



September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

Week 1

The revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup> who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, whatever he saw. <sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is

<sup>18</sup> I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book. <sup>19</sup> And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share of the tree of life and the holy city, which are written about in this book.

"If it ever became illegal in my part of the world, as it actually is in other places at this very moment, to own a complete copy of the Bible—and if the authorities, as an act of mercy, allowed me to possess just one book of the Bible for "personal" use—I would, without hesitation, keep the last. I would keep the book of Revelation.

Why? Because no other book of the Bible presents the gospel as powerfully as the last book does. No other book of the Bible, in the face of all that threatens to undo us, proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ the way the last book does.

More particularly, in no other book of the Bible do we see \_\_\_\_\_ as clearly and compellingly as we do in the last book." – *Darrell Johnson*

1. What is eschatology?

## 2. What does Revelation mean?

In his excellent work on Revelation, Eugene Peterson suggests that in the book we are not taught anything we have not already learned in the rest of the Bible. We do not discover new truth. We are taught the already-revealed truth in a new way. Peterson writes,

I do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle. Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the Bible. The Revelation adds nothing of substance to what we already know. The truth of the gospel is already complete, \_\_\_\_\_. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it. I read the Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination. St. John uses words the way poets do, recombining them in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived. He takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by endless usage and sets it in motion before us in an “animated impassioned dance of ideas.”<sup>2</sup>

The new way is the way of imagery. Vivid imagery. Sometimes wildly vivid imagery. Imagery that, ironically, needs to be heard in order to be seen, which is why the book is to be read aloud (1:3). Hearing is the way to seeing.

## 3. Who wrote Revelation?

## 4. To whom was it written?

It turns out that, although the seven churches of Asia to whom Revelation was first addressed (1:4) were facing varying degrees of persecution, the greatest danger was not the *persecution itself* (and it never really is), but rather \_\_\_\_\_.

That is, believers were uncritically benefiting from the seductive riches and might of "Babylon," which at that moment in history was Rome. The last book of the Bible calls us to a radical discipleship, to all-out courageous loyalty to the Lamb in a world "feverishly worshipping the beast."<sup>1</sup>

#### 5. When was it written?

In a.d. 92 difficult times became more difficult. Persecution in the Roman Empire had already begun in a.d. 65 under Emperor Nero and intensified in 67 a.d. under the Emperor Vespasian. Jerusalem was destroyed in a.d. 70 Peter and Paul had been crucified, Timothy murdered.

But in a.d. 92 things got worse. Domitian was the Emperor. He was a profoundly insecure man (as most tyrants are). To compensate for his insecurity, he ordered all citizens and subjects of the Roman Empire to worship him as Lord and God, Dominus et Deus.

He changed the name of the Roman Empire to "Eternal Empire" and called himself "Everlasting King." All citizens and subjects were to go to a temple built in his honor, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the fire of the altar and say Caesar Kurios, "Caesar is Lord." Domitian did not care what else people believed as long as they did this "little act of worship," an act of worship which was the glue that held his empire together.

For most people such an act was not a big deal. Most people were polytheists, anyway, believing in many gods and lords. What was one more god in the mix? <sup>7</sup> But for John it was a huge deal. Honor Caesar, yes; worship Caesar, no. Respect Caesar, yes; declare absolute allegiance to Caesar, no.

For John there is only one Kurios, only one Lord, only One who commands absolute undivided allegiance: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. John knows that one day Caesar must bow before Jesus.

In his old age John was not about to bow his knee to a mere mortal.<sup>8</sup> So he Graciously refused to take the pinch of incense and throw it on the fire. From the Emperor's and state's perspective John is, therefore, an "atheist." And, thus, a trouble-maker. The unity of the empire, the unity of the state, consisted in the worship of Caesar. Not worshipping Caesar was disrupting the unity.

John was arrested and banished to the island of Patmos, ten miles off the coast of modern-day Turkey. The Roman government-maintained rock quarries on Patmos to which criminals and "enemies of the state" were sent to spend the rest of their lives.<sup>9</sup>

That was the historical and personal setting in which John received and wrote Revelation. A setting that appears to call into question the fundamental truths of the gospel. Indeed, the setting appears to negate the truths of the gospel. ***"The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near."*** Where?

Where is the kingdom? "Jesus is Lord"—but where is the evidence? The church was having to operate behind closed doors. Immorality was gaining footholds in some of the congregations. John, the beloved pastor and bishop, is hauled off by the police into exile. Where is Jesus in all of this?

Through the vivid images of Revelation, Jesus speaks to that question in a way that overcomes our fears.

6. In what style was it written?

"John himself uses three words to describe the book's genre. He calls his work a \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_ and an \_\_\_\_\_. Any interpretation of Revelation has to keep this combination of genres in mind.

(1) It is a letter. The *longest* letter in the Bible, in fact. It is written in the style of other first-century letters. ***"John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace"*** (1:4). The point being that "The Revelation" is written by a *specific person, to specific persons, living in specific cities, at a specific time in history, to meet specific needs.*

This means we must take seriously the specific historical context if we are going to rightly understand the message. John is first and foremost a pastor writing a pastoral

letter to people he is pastoring. What he writes would, therefore, be addressed to issues *they were facing*, and what he wrote would speak to and make sense of those issues. Revelation begins and ends as a letter.

(2) It is also a prophecy. Five times John, or the angel, calls the work "the prophecy." Its purpose of the prophecy is *"to show the things which must shortly take place"* (1:1). The phrase is repeated near the end of the book—*"to show the things which must shortly take place"* (22:6). In the biblical world the word prophecy does not so much connote " \_\_\_\_\_ " as it does " \_\_\_\_\_ ."

The heart of biblical prophecy is not, "look what is coming," but, "thus says the Lord." This is not to say that God does not enable some of his people to predict the future and then accurately convey that prediction (see 1 Peter 1:11-12). It is simply to say that in "prophecy" God is enabling some of his people, "prophets," to see what others could not see, especially concerning God's will.<sup>10</sup> Calling the book of Revelation a "prophecy" means that God *is now revealing something that is requiring a response at that very moment, some new form of obedience to his will.*

(3) And the document is an apocalypse, or in Greek, apocalypsis. This is the word we translate as "revelation." Some Bibles even use the word for the title of the last book, "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ." As already noted, the word apocalypsis simply means "unveiling" or "disclosure." The word refers to lifting of a cover or pulling back of a curtain. The last book of the Bible is the *unveiling of Jesus Christ*, the disclosure of Jesus Christ, the lifting of the cover and pulling back of the curtain, *"the breaking through" of Jesus Christ.*

John's work is not the only apocalypse of his time. During the two centuries before and after John, a considerable number of Jewish and Christian writings of the same genre appeared.<sup>11</sup> We have early apocalyptic works in Daniel, Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel 38-39 and Zechariah 9-14.

Apocalyptic literature has a number of unique features. For example, people are often represented in the likeness of animals, thus the Lamb and the beasts.<sup>12</sup> Historical events are represented in the form of natural phenomena, thus earthquakes and floods.<sup>13</sup> Colors and numbers have meanings. Thus, the numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 144,000, 3 1/2, 1,000 carry special significance and figure prominently in Revelation.<sup>14</sup>

But the most unique feature of this kind of literature is its driving force. Apocalyptic seeks to do two things: *first*, it seeks to set the present in light of the \_\_\_\_\_ of the future. For if we know what the future holds it determines the choices we make in the present.

Second, and more importantly, it seeks to set the present in light of the \_\_\_\_\_ of the present. The fundamental conviction of apocalyptic literature is that “things are not as they seem”; there is more to reality than meets the unaided eyes or ears; there is more to the present historical moment than we can deduce.

And apocalyptic writing seeks to unveil that unseen reality of the present, to pull back the curtain on the present so that we see what is really going on.<sup>15</sup>

#### 7. What are the central themes of the book?

Forty times in Revelation John says, “I saw.” Thirty-two times he says, “I heard.” John sent his work to the seven churches intending it to be read out loud in the churches. Have you ever heard it read “live?” It is a powerful experience.<sup>17</sup> Michael Wilcox says that when we read the book, we are to think of those seven churches gathered on the Lord’s Day, hearing the vision read, hanging on every word and asking, “What did John see next?”

“What did John hear next?” Because what John sees and hears opens up, discloses and unveils the unseen realities of the future, yes, but more importantly, the unseen realities of the present.

This explains why the primary exhortation of Revelation is not trust and obey, but “listen” and “look.” Especially “look.” John is telling us we are having a hard time trusting and obeying Jesus Christ in our life because we are not listening and looking. Correction: we are listening and looking. It is just that we are not listening to and looking at what John hears and sees.

Nineteen times in the book we are told to look! Nineteen times we meet the word “lo,” or “behold,” the imperative form of the verb “to be.”<sup>18</sup> It is a command—look! Because John the pastor knows that if we can just see the full reality of the present, then we will have courage to overcome the powers of the age, and we will then follow Jesus Christ with reckless abandon:

I think, therefore, that the key to the structure of the whole book is the verb open. John uses the verb four times. The four uses divide the book into five major sections. John

speaks of seeing something “opened” in 4:1,11:19, 15:5 and 19:11. Remember those four references, and you will be able to keep the whole book in front of you as you read its parts.

It is important to emphasize at the beginning of our journey through Revelation that this series of windows, this series of visions, does not progress in chronological order. That is, the events depicted in the images are not presented in the order in which they happened historically. They are presented in the order in which John saw them. “Then I saw.” “Then I saw.”

“Then I heard.” “Then I saw.” We are not to ask, “What happens next?” but rather “What did John see next?” That’s because what John sees next may not be what happens next.<sup>19</sup> The clearest example of this is the fourth window, opening at 11:19 and moving into Chapter 12. This window describes an event that takes place long before John is arrested and exiled to Patmos. Revelation 12:3-5 describes in apocalyptic language what happened on the first Christmas Eve:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman ... and she was with child. And another sign ...a great red dragon ... and he stood before the woman who was about to give birth, that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations. . . .

Revelation 12 is the theological center of the whole book. And the reality it conveys takes place before the events depicted in Revelation 1-11 (as we will see when we study that text).

Remember: as you read Revelation, the question is not, “What happens next?” but, “\_\_\_\_\_?”

\*Written portions are adapted from “Discipleship on the Edge” by Darrell W. Johnson