greek alphabet – *Alpha* and *Omega* – Jesus looks us straight in the eyes and says that he is the *Beginning* and the *End* of all things, and everything in between. From creation to consummation, He's the source, centre, and sum. You get the point. He's doubling down, saying, *I'm God. I've always been God. And because I'll always be who I always am, you can trust that I will always be with you, to the end. Always. No matter what.*

As we launch into the Book of Revelation this fall, I don't know where this message finds you, or what you going through, but let me ask you: How could it change things for you to know that the *omnipresent* God is present with you today? That the *omniscient* Spirit of God knows all about you and all you're up against? Or that the *omnipotent* God, fully, faithfully, and powerfully revealed in Jesus, has what it takes to see you through? However apocalyptic your situation may feel, Revelation wants to subvert your worst fears and offer you *hope*. However anxious you are about the future, Revelation wants to speak prophetically into your life, to instruct and guide you with wisdom. However distant or disconnected you feel from God today, Revelation offers itself as an intimate, blood-stained love-letter from the very heart of Jesus. Revelation wasn't written to instill *fear*, but to inspire *faith*. It's not a trail of breadcrumbs leaving clues for the *end* times, but a clear roadmap for navigating faith in our *present* times. It's not information about what happens after we die, but an invitation to fully live here and now. It's not focused on our final destination, but on our true destiny, to become a deeply loved, fully forgiven, kingdom of priests, serving God with our whole lives. As we open the pages of *Revelation* together this year, it won't be to identify which current world-leader is the *anti*-Christ, but to fully reveal the real identity of our true leader, *Jesus* Christ. And that's why a church like *ours* is going to spend the next year working through a book like *this*; in order to see Jesus with new eyes, a reimagined perspective, and to invite a fresh *revelation* of Jesus to inspire a fresh *response* from each of *us*.

Maybe you've been drifting lately, sleepwalking through life, putting faith on the back-burner while you devote your life to other lesser loves. Maybe the closeness you once felt with Jesus has faded. Maybe Jesus has become more like a lucky charm, someone you pray to only when you're in trouble, or perhaps just another self-help guide. Or maybe, like so many first-

century Christians, you feel like in the years since following Jesus, things have only gotten worse, and maybe you're wondering if Jesus simply hasn't worked for you. If you're feeling stuck in the same dead-end job, same broken relationship, same pattern of addiction, or emotional rut. If life's questions have only gotten bigger and more complex, and your faith hasn't grown beyond simple Sunday-school answers and explanations, then I believe that Revelation is for *you*.

Ultimately, whether you're drawn to Revelation, fascinated by its spellbinding mysteries, or would frankly prefer to just sit this one out, let's appreciate today that Revelation isn't what it's been made out to be; it's not meant to intimidate us but to inspire us, to help us see Jesus like never before. And in seeing Jesus like never before, it invites us to love, serve, and follow Jesus like never before. That's where we're headed this year, as a church. And if that's what you're looking for, or even if you're just slightly curious, if you need a fresh revelation of Jesus, and a renewed vision for your life, then all I can say is... *welcome to Revelation*. Let's pray.