

Reading and Heeding
Revelation 1:1-3
July 23, 2006

“Read and heed”—that’s what John calls for as the book of Revelation opens. The book would have been read aloud to the first hearers, who in turn, had the responsibility of grasping its theological message and applying it to their present circumstances. Further into the opening chapters we find it evident that John targeted a particular audience represented by seven identifiable churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Additionally, the personal message of the Lord of the Church to each of the seven churches reminds us of Christ’s concern for every church that names His name, while also revealing something of the historical setting that called for such an unusual book.

Why are we embarking on a study of Revelation? I must confess that outside preaching on the seven churches and an occasional sermon from selected texts in the book, my only other attempt to teach Revelation fell flat! I was 19 years old, leading a group of guys in the local Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Bible study, when I had the bright idea of studying Revelation. It was a hot topic in those days with the emergence of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Salem Kirban’s *666*, and Tim LaHaye’s *The Beginning of the End*. Larry Norman was singing “I Wish We’d all been Ready,” and Doug Oldham, “The King is Coming!” Low-budget movies began to depict the sensationalisms of the popular books and talk. So, I thought that I needed to jump on the bandwagon.

But it flopped—I mean royally flopped! For one thing, I was not solidly grounded in God’s Word; I understood nothing about principles of interpretation (hermeneutics). So I relied on a couple of poorly written commentaries and what I could remember of the chatter about Revelation. Another thing, Revelation is a gospel book filled with rich theology concerning the nature of the Godhead, the person and work of Christ, the nature of sin, the doctrine of man, and the doctrine of the church. My understanding of the basic elements of the gospel was sketchy at best, so trying to wade into Revelation proved to be way over my head! So, purely from a personal standpoint, I’m trying to redeem myself from the messy disaster I left 33 years ago!

More importantly, though, my reasons for studying this book are not about seeing if I can finally get it right. Revelation is for the church. It’s Christ’s message to the church living under the pressure and opposition of the world, to remember the “triumph of the Lamb” (to use Dennis Johnson’s book title). As we analyze the seven churches in the next few weeks, we will see that one of their major problems was that of losing sight of the Christ-centeredness of being a church. The corporate nature of these messages is a solid antidote to the narcissistic individualism that often characterizes the American church population.

Revelation is also the most abused book in our generation. The Apostle John would not recognize his own book by many of the sermons, conferences, books, and movies espousing it! Most of what I believed about Revelation 30 years ago, I’ve had to unlearn. That has often been a difficult and painful, though necessary process. Trying to squeeze John’s apocalyptic letter into the charts and boxes created by imaginative folks over the past couple hundred years (and more) unravels when put to the test of grammar, historical context, literary genre, and theological precision. It is important that we get a grip on the

message of Revelation, just like John's first audience. We will not do so with the Hollywood-style interpretations so popular in our day.

Here's what I propose for making the most of this study.

(1) Check your pre-configured system at the door. All of us, and I certainly include myself; have much to learn about Revelation. If we are locked into a system before venturing into the book, then we will be blind to many of its riches and applications.

(2) Listen to the reading of the text of the book of Revelation. Revelation was written to be read aloud and listened to with our full imaginations in gear. I plan to read through Revelation after our dinner-on-the-ground on September 3rd (D.V.). Plan to be part of hearing the whole book read in one sitting as would have been the case with the first hearers.

(3) Apply the message of Revelation as we work through this study. It is filled with important applications, and a promise of blessing for those hearing and heeding its message.

(4) Pray for the church across the world. Many of the scenes that will unfold in Revelation will bring to our minds real-life issues facing the church around the globe. That is our call to prayer and action. Revelation reminds us that the church in every culture faces worldly and satanic opposition, and so must depend upon the triumph of the Lamb. Let us bear the burden of our brethren throughout the world.

(5) Finally, let us worship as we marvel at the sovereign might of our Lord. Revelation, more than any New Testament book, is a book of worship. It has inspired countless hymns, e.g. "Of the Father's Love Begotten," "Holy, Holy, Holy," "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," and Handel's "Messiah," particularly the Hallelujah Chorus. May we see Christ crucified, risen, and triumphant on every page!

John's Revelation calls for us to hear and heed Christ's message to the church. Why do we need to give heed to Revelation?

I. The nature of the book

You do not have to read beyond the first chapter to know that Revelation is different from anything else in the New Testament—and most of the Old. By the time that you get through chapter six, you're struck by pictures of broken seals, living creatures, earthquakes, and the sun as black as sackcloth. Too often, we close the book up at this point; assuring ourselves that if it was meant to be understood, then surely John would have included footnotes to explain it!

The language of Revelation sounds more like parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah than like John's Gospel or Epistles. The heavy use of symbols, metaphors, numbers, and mythical characters make it strange to our western minds. But that was not the case with John's first audience living in Asia Minor. The old apostle, probably in his nineties by this time near the end of the 1st century, tells us, that he "was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Patmos lay just southwest of Ephesus, halfway between the island of Crete and mainland Asia Minor (Turkey). In all likelihood, John faced exile because of his faithful preaching of the gospel. But that did not stop his continued ministry, as he received the word of God to encourage and warn the churches.

1. Chain of authority

Apocalyptic writing was not unusual. It had begun a century earlier with ingenious and imaginative stories of good and evil, dealing with both political and religious issues. An apocalyptic writer, using a pseudonym, would borrow the name of a famous person in history, and use that to bolster the authority for his work. He claimed to have received his message from some other-world creature—usually an angel. He saw grand things beyond this world which he describes through visions of strange creatures, dragons, monsters, and the like. Often he interprets history through his visions or gives his take on the future. Though entertaining as far as stirring the imagination, the apocalyptic writer had another aim. He sought to exhort and console people in crisis. Apocalyptic literature came on the heels of crisis [David Aune, *WBC: Revelation 1-5*, lxxvii-lxxix].

John had the distinction of being the longest standing member of the church of Jesus Christ. He had endured Herod's persecution in the Galilean region, the opposition of the Jewish leaders in Judah, and Nero's limited but intense persecution in the mid-60s when both Peter and Paul were martyred. Aside from regional persecution, the church continued to enjoy relative peace in the Roman Empire as a subset of Judaism. Then came the Emperor Domitian, whom many considered to be another Nero. Emperor worship grew under his leadership, reaching a fever pitch within a few years under Emperor Trajan's rule. Trajan decreed punishment for anyone that would not offer sacrifice to the emperor's image. John saw it coming through the revelation he received on Patmos.

John did not speak on his own initiative or out of his own imagination. He opens Revelation by identifying the chain of authority by which he received the Revelation. **"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John."** Grammarians debate whether John intended us to understand that the revelation was *from* Jesus Christ or whether the revelation was *of* Jesus Christ. I think that we can state with confidence that John wanted us to know that it came from Christ, the Lord of the Church; yet as we see in the unfolding of his message, we find that the central focus is on Jesus Christ and His triumph on behalf of the Church. The revelation came *from* Jesus Christ who received it from God—**"which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants."** John's Trinitarian convictions weave their way throughout the Revelation. Here, the authority of the Father giving with finality this revelation of what lay ahead for the church is entrusted to His Son. The Godhead's concern for the church, and the particular preparation made through the death and resurrection of Christ, will be reiterated along the way.

John's tour guide in the unfolding Revelation was an angel. Christ **"sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John."** While John sees many different angels throughout the book, this particular angel showed him things in heaven and earth. Many people in our day treat angels as divine beings. John even did that momentarily until corrected by the angel. When he finished, John records in 22:8-9, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. But he said to me, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God.""

2. Unusual genre

Literary *genre* has to do with the type of literature under consideration. Matthew is gospel genre, Acts is historical genre, and Romans is epistolary genre. Revelation is unlike any other book in the Bible in terms of its literary type. On one hand, it is *apocalyptic*, which is noted by the first word in the Greek text translated as **“Revelation.”** The word means unveiling or an act of uncovering or revealing. In other words, the book will unveil some things that are presently hidden. Apocalyptic language, as we’ve already noted, identified a particular style of imaginative writing full of symbolism, metaphors, and word pictures. It has been described as a type of ancient writing that serves in fashion as “moving pictures” or “a ‘sound film’” [Wm. Hendriksen: *More than Conquerors*, 50, quoted by Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 9]. The images seek to “engage readers in an ongoing process of reflection, rather than giving information that eliminates the need for future thought,” according to Craig Koester [*Revelation and the End of All Things*, 43]. This is further explained by the use of the word translated as **“communicated.”** It is a word that carries the idea of to signify or to show by some kind of sign (or symbol). So, by the use of signs and symbols found in the shocking pictures painted by the apostle, God communicates a message to us. It is one that lingers in the mind so that we might reflect upon it and be moved into action and obedience.

John also calls the book **“the words of the prophecy,”** which means that Revelation is of *prophetic* genre. Prophetic writing was not monolithic. It did not just serve the predictive element, though it included this. But much of prophetic writing, e.g. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, exhorted and called for repentance. The critical issue in prophetic utterance and writings was whether or not it “promotes faithfulness to God or whether it leads people away from God” [Koester 45]. A false prophet could be easily recognized by the way his message led people away from fidelity in relationship to the Lord. Here is where the term **“heed”** comes into sharp focus. John wrote to the churches to call them into obedience to Christ. While some of his language predicts future events, the thrust of his message was not to inform the curious about what lay ahead, but rather to call God’s people to faithfulness.

We cannot get away from the fact that Revelation is also categorized in the *epistolary* genre. **“John to the seven churches that are in Asia,”** he begins as typical of an ancient letter. Specific issues facing the seven churches, including some personal matters, are addressed. Ancient letters were intended to be read aloud. The singular use of **“he who reads,”** points to the pastor or elder in the church who would read to **“those [plural] who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it.”**

So, which one is it? Is Revelation apocalyptic, prophetic, or epistolary? Yes! Try all three, because elements of each are found in this unusual book.

3. Real life – real application

John’s message dealt with **“the things which must soon take place.”** This is where the various approaches to interpreting Revelation smile with glee or do some quick maneuvering! Bruce Metzger points out, “The word *soon* indicates that John intended his message for his own generation” [*Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, 21]. Things were happening among churches in the Roman Empire that concerned the apostle. The word **“soon”** implies speed or swiftness or suddenness.

Added to this is the somber note, **“for the time is near.”** Greg Beale explains that the use of these words “is primarily on inauguration of prophetic fulfillment and its ongoing aspect, not on nearness of consummation of fulfillment” [*NIGCT: The Book of Revelation*, 182]. So John announces that these things were beginning to happen not that their completion was at hand. When someone in our present day reads these words, and immediately claims that they are about to be fulfilled due to the use of “soon” and “the time is near,” it needs to be remembered that John spoke those words to his first audience at the end of the 1st century. That gives us at least one critical interpretative key. *The things that John addresses to encourage and warn the churches of the 1st century cycle around to churches of every age. The present applications cannot be understood apart from the original intent.* The real-life applications they were to make in response to hearing this book read continue to be called for in the present day. Dennis Johnson adds, “Revelation gave first-century Christians insight into the purposes of God in their time.” Then he warns about trying to make it a book aimed at the 21st century. “We can at least conclude, therefore, that interpretations of the visions that lie completely beyond the original readers’ frame of reference are suspect” [*The Triumph of the Lamb: a Commentary on Revelation*, 20].

II. The parameters of the messenger

The polished Greek of John’s Gospel, likely the help of an amanuensis, shifts to more rough-hewn language in the Revelation as the old apostle writes while in exile. What he saw, he wrote. Here, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John attempts to put on papyrus the vivid scenes filling his imagination. For instance, as John described his vision of the exalted Christ, he uses the comparative “like” seven times to show that he doesn’t have the exact vocabulary to explain it. He must use a comparison. So Christ appeared as “one *like* a son of man.” “His head and His hair were white *like* white wool, *like* snow; and His eyes were *like* a flame of fire. His feet were *like* burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was *like* the sound of many waters... His face was *like* the sun shining in its strength.” Using rich symbolism and vivid metaphors, he helps our minds to capture something of this heavenly vision. But what was he concerned with doing? Was John out to give a complete picture of biblical eschatology (a study of last things)?

1. Big picture

The first thing that we must recognize is that John picked up images and language from the Old Testament. He said that he **“testified to the word of God.”** What he had written in Revelation bore witness to and provided information from the Old Testament writings. The influence of Moses, David, and the prophets drips from the pages of this book. It’s not that we find ample quotations from the Old Testament; there are only a few. But we do find lots of allusions to the whole of Scripture. In a sense, John tied together what Moses had written concerning the children of Israel and God’s purpose for them, what David had anticipated of the Messiah and the nature of His eternal kingdom, and what the prophets had warned concerning divine judgment and the nature of Messiah’s rule. We will see much of this as we journey through the text but let me identify just a few examples by quoting Dennis Johnson’s excellent introduction.

The display of divine splendor that initiates John's prophetic call (Rev. 1; 10) has appeared before as prophets were commissioned to carry God's message from his council chamber (Ezek. 1; Dan. 9-10). The beast that emerges from the sea in Revelation 13 is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7, namely, the world kingdoms that oppress the saints until the Son of Man receives royal dominion from the Ancient of Days. The two witnesses of Revelation 11 are the two olive trees of Zechariah 4, "the two anointed ones who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth" (Zech. 4:14). The woes of judgment that fall on the harlot Babylon (Rev. 18) echo those that fell on Israel's ancient oppressors, Tyre (Ezek 27) and Babylon (Jer. 51; Isa. 48).

Revelation's symbolic vocabulary is drawn not only from the thesaurus of the prophetic literature but also from other parts of the Old Testament. The tree of life in paradise at the dawn of biblical history (Gen. 2:9) reappears at the consummation (Rev. 2:7; 22:2). The ancient serpent whose murderous lie seduced the woman and plunged the world into floods of misery (Gen. 3:1) is seen again, waging war against the woman, her son, and her other children—but this time his doom is sure and his time is short (Rev. 12; 20) [Johnson 12-13].

We do not have carbon copies from the Old Testament, but in light of the triumph of Christ in His death and resurrection, the ancient pictures receive new shades and hues appropriate to Christ's kingdom triumph. John masterfully ties together the whole of biblical revelation into this encouraging word to the church still facing the oppression of the world. It leaves the hearers understanding, in the words of Martin Luther, "God's truth abideth still".

2. Gospel focus

John also declares that he testified "**to the testimony of Jesus Christ,**" which clearly points to the gospel. Revelation is a gospel focused book. What greater encouragement can the church find than to return to the priority and sufficiency of the gospel? That was precisely where the enemy could gain ground upon the church; when the redeemed slip away from living in the reality of the gospel of Christ. In 1:5-6, John speaks of the redemptive work of Christ through His bloody death; 1:7 he reminds us that even those who pierced Him will see Him in His triumph. The portrait of Christ in chapter one, and reiterated in the letters to the churches (chaps. 2-3), remind us of Christ's sovereign authority and Lordship. Chapter 5 unfolds one of the most majestic explanations of Christ as our mediator, affirming the particular nature of His redemptive work in securing a people for Himself. Chapter 7:9-17 praises the Lamb in the center of the throne whose blood has washed clean those gathered around His throne for eternity. Chapter 11 assures us of the eternal reign of Christ. Chapter 12 takes us back to the blood of the Lamb that conquers Satan and delivers the elect. Chapter 14 speaks of the Lamb purchasing and securing His people. In chapter 15 the song of the Lamb rings out concerning Christ as ruler of the nations. The Lamb's triumph is reiterated in chapter 17. Chapter 19 takes us to the marriage of the Lamb, and the bride that He has secured, followed by the scene of Christ riding on a white horse, crowned with many crowns, clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and named The Word of God. The last chapter alludes to His eternality, Incarnation, and the sufficiency of His redemptive work.

The church in every age must never waver from the gospel. It is certainly the message that we proclaim, but much more, it is the truth that we live forever.

III. Preface for the hearers

John concludes his preface with three distinct reminders

1. Happy reader

“Blessed is he who reads... the words of this prophecy.” The word for “read” literally means to read aloud. Here is the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation, pronounced upon the one reading the book to others. Since few books were available in that era, and since few people were able to read, the one reading this book had a special responsibility to benefit the rest by reading this revelation of Christ to His churches.

2. Happy hearing and heeding

Also included in this first beatitude is promise of blessing for **“those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it.”** Revelation was not written to satisfy the curiosity of end-time-thrill-seekers. It contains warnings, exhortations, commandments, and instructions that are to be heeded. Our journey through Revelation will contain information but much more, it will contain exhortation to follow the Lamb of God.

3. It’s time

“For the time is near,” John adds. He doesn’t declare that the “end” is near but rather **“the time.”** The word **“time”** is the Greek word *kairos*. It means the event or the happenings. John told the early churches that things were beginning to happen purposed by God long ages ago. The “things happening” began with the cross and resurrection of Christ, and now press forward in the unfolding of His kingdom reign. From an earthly perspective, things were looking grim; but from the perspective of Christ’s kingdom, the triumphant Lamb was on the move. Some will meet Him in blessing; others in judgment.

Conclusion

Revelation is about the triumph of the Lamb of God—Jesus Christ, in His death, resurrection, and kingly reign; and of the triumph secured for His people. The Lamb is not to be trifled with. You will know Him as Lord or you will know Him as Judge.