

# Meet Revelation

*Revelation*

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Well-adjusted people understand that there is a process involved to get to know someone new, and for most of us, we understand that intuitively and operate accordingly, but I want to just kind of highlight it because I think it will help us approach our text here this morning. When you first meet someone, you basically ask questions of a most fundamental, simple sort to gain a basic familiarity with the person in front of you that you've just met. "What's your name? What do you do for a living? Where do you live? Do you have any family?" These things hardly need to be highlighted, don't they? This is just what you do when you meet someone new and are trying to get acquainted; you learn basic things before you go into more personal aspects later in the relationship. No one in their right mind starts a relationship with questions like, "How much money do you have in the bank? You know, you really should wear different clothes. That outfit makes you look fat." And again, just meeting somebody for the first time, "How was your relationship with your dad?" These are just things that when you're first getting to know someone, you just don't jump into those kinds of questions or themes. You have to know basics before things can become more personal. Part of the aspect of that, I guess, is that there's an element of personal respect that you show to someone by respecting boundaries and, you know, responding as someone either opens up or, you know, says, "That's enough for me for now."

Well, in a similar way, in a similar way, we have to approach the Bible in a like manner like that. When you come to study a new book of the Bible, as we're doing in the book of Revelation here in the life of our church, you need to know some basics about the Bible book before you begin to get into the meatier details of its message, before you address interpretive difficulties, and in keeping with what I said about meeting someone new, think about the book of Revelation, and I'm more committed to what I'm saying here now than what I was even a month ago in light of some of the interactions I've had, not just here at church but in other places, as you begin the book of Revelation, you do not start with the things that you've heard over time and that are the most controversial and the things that are of a particular interest to yourself, perhaps. And so when you begin the book of Revelation, not just teaching from the pulpit, I'm speaking more broadly, when you as a man or woman come to the book of Revelation to begin a serious study of it, you should not say, "I've got things, I've got questions I want answered. I want to know about the mark of the beast. I want to know about the final conflict of Armageddon." You

know, without addressing more fundamental matters, you don't jump in immediately with your preconceived agenda and say, "The first thing that I want to know, the first thing that we must address is what is the timing of the rapture, or let's talk about different millennial views, or let's talk about how other parts of the Bible relate to the book of Revelation." That's a serious mistake. It betrays a lack of respect for the book of the Bible, even if people don't see it that way right away, because it's bringing your agenda to the book rather than coming to this book for what it is, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place," we're coming to a holy book of the inerrant inspired Word of God that speaks of profound things about the purpose of God, and so you have to come to Revelation, in my judgment and in my understanding, in a much slower way, you might say, a much more reverential way, kind of checking your biases at the door and saying, rather than me telling this book what it must tell me, come to the book and say, what does this book have to say? Let me let the book of Revelation speak first, in other words, rather than coming and saying, I must have answers to my questions, which in matters of prophecy and matters of revelation is just a tremendously difficult bias to overcome if you're going to teach people about it. You cannot rightly or intelligently discuss those matters that I alluded to without a prior and proper context. You need to ask some basic questions to get to know the book generally before you are in a position to go and answer questions like that specifically.

So, with that in mind, today we're going to meet Revelation. We're going to meet Revelation as if we were meeting a fellow human being for the first time, just in a loose analogy there. We're going to show respect for God's word by letting it speak first and getting to know it in the most general way before we enter into the exposition in weeks and even months to come. And I want to say this to put your mind at ease, this is, in my opinion, this is an easy listening message. There's such a thing as easy listening music, I guess, but there's just that kind of music that doesn't demand much upon your mind and your energy; you can just kind of take it in and enjoy it at a level. This is an easy listening message, and you'll see what I mean by that as we go along.

Now last Sunday, we started our exposition of Revelation and we read through, last Sunday, we read through the entire book, our entire service was devoted to reading the text of Revelation from start to finish. You might think about that in terms of the analogy that I used to open it up. We came to Revelation and we said, "What's your name?" We let Revelation identify itself in its full context, and we just let Revelation speak to us, and we read it that way, and I'm grateful for the expressions of appreciation that I received from some of you about that aspect of the way that we began.

Now last Tuesday, there was an equally important message that I hope that you were able to hear if you were not able to be with us. One of the things about our pulpit ministry, it's kind of hard to just kind of drop in and out and come and go. Everything kind of fits together like a seamless garment and if you rip out one part and just see that one part, then you're kind of left with a hole in a garment that leaves it a little bit unseemly and not capable of being worn. This past Tuesday was a very important message that we titled, "Revelation and Personal Holiness," and if you haven't heard that message yet, I really encourage you to go back and listen to it. That was the starting point because we

addressed the spiritual traits that someone needs to understand the book of Revelation. This book is not open for just anybody to come and to understand. It's not a book like that. In fact, the Bible is not like that. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 that the natural man, the unsaved man, the unconverted man cannot understand the things of God. There is a spiritual component. A man must be born again if he's going to understand the Bible and so there's this sense of which we have to think about going into someone's home, you need to know, "Well, should I take my shoes off here? If I'm not taking off my shoes, do I have any mud on my shoes before I enter into the home that they've welcomed me into?" Well, in a like manner, we have to come to the book of Revelation and ask ourselves and check our hearts about where we're at spiritually.

So we saw from the text of Revelation itself that there are certain godly traits that are necessary before anyone can rightly understand the book of Revelation. Before you get to questions about the rapture or the millennium or Daniel or Ezekiel or the mark of the beast, I keep going back to that one, that's just a reference for other like questions about details, there must be godly traits in our heart as we approach this book. This is a holy book. This is not for carnal hands to come and mangle and handle roughly in pursuit of their own agenda because they want to have an argument online with somebody who has a different millennial view or whatever. No, the book of Revelation is hidden from people that use it like that and want to do it like that. So what we said on Tuesday was this, is that to come to the book of Revelation, there must be an aspect of a pursuit of biblical holiness in your life. Revelation teaches us about the glory of Christ. It teaches us to fear God. It teaches us to worship God. It teaches us about the essential nature of true repentance and that those who would know Revelation, who would know the word of Christ given to us in the book of Revelation, must manifest, must come with a sincere, profound, unfeigned spirit of repentance. And you can see that for yourself. Go home this afternoon if you have any questions about what I just said, go home and simply take 10 minutes to read Revelation chapter 2 and Revelation chapter 3, and notice how many times the Lord Jesus Christ, when he is addressing the seven churches to whom at one level this book is written to, how many times he tells those seven churches to repent, how he confronts them in their doctrinal error, how he confronts them in their immorality, how he confronts them in their cold, lukewarm spirit, and says, "My message to you is to repent." Five of the seven churches are specifically rebuked by Christ and told to repent before they move on in the development of their congregational life, you could say. The glory of Christ, the fear of God, the worship of God, true repentance.

Now, beloved, what are churches except a collection of individual people at one level? In other words, the people in those churches were individually and specifically addressed by Christ and said, "You need to repent here, here, and here if you're going to be my disciple. You need to repent here, here, and here if you're going to truly enter into the kingdom." And so as we come in the 21st century to read this book, beloved, nothing's changed. Nothing's changed in that regard. The Lord Jesus Christ comes through his word here in Revelation and addresses your life. It addresses your spiritual mediocrity, perhaps, for some of you. It addresses your sexual immorality for some of you and says, if you have any interest in this book, you have to repent of these things. And it addresses you and asks you questions. Do you fear God? Do you worship God? Is that what

motivates you to come to Revelation? Or are you just here out of an idle sense of curiosity that you want to hear the latest take on eschatological matters and just see, you know, and just kind of add that to your, you know, to your prophetic repertoire in matters? Look, I'm speaking sympathetically. I'm speaking to help you. It's just so important to do that. That's, you know, God as my witness, that's always the spirit with which I speak to you, beloved, to help you to honor the word of God and to not be content with going through motions or letting people dwell in self-deception. Sometimes a pastor needs to speak directly and candidly in order to help people. You know, I have no interest in being the next agitator for a particular millennial view. I don't. That's not why we're doing this. And I was mindful as I was moving and preparing the study here that there needed to be a spiritual preparation in our church and for whatever audience we have outside of the church, there needed to be a spiritual preparation for people to enter into the right spirit of the study of Revelation and I call you to that. Christ calls you to that. And again, if you have any question about that whatsoever, just read Revelation. Read chapters 1, 2, and 3. It'll take you 15 minutes at the most. Read chapters 1, 2, and 3 and you'll see exactly what I'm talking about, an exalted view of Christ, a commendation of Christ for the faithful, and a rebuke and a call to repentance for the unfaithful.

And unless we're willing, beloved, unless we're willing to enter into the book of Revelation on its terms, which are the terms of Christ itself, we're wasting our time. And I was mindful when I announced the study of Revelation that it might stir up some interest because Revelation is a book that people tend to take a particular interest in, and all I'm doing here is saying, check your shoes at the door. Before you walk into this study of Revelation, look and see if there's any mud on your shoes. Don't track, don't track across the living room carpet of the word of God with your muddy, unrepentant spiritual shoes. Check your heart and check it in terms of whether your affections are for the glory of Christ, the fear of God, the worship of God, a true spirit of repentance or not, and once we've done that, then we're in a position to study the book together. Okay? And so, you know, and that's the way that God's word should always be approached. God's word is not given to us to become a, you know, grist-for-the-mill of contention. It's just despicable to see the way the word of God is treated on social media, for example, without any lack of reverence. People.... Yeah, I don't need to dwell on that.

We just need to come to the word of God with humble, repentant hearts, see it on its own terms, and let the word of God, let God the Holy Spirit work in our hearts through what the word says, and one of the ways that you do that is by you slow down, you say, "Okay, let me learn some basic things, let me learn the structure, a little bit of the outline, some of the key themes of the book of Revelation," and then we're able to enter into it on its own terms. So today, in this easy listening message, we're going to introduce the book of Revelation in a most general overview. If you take notes and you title your notes, today's message is titled, "Meet Revelation," and we're going to meet it in five different aspects here this morning, just looking at it on its own simple terms, plain things that the youngest reader who's just begun to learn to read can see for themselves and we humble ourselves to take in that simple information. And one of the things, one of the things that it does when you slow down is it starts to purge out some of your bias and you just come with a preconceived idea of what Revelation says and what it must say, and you just look

for it to confirm your opinions or what you were taught in the past. When you slow down, you're able to kind of silence some of those interpretive biases and be able to just let the word speak for itself. That's all we're trying to do today. There's nothing threatening about this to anyone. We just want to get acquainted with a key part of the word of God and it is a key part. Sometimes people have a temptation and they'll speak in these ways, Revelation's not that important. It all comes out okay in the end as long as you're a Christian and it's not as important as other parts of the Bible. That's ridiculous. That's ridiculous. Those of you that are sports fans, basketball, football, today's Super Bowl Sunday. I didn't even think about that. I'm not even going to watch the game. Here on Super Bowl Sunday, think about it this way. Can you imagine how foolish it would be for someone to say, "I'm just going to watch the first three quarters of the game. That's where the action is. That's what's really important. Who cares what happens in the fourth quarter? Who cares what the outcome is? That's just kind of secondary." No one in his right mind talks about sports that way. The fourth quarter is where the most intense action takes place. The fourth quarter is where the outcome is determined. That's the whole point of competition. That's why they keep score and count points, it's so that at the end there is a winner and a loser and it's made known to all.

Well, Revelation is the fourth quarter of the Bible. Of course it matters, and so, on the one hand, we have those that come with their own biases and just looking for contention in the book of Revelation, and on the other hand, we have some that, you know, speaking really broadly about the way Revelation is thought of, who say, "It's really not that important. You know, it all comes out okay in the end." In either way, beloved, it should be obvious to you that that is no way to approach the word of God. There is no reverence in that. There is no concern to know and to understand in that. And so with those things in mind, let's meet Revelation in five different ways here.

First of all, we want to meet the author. We want to meet the author, and here I'm just speaking in a human sense. The ultimate author of the book of Revelation is God himself. We see that in verse 1. "The revelation," chapter 1 verse 1 of Revelation, "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." This is a revelation from God given to his Son the Lord Jesus Christ that he communicated to an angel to deliver to his servant John. And so in an ultimate sense, the author of Revelation is God himself.

Now, you can look at it that way, on a human level, Revelation was written by a man named John, and so we just read that in chapter 1, verse 1. God 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." John was the human receiver of this revelation, and he puts into writing at the command of God the things that were given to him, and we see the emphasis on the human author John at the beginning and at the end of the book. It functions as bookends so that this isn't lost on anyone so that in Revelation chapter 1 verse 4, we read, "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." So we see John again after the introductory portion in those first three verses, he picks it up and says, "John, here I am

identifying myself, I am speaking here." You know, in the times in which this was written, they wrote letters in what I think is really a better, a more intelligent way than what we write letters, at least those that used to write letters. You'd get a letter and it'd say, "Dear Don," and you'd read the body of the letter, and only until you get to the end, technically speaking, do you know who wrote the letter. You know, it said, "Sincerely Yours, John Smith." You know, "Oh, John Smith wrote this." Well, they did it just the reverse in ancient times. They'd identify, the writer of the letter would identify himself at the very start, "John to the churches of Asia, Paul to the churches of Galatia, Paul to the church at Colossae. Paul to the church of Rome." So that the author is identified right from the beginning. I think that makes much more sense than what we inherited from our forefathers.

Going down to Revelation chapter 1 verse 9, we see it again, "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Then if you go to the very end of the book, Revelation chapter 22, after everything that comes in between, the great meat of the sandwich between the pieces of bread, in Revelation 22 verse 8, as the book is coming to a conclusion, we read in Revelation 22:8, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me." He wasn't supposed to do that, the angel corrected him, but it just comes full circle to what we saw there in chapter 1 verse 1. God, about Christ, gave it to the angel who gave it to John. John is saying, "I fell down before the feet of the angel who showed all these things to me." And so we see that somehow there was a process where a man named John received these things and he's written them out for the edification of the church and a warning to the world for all time to come until Christ returns and brings all things to a conclusion.

Now from the beginning, beloved, I'm not going to go into any history on this, I'm just going to state the fact and we'll move on from here, remember, I'm making this an easy listening message. From the beginning, the church considered John the apostle to be the one who wrote this book. John the apostle, the same one who was the beloved disciple of the Lord, John the apostle, who wrote the gospel of John, wrote the three epistles, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John, and that's who wrote this book. John wrote this book. John the apostle wrote this book. Now sometimes there are alternate John's that are suggested for it, but look, John was the last living apostle when he wrote this, and everybody in the church knew the name of John. He doesn't clarify, he doesn't identify himself further because there was no need to do that. Everybody would have known John in the first century church. And I can give you a little bit of an illustration of how sometimes qualifiers and additional information is not necessary.

If you go to the campus of Grace Community Church, in Sun Valley, California and you talk to anyone on the patio, say, "Is John speaking today?" Everybody knows what you're asking and who you're talking about. They say, "Well, yeah, John is speaking today, or no, John's away, he's not speaking today." You don't have to use the last name MacArthur. You know who you're talking about just because the context and the long established prominence makes it so that you could be talking about no one else. No one

thinks, and I'm using real names here of real elders on the board at Grace Community Church, if you go up and you say, "Is John speaking today," no one thinks that you're talking about the lovely man John Bates. No one thinks that you're talking about John Street. No one thinks that because everybody understands the context and the prominence and you don't talk that way. It's just assumed. It's not necessary. It would be extraneous to the discussion.

And so when the point here is that in the early church to a much greater and a far more important way, the Apostle John was the eminent one in the church and so when they would read John, they knew exactly who was being discussed. It was the Apostle John. And so that's the author. The author is one who was a commissioned apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, just generally speaking. He was one who had seen the Lord during his earthly life, who was there at the cross, the one who Jesus specifically delegated to care for his mother during the course of, after his death, after his ascension, and Jesus made that assignment on the cross when he said, "Behold, your mother. Behold, your son." This is John of the most intimate and authoritative representative of the Lord Jesus Christ that gives us this book and so we come and we learn from the man who literally sat at the foot of Christ, who literally was so close and intimate with Christ, leaned his head on his chest at the Last Supper. The one who was literally at the cross and saw our Lord in the midst of his sufferings. The one who literally took in the Lord's mother after his death and departure from earth. The one who literally served the church with many writings.

We have the most credible and the most authoritative author giving us this book that we could possibly have and so on a human level, we respect this book because we respect the author and respect his prominence, and that is before you even calculate in the reality that this is ultimately a book written by God given to us. So this is the author. We have someone that we pay heed to, that we respect and we listen to and someone that can be trusted because he was a directly authorized representative of the Lord Jesus Christ to declare revelation on his behalf, as stated in the first three verses of the book itself. It's remarkable to think about, isn't it? And just by way of a very brief side note, we've covered this in the past in our teaching on the apostles. There are no apostles in the church today. Don't let anyone in some kind of Apostolic Reformation tell you something or make claims that they are apostles of Jesus Christ. There are no apostles today. To be an apostle you had to be a direct eyewitness of the life, ministry and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was a non-negotiable requirement. And so after the first century, after those witnesses of Jesus died, there were no more people who held the qualification, and there are none today. When someone claims to be an apostle, you can and should walk away without any fear that you are missing the purpose of God in your life. This is a unique author that has given us this book.

So that's number one, meet the author. Okay, it's the Apostle John. We could go into a lot more depth about this, but I promised you an easy listening message today. The Apostle John is the author who gave us this book. Let's meet the audience. Let's meet the audience of the book to whom this book in the original context was given. We'll talk much more about this when we get to later parts and get into the book more properly, but the first chapter gives us the audience. The first section in chapters 1, 2, and 3 tell us who

the immediate audience of this book was, and it's seven churches. There are seven churches that were the immediate recipients of this message, and for that I want you to look at chapter 1, verse 9. This is just getting into the background of these things was very, very fascinating to me and I can't wait to teach in greater depth about it. There in verse 9 we read, "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches,'" there's our audience, send it to the seven churches, the immediate recipients of this book were seven churches. And the voice tells John exactly who those churches are. It enumerates them. So you see in verse 11, "to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

Now those city names to somebody new to the Bible, somebody that hasn't had opportunity yet to really learn much about Bible background, those names might sound completely unfamiliar. Maybe Ephesus sounds familiar. I remember as a young Christian for a long time, not being able to make a clear distinction between biblical Philadelphia and the city in Pennsylvania in the modern day. It has nothing to do with modern day Philadelphia whatsoever. These seven churches that are identified are identified by the cities in which they were located, and all of these cities, if you think about a modern day map and think about the nation of Turkey and that landmass called, sometimes known as Asia Minor, kind of a football-shaped a piece of geography there, these seven churches were located on the western end of that geographic region, located on the western edge of modern Turkey, you could say. And before I say any more about that, there's something very interesting about this that I want to say in just a moment. What I want you to see is that when you go to Revelation 2 and 3, you see these cities repeated and it's interesting that they are repeated in the exact same sequence in which they are identified in Revelation chapter 1 verse 11.

So, we're going to go through this really, really quickly. Look at Revelation chapter 2 verse 1 as we see the audience for this book. Revelation chapter 2 verse 1, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus." That word angel could be messenger and be referring not to a heavenly being but a human, maybe a human leader. We'll talk about that another time. All we want to see is Ephesus. Chapter 2 verse 8, "To the angel in the church in Smyrna." Chapter 2 verse 12, "the angel of the church in Pergamum." Verse 18, "the angel of the church in Thyatira." Chapter 3, verse 1, "the angel of the church in Sardis." Chapter 3, verse 7, "the angel of the church in Philadelphia." Chapter 3, verse 14, "the angel of the church in Laodicea." Seven churches identified collectively in one place in chapter 1, verse 11, and then identified again in individual sequence as the Lord gives particular messages addressed to them and their situation in their time. And so you have these seven churches identified and in a particular sequence that is repeated in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

Now what's very interesting to me, you don't have to think this is interesting and still benefit from the message, but I find this interesting, and there's clearly an intention in the way that all of this is given. If you pick up a Bible atlas or maybe look, if you've got a



map in the back of your Bible that shows these cities, what you'll find is this: the island of Patmos was just in the sea a little bit to the west of the western edge of the landmass. So that's where John was writing from, where he had been exiled. And then you go and you trace these cities on a map, what you find is this, is that they are listed in clockwise order around the map. So you start at Ephesus, you go up to Smyrna and around to Pergamum, down to Thyatira, Sardis, and all the way back and you come up to Philadelphia and you've almost gone in a complete circle. Loosely speaking, it's more like an oval, but you've gone clockwise around a circle in the geographic order in which these cities existed. Very fascinating to me and what Christ does with these churches is he addresses them in the early part of the letter. He addresses these first century churches as they existed and speaks to them, commends them, rebukes them, encourages them, promises that those who conquer will inherit the kingdom, so to speak.

And so that's the immediate audience but, beloved, there's something really interesting also in that it's on the face of the text, the audience of this book goes beyond those seven churches. These churches were to hear what was said to the other churches, and the terms of the book tell us that others were supposed to hear and heed this, including us today. So that you see in chapter 2 verse 7, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Then in verse 11, chapter 2, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Verse 17, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Verse 29, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Chapter 3, verse 6, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Verse 13, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Verse 22, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Seven times to seven churches it said, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Now, you don't have to do this, you can if you want to. I generally don't like these kinds of things with interacting with an audience when I preach, but if any one of you in this room just took your left hand, took your right hand, and lifted it up and touched to the side of your face, you would feel an ear. Both sides, two hands. You can do your right hand to your left ear. You can do your left hand to your right ear. You can do both. You have an ear. In fact, you have two of them and as a result of that, those of us with ears are called to hear what Christ says to the churches. And so, this means that the audience is broader than those seven churches. This is a direct message that God intends all to hear. We all have ears. We are all meant to hear and to heed and, beloved, when you get into the messages to the seven churches, what you're going to find, I can't wait to get there, what we will find is that there are very particular, specific, clear, practical matters of instruction for us, calls to repent for us, calls and encouragements to persevere to us. This book has a message for us today, the book of Revelation speaking broadly.

And so there's an audience. We realize we need to know something about that original audience of those seven churches, and we started that just with the geographic, you know, clock face stuff. That's a Greek word. I don't have time to exegete it for you, the stuff. But we also see that we're being called as those with ears, that we're being called to hear and heed and this is another aspect, beloved, of what I was saying earlier about not

coming with a proud, haughty attitude that says, "I want to get to the stuff that interests me." This book comes to you and addresses you with authority and says, "You hear, you listen, you hear, you heed what you find written in this book." This book isn't something that we place under our heat lamp that we try to keep french fries warm with or anything like that, and we submit it to our examination is my point, this book comes to examine us. This book comes to examine you and call you to think about your life in light of the coming return of Jesus Christ. It comes and calls you to examine your life, for a church to examine itself in light of the authoritative examination which the Lord Jesus Christ gives through this inspired word communicated through his authorized representative, the Apostle John.

That starts to change things, doesn't it? I hope that there are at least a small handful of people either in the room or who hear these things later and are chastened by that enough to say, "I need to change my attitude in the way I approach this book. I need to change my attitude in the way that I approach the Bible itself. The Bible is not an object for my examination as though I'm the one who's in charge and I'm the judge and executioner here. The Bible comes and speaks to me with authority. The Bible tells me what to think, tells me what to do, tells me how to repent." And with that attitude, you study it in a completely different way rather than just the idle curiosity of wanting to advance the argument on the next speculation about the latest book about millennialism that was written. You can't rightly understand and respond to this book until you have humbled yourself like that.

And so that's the audience. Now, thirdly, we want to meet the times. Meet the times. We've met the author, we've met the audience, now thirdly, we want to meet the times. And there's a social context that you can see just on the surface of the text. There's also a spiritual context that you can see right on the surface of the text. When John wrote to these churches, the church was in a time of increasing persecution from the Roman Empire, written in AD 95, 96, something like that, during the reign of a Roman emperor named Domitian. who was known and history has recorded that he persecuted the church. Revelation is written in a time of increasing Roman persecution so that we read again in Revelation chapter 1 verse 9, John says, "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos." He had been exiled there by the authorities, and so he is a partner at the time that he wrote to these churches in the tribulations that they were going through. This is not the Great Tribulation of which we'll talk about sometime, but just the pressure of being a Christian in a pagan empire that was hostile to Christianity. You read on in chapter 2 verse 10, as our Lord speaks to the church in Smyrna, he says, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death." And so there's this thread of imminent suffering that's taking place. Prison would lie ahead for some in the audience. And then in verse 13, at the church of Pergamum, we realize that there was already a martyr that had actually died as a result of the persecution that was going on. So we read in verse 13, the Lord says, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan

dwells." And so we see that the social context in the culture was one of great hostility against the church, suffering, imprisonment, martyrdom, and these are the times in which this book was written.

On a spiritual side, the times are these, and again, we'll talk about this more later, but the churches had been in existence long enough to experience spiritual decline from the greater heights that they had once been at and again, you see this in how Christ addresses the churches. In chapter 2, verse 4, at the church of Ephesus, Jesus says this, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." There was a love in this church for Christ, but time had gone on and somehow they had lost and abandoned that love in response. That doesn't happen overnight. That doesn't happen quickly in a matter of months. This is something that took place over the course of some time indicating that there had been time taking place, time has passed that allowed a church to go from its heights down to a lower plain where they were now living.

There was a spiritual decline in some of these churches. Look at chapter 3 verse 1 to the church in Sardis. Chapter 3 verse 1, "to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'"" Early on, apparently, this was a flourishing church, a living, dynamic church, but now when Christ writes to them, he says, "You're not alive, you're dead." Again, that doesn't happen overnight. There had been a passage of time to allow decline to occur.

And in like manner and in terms of speaking about spiritual decline anyway, in Revelation chapter 3, verse 15, the church at Laodicea, Jesus says, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." And it goes on and Jesus gives them counsel in what to do in that condition.

So that there's some apostasy, there's coldness, there's decline in some of these churches, not all of them, but the whole point here is that we're deeper into the apostolic age. We're toward the end of the apostolic age. There must have been an interval of time to allow for decline to take place, and that decline took place over a period of time. That's one reason among many that the book of Revelation was not written prior to the fall of Jerusalem, which is one reason among many that the doctrine of preterism is inaccurate, it is not true, and you can read all about that in the book that I just released called "When Christ Shall Come." I just mention that simply to say that that brief provocative statement that I just made is fully supported in other places that I'm not taking time to address right now. This was not written prior to the fall of Jerusalem. This was near the end of the apostolic age.

Now, we've met the author, we've met the audience, we've met the times, just ever so briefly, and you can see that if there's a time of decline and there's disease in the church, how important this book must be, fourthly, we want to meet the content. Meet the

content, again, ever so briefly. The content of this book, on its own terms the book of Revelation is a book about future prophecy. On its own terms, what it says about itself, Revelation is a book about future prophecy so that we read in, again, in Revelation chapter 1, verse 3, we read this, we read, "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." It's prophecy, the time is near, meaning the time is still future, meaning that this is looking forward to future events, not describing past events that have taken place. It's looking to the future.

Look at Revelation chapter 10, verse 11, and I know that as we rush through these things, it might be in the back of your mind, "I thought this was easy listening." Well, it is. You just have to stay with me. Revelation chapter 10, verse 11, we read John was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." Prophecy.

Chapter 19. verse 10, and if you just want to listen as I read along, you can do that. We read at the end of verse 10, "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." Chapter 22, verse 7, we read this in Revelation 22:7, Jesus says, "behold, I am coming soon." Looking forward, "I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." Verse 10, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near." Verses 18 and 19, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues," verse 19, "and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life." Prophecy, prophecy, prophecy, looking forward. "The time is near. I'm coming soon." This is looking to the future, not describing things that have happened in the past.

And in addition to that, again, as we remember those very key and central chapters in chapters 2 and 3, this book of Revelation instructs the churches about their present condition and sets forth for them the prophetic future of God's final purpose. So God addresses the churches in verses 2 and 3, and then he says, "Here's what's going to happen in the world," in what follows chapter 4 and beyond. And so the content addresses the churches, rebukes them, deals inside the church, you might say, and then expands out to look at the future of the purpose of God in the world as we know it.

That's the content. It's prophetic. It's instructive, edifying to the church. That's the content. And then, fifthly and finally, we want to meet the method. Meet the method, and what I mean by that is how was this book given to us. What was the means by which this was made known to John so that he could make it known to us because in his human ability, obviously, John could not literally step forward in his human ability into future time and see what was happening and then step back into it. We don't have the ability to, you know, to teleport ourselves into the future. None of us can step into tomorrow now and then come back and tell us, you know, who won the game. If we could do that, you could bankrupt the bookmakers, right? We don't do that and so what's the method, what is the method by which we receive this book? The Apostle John goes to great lengths to say that this book is not a human production, and we're just going to look at it all so quickly.

Go back again to chapter 1, you start to see how important these opening verses are, and I just want to point out, and we won't try to have you keep up with me, you can just jot these verses down and listen as I read them. John goes to great lengths throughout the book to say that he was in the Spirit when he received these things. Chapter 1 verse 10 we read, John says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." I was in the Spirit. Chapter 4 verse 2, John says, "At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven with one seated on the throne." He was in the Spirit. In chapter 17 verse 3, we read this. he says, "and he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names." He was in the Spirit. And finally in chapter 21 verse 10 as he talks about the eternal state, he says again, "he carried me away in the Spirit to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God." He was in the Spirit as he received these revelations to the churches. He was in the Spirit when he saw the throne of God in chapter 4. He's transported into the future in the Spirit in chapter 17, transported somehow into the eternal state in chapter 21. This is breathtaking, beloved, when you think about the significance of it all, the magnificence that John, a man of like flesh like us, had experiences like that and truth like that deposited and that he was responsible for to have it distributed to the churches.

What does it mean to be in the Spirit? Well, somehow, somehow, John's inward senses and his inward perception were opened to the spiritual realm that is normally beyond the reach of human ability. The Holy Spirit gave him perception to see things that others could not see. And, beloved, this is really important, but our time is going to make you think that that must not have been too important, he didn't spend that much time on it. He received this revelation of things in the spiritual realm, things from eternity, things in the future, things about the present aspect of the church, he received it in a way, the Spirit gave it to him in a way that he was able to describe in human terms. There was a limit to the human language as he gave it. You can see him struggling as he's describing these visions. He said, "I saw something that was like this. It looked something like this." And so he's seeing things that are beyond human ability, and yet he's given it to us in such a way that human words are adequate for us to receive the message. The Spirit lifted John beyond time to see future history before it happened and that in the Spirit, what we'll see as we go along through the text, the Holy Spirit facilitated John's remembrance of the Old Testament and Old Testament imagery so that he was able to interpret the things that he had seen for the edification of the people who would read this book over the course of subsequent centuries and millennia.

The point for today, beloved, as we wrap this up, is that the book of Revelation is a supernatural book with supernatural content that is beyond the ability of human intellect alone to understand. The book of Revelation is a book that is closed and locked that keeps out the unregenerate, that keeps out the ungodly from a proper understanding of it, and therefore it is so important for us to examine ourselves. Am I in Christ as I come to this book to understand it? Am I walking in the Spirit in order to understand what the Spirit has given? Am I in step with the Spirit who gave this to John. Beloved, that's the only hope that we have of understanding this book, is that God would give us

supernatural enablement, supernatural help, supernatural illumination to understand the supernatural revelation that he gave to John that is preserved for us in this book. We're at the threshold of the household, in other words, as we want to enter into the living room of this book, to sit down, to get comfortable, to learn from it. But as I said earlier in the message, beloved, you and I, we need to check our feet. We need to look at our shoes. Is there the mud of sin in my life? I need to wipe that off. I need to repent before I embark on this study. That's what the book requires. Am I coming to this book with a sense of dependence? "God, help me to understand that which is given here." Those spiritual characteristics are the product of meeting the book of Revelation and I invite you, I encourage you, I call you to examine your heart, examine your life in light of the things that we've seen, to repent where that is necessary, and then come with a humble, dependent spirit before the word of God with the Spirit that says, "Speak, Lord, your servant listens."

Let's pray together.

*Gracious Lord, it's a wonderful joy for us to open this book to anticipate the study, and we just ask for that kind of help. May you help each one of us to rightly examine ourselves, Father, knowing that it's so easy to fall into the trap of spiritual indifference, spiritual pride, even spiritual cynicism and skepticism, Well, Lord, we need to repent of all of that and we pray that by your Spirit we would and that as we move into a greater study, further study of this book in the weeks and months to come, that you would indeed help us, that you would wash us, that you would cleanse us and prepare us, that we would purify ourselves as we look toward the return of our glorious Lord Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.*

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