

The Key to Understanding Revelation

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Last Things

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Bible Text: Revelation 1:19; Revelation 4:1-3

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This morning, it is my privilege to invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Revelation 1, the last book of your Bible, but in all fairness, we are going to begin in chapter 1, but we're also going to find ourselves in chapters 4 as well as chapters 19, but all the passages that we turn to today will all be contained within the book of Revelation.

If you are a guest or visitor or you were not able to worship alongside of us last week, I want to welcome you to a journey, not just through the book of Revelation, but a journey through the last things. When you look at the early church some two thousand years ago, we discover that God communicated in incredible fashion. Not only do we have the four gospels, not only do we have the letters of whom we know as the Apostle Paul, but there was that one communication, a man by the name of John on the island of Patmos, who had been marginalized for his faith and for his testimony, God gave him not just a vision, but God commanded him to write down the details and the description of the last things. You know, I teased last week when it comes to the book of Revelation, it's not just you get two people, you get three opinions, you get two people, you get about fourteen or fifteen different opinions. However, if you begin to kind of drill down a little bit and begin to look at how do people see the book of Revelation, there's really three basic camps that people fall into. There is one group of people that they believe that when you look back at the first century, when you look back at all that happened with Nero the Emperor and Titus the General, the destruction of Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews and the persecution of the church, there are those that believe that what we know as the book of Revelation is basically an account or a telling of events that have already occurred. There are some people that believe that the book of Revelation isn't a description of that which has occurred in days past, they believe it's more of a metaphor of days present; it's not a book to be taken as a literal prophetic word of events and times and days that are coming, but it is more a description of this great cosmic spiritual battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan. And then there's a third group that looks at what we know as the book of Revelation and says that everything contained therein is regarding matters that are yet in the distant future. And the reason I share those three respective camps is that today, verse 19 of chapter 1, is going to give us the key to understanding the book of Revelation. And those of you who know me well know that the answer today is not either/or, the answer is both/and.

Now let me set the stage for verse 19. John, as I mentioned earlier, he's on the island of Patmos. He's been marginalized. He's been isolated for his testimony and his proclaiming of the truth of Jesus Christ when all of a sudden the Lord comes to him in a very dramatic fashion, not the Jesus of the healing the blind man, not the Jesus of multiplying the bread and the fish, but the Jesus who is dressed in royal apparel, the Jesus who has his feet as is brass that is burning, and eyes of fire and a double-edged sword out of his mouth. He rightfully falls at his feet as if dead. Jesus places his right hand upon him and says, "Fear not, I'm the beginning, the end, the first, the last. I have the keys to death and hell."

Now the book of Revelation, not just those respective three camps, but the myriads, the plethora of opinions and perspectives that are out there, and yet verse 19 is the key to it all, and so for all the confusion today, we're going to bring a little bit of clarity. What is it that the book of Revelation actually contains? What is it that Jesus actually desired to be communicated through whom we know as the Apostle John? Look in verse 19. This is the commandment that God gives him.

19 Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter;

Isn't that interesting? Basically, what Jesus tells him is, "I'm about to show you some things, you're about to hear some things, and I want you to write those events that are considered the past, those things which are considered the present, and those things which are considered the future." This is the paradigm that God gives the Apostle John. This is the paradigm that he gives you and I today. And so when it comes to the book of Revelation, we do not have the privilege of putting it all in the past, we don't have the privilege of making it all about the present, nor do we have the privilege of making it all about days to come for God, for Jesus Christ made it very clear, "John, I need you to write the things which have been, the things which are, and the things which are to be." Which brings up an interesting question to ask. Okay, if those are the three things or the three areas found within the book of Revelation, how do we separate those things? How do we discern what's the past, what's the present, what's the future? What is, for lack of better terms, what is the procedure by which we discern these differentiations?

Now within the book of Revelation, all of the activities take place in two respective places. You're either "on planet earth, or you're in heaven above." Those are the two places. And what we discover is that the majority of the book of Revelation is the wrath of God poured out on those that have rebelled against God, but there are significant scenes within what we might call the throne room, collectively we would call the heaven above. But what's interesting, in the midst of all these judgments, in the midst of death and peril and famine, etc., there are two places in the book of Revelation that bridge the gap between the heavens and the earth: chapters 4, verses 1 through 3, and chapters 19, verses 11 through 15. If you would turn a few pages with me to chapter 4, verse 1 through 3. And for those of you that were a part of our journey through the book of 1 Thessalonians, what we're about to read not only sounds a whole lot like the song we just heard, but a whole lot like 1 Thessalonians 4. Verse 1 says,

1 After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. 2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. 3 And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.

What we have here is the Apostle John, who was on the island of Patmos, he is supernaturally transported to the heavens above. In fact, he is experiencing something that I can confidently say that no other person in the Bible experienced. Yes, there were individuals who at times got an incredible glimpse of God. Yes, there were times where people, for lack of better terms, saw into the heavens. There was even 2 Corinthians 12, where the Apostle Paul says, "I don't know if I was in the flesh, I don't know if I was in the spirit, but I got taken up into the third heaven. I saw things that I cannot articulate. I heard things that I cannot replicate." But no other place in the Bible do you find a door opening up and a mere mortal human being being taken up into the heavens, not just to see and to hear, but with the commandment to write down everything that God shows him.

Now fast forward to chapter 19. By the time you get to chapter 19, we have a description of what we often refer to as the "Second Coming of Jesus." Now I know that's kind of a broad term to describe a lot of things, but this is the point at which he literally, physically touches his feet upon planet earth again. Verse 11,

11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. 12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. 13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

Why are these two passages so critical to understanding the procedure of what we know as the book of Revelation? All the events take place either on heaven and/or on earth but there are two places where heaven is opened. In chapter 4, a mere mortal man goes up into the heavens, and in chapter 19, Jesus and all of his armies descend from above. Now I'm not a mathematician by trade but I do know that if you have "two division" you end up with three parts, do you not? What was it that John was commissioned to do? Write that which was, write that which is, and write that which is to come. And so what you and I have today, is we have the privilege of seeing the last things, not from the perspective of

planet earth, not from the perspective that you and I see on a regular basis, but we have it given to us from the perspective of John who is not merely on the island of Patmos but according to what we just read in chapter 4, he is above in the heavens.

In fact, if you'll turn back to chapter 4 momentarily, I want you to notice a very important word that is utilized. Verse 1, it says, "After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter." Now I understand that when you see that word hereafter, your immediate thought is, "Aha, that's the future." And I understand that, and so it would be somewhat natural to say, "Well, all the events from chapter 4 onward, that's all the future stuff, that's all the things that are to come, that's nothing that we're to experience, that's nothing that we're to be a part of." And I agree with that. However, if you look at the word hereafter by definition, it doesn't just mean events that have yet to occur, it also includes events of the present and the events that are yet to occur.

See John had a perspective that no theologian or commentator has ever had when it comes to the book of Revelation. It wasn't about reading the words and saying how I divide this and how I divide that for John himself was taken out of the time frame and the time constraints of mere earth, he is transported supernaturally into the heavens above and when he's in the presence of God, he's not just above time, he is outside of time. And so what does he see? He is able to see the past, he's able to see the present, and he is able to see the future all at one time. Now again, when we go to the totality of the book of Revelation, I do believe that there's an argument to be made that all the events leading up to chapter 4 are "past." Remember, it's not from our perspective, it's from his. I think there's a case to be made that all of the calamity and destruction and wrath that's poured out in chapters 4 through 19 he saw in real time from his perspective. And there's hardly anybody that's going to argue that by the time you get to chapter 19, that is all events of the future.

Why is that so important? That word hereafter, no matter how you, and forgive me for saying this, no matter how you slice it, no matter how you dice it, what you discover within the book of Revelation, because John is taken up into the heavens, because he is given a perspective unlike any other, because he has been commanded to write these events down, that which he sees and that which he hears, that his perspective is not our perspective, and therefore, by the time you get to chapter 4, I believe there is a biblical case that all of those endeavors are that which you and I, the people of God, the body of Christ, and the church of Jesus Christ, never have to worry and/or be concerned about enduring. By the way, for those who may struggle with that perspective, the word church is not found anywhere between chapters 4 and 19 and it is everywhere in chapters 2 and 3. Which leads me to a very important possibility.

Now for those of you who have known me over time, there are some phrases that I like to utilize. One of those phrases is, could it be? Could it be that in light of the paradigm that God gives John, in light of the procedure of a door in heaven opening in chapter 4 and another one in chapter 19, in light of the fact that he has a perspective of time that no

commentator or nor theologian has ever experienced on his own, is it possible that what we see being laid out before us is more insightful than maybe we've ever given credit to?

Chapters 2 and 3, feel free if you want to peruse those chapters while I'm alluding to them, but here's what we discover: we discover that there are seven churches. They're in what we know as Asia Minor. Now these are local congregations. They had respective pastors and elders and deacons and such. They had different environments, though they were in the same culture, so to speak, and there is a message that is given to each and every one of them. What we'll notice is this, that every single one of these churches, all seven of them, God commends them for something that they are doing "properly." With the exception of two, he also condemns them for that which needs to be repented of and changed. The only two churches that God does not say anything negative to is the second church, which is the church of Smyrna, and the sixth church, which is the church of Philadelphia. Smyrna was a group of individuals who claimed that they were small in number and of no great impact for the kingdom of God, and yet Jesus said, "You may be small in number, but you are mighty in power." The church of Philadelphia, it says that they were faithful to the word of God, and because of that, there's a door that has been opened that no man can shut.

What's interesting about these respective seven churches that we see being described up until chapter 4 is that each of the respective names has a very important definition, distinction, and description. For example, the church at Ephesus. By the way, you do know that whom we know as the Apostle John before he went to Patmos, he was the pastor, most likely, of that church. And the name Ephesus means "desired ones." And if you read chapter 2 in the book of Revelation, you would desire to be a member of that church. They were faithful in their convictions. They were faithful in their doctrine, in fact they even tested and tried those who claimed to be believers but were not really, and they removed them from the fellowship. The only issue God had with them is that in the midst of their doctrinal purity, they were losing some of their passion. They had "lost their first love."

The church of Smyrna that was small in number but greatly persecuted, it means people of bitterness, or myrrh, persecution and having events of that nature are often a very bitter experience.

Then there's the church at Pergamos. Pergamos is an interesting word. It means "much marriage." And what do we see happen to the church at Pergamos in chapter 2? The church at that location decided that they would marry the world, that they would do as the world would do and thus live not distinct from but in step with secular society.

Then there's the church of Thyatira. That word Thyatira is an interesting word. It means "odor of affliction" and basically it makes you want to hold your nose. What do we discover there? Oh, there's an Old Testament figure that's popped up again. Jezebel is in Thyatira and it says that she has caused many great ones to fall from their faith. She has caused many to deny the faith and there is carnage everywhere.

Then there's the church at Sardis. The word simply means "red ones." Again there is a persecution much like Smyrna and there are a few faithful ones but not near what we had in Smyrna.

Philadelphia, the word simply means "brotherly love." And then again there's that church as I described earlier that the word of God was of the greatest priority. In fact, it says that because of that God has opened a door that man can't shut and if God shuts a door man cannot open it. The word of God is that powerful in our lives.

And then there's the last one, Laodicea. It's the lukewarm church. He says, "I wish you were hot or that you were cold but because you are right there in the middle, you're in that tepid water," the description is that, "that church made God sick at his stomach." What's interesting is what the word Laodicea actually means. It means "the rights of the people."

Now I've described for you what the names and the characteristics of these respective churches mean but for illustrative purposes, remember this is one of those could it be's, this is one of those possibilities. Will you allow me in just a few moments, literally a few moments, can I recount the last two millennia of our history? The last two millennia of what the church of Jesus Christ has looked like both good and bad? You know, we started off as a small group. In fact, there was a group of about 120 according to the book of Acts 1 huddled up in the Upper Room praying and fasting for seven days waiting for what you and I know as Pentecost. You talk about a logistical nightmare. They went from 120 to 3,120 overnight. The Lord brought an incredible number of believers. In fact, you walk through the book of Acts, by the time you get to chapter 17, it says they have turned the whole world upside down. Think about this, at the end of Acts whom we know is the Apostle Paul, he gets an audience with Agrippa, Festus, and Felix. We're talking the United Nations of the first century world. We are, for a lack of better terms, it is moving and it is shaking.

But then what happened? Those that were "in charge" in the Roman Empire didn't like that Christianity not only was contrary to their pagan beliefs but it was attracting more people and more money as well. So what did they do? Over the course of the next 300 years, systematically, strategically and with the seal of the "state," they made it legal and advantageous to persecute and kill Christians. All of a sudden the numbers were not as visible as they had been days past, not because there were less people coming to faith in Christ but there was a lot of believers being killed for their faith and there were others that had some wisdom and they got a little smarter with their navigating of life. We don't see the publicness of the faith for those 300 years.

Oh, but then the fourth century came. A man by the name of Constantine decided that Rome needed religion and so he declared that you and I, the church of Jesus Christ, would be the official religion of Rome. That was the absolute best/worst thing that ever happened to us. Why was it the best thing? Because they quit killing us. Why was it the worst thing? Because any time you hold hands with the state you're going to end up going the same direction they are. And the church for hundreds of years no longer said, "Thus

saith the Lord," they said, "Whatever Caesar said, that's what we'll do." And we didn't only end up in a mess, we ended up in a time period the historians call the Dark Ages where you could hardly find a copy of God's word. The churches were empty. They were dark. They were desolate. Oh yes, there was infrastructure, there were personalities, there was pomp and circumstance, but there wasn't any Jesus. But there were always those faithful few in the midst of all that was happening around who stayed true, who stayed true, who did not give up or give in to what was happening around them.

And then in the 16th century, the world changed forever. Who would have thought that a small, weird haircut Franciscan monk by the name of Martin Luther, and I say that with all compliments but you have to admit when you see pictures, that was just a strange hairdo he had going on, all of a sudden said, "You know what? It's not about pomp and circumstance. It's about the word of God, the person of Jesus Christ and the grace that he is willing to bestow." And we had what historians call a Reformation, and not only did we have a return to biblical faith but a guy named Gutenberg had invented a printing press and now the Bible wasn't something that people had heard existed somewhere but actually could be in one's possession. And over the next hundreds of years you know what humanity experienced? We experienced revivals. We experienced awakenings. We experienced a missionary going forward that the world had not seen since. In fact, over the course of the next 300 years there were more people who came to faith in Jesus Christ than the previous 1,700 combined.

Sounds like it's a good story until you get to about 100 years ago. About 100 years ago, those that have the say, for lack of better terms, decided to fall for the same trap humanity did in the Garden of Eden. Remember when Satan came and said, "Yea, hath God said?" We began to challenge the word of God. We began to dispute, "Did God really mean what he said, and did he really say what he meant?" And we began to take the word of God and place it not just in second place but sometimes in third and fourth place next to all the isms and the beliefs of the world. In fact, I would daresay, and I said it last week, I believe 2 Thessalonians 2 may be being lived out in real time today. We are experiencing that "falling away." I could quote statistic ad nauseam, but all you need to know is it's not just here in America, it is worldwide. What we know as the presence, the power, the impact and influence of biblical Christianity is waning compared to those days after what we know as the Reformation.

Now I've just given you 2,000 years of history in a few moments but what you may not realize is I've also told you the story of those seven churches. You say, "What do you mean the story of those seven churches?" Ephesus was a church that was thriving and populated, kind of like the early days. Smyrna was a church that was small in number and heavily persecuted. Pergamos, remember it means much marriage? The church decided to marry the world years and years ago and we ended up going the way of the world. Then there's Thyatira, odor of affliction, those dark ages of despair apart from God's word. The faithful few in what we know as Sardis. And then there came a time where the word of God, just like in the church of Philadelphia, was once again prominent in people's lives. Which means that, could it be, is it possible that when you look at the book of Revelation from John's perspective, not from ours, here he is caught up into the heavens looking at

things past, about to endure things present, about to write things future, what is the last thing that he writes about before he's caught up? Laodicea. That's the last church. That's the last description. Let me return you to what that word means. The word Laodicea means "the rights of the people." Do I daresay we collectively as humanity under "the umbrella of the church," we are more interested today in our agendas and our opinions than what God said. We are more interested in you recognizing and celebrating my freedoms of emotions and feelings than what did God say is holy and what did God say is sin. We have become Laodicea whether we want to recognize it or not.

Why is it so important? Why is it so strategic? Why is it so critical? Because last week I shared with you that John is a prophetic picture of the church. What happens in chapter 4? We just read it. All of a sudden without warning, without notice, without it being set on the calendar, hears a voice saying, "Come up." The trump of God saying, "Come up." And he is immediately in the presence of the Lord. Allow me to give you a biblically accurate guide to predicting the chronology of the book of Revelation. You ready? We are closer today than we were yesterday. And if tomorrow comes, we will be closer then than we are at this present moment.

The key to understanding the book of Revelation isn't about sitting on earth looking to the heavens. It's about seeing John seated in the heavens looking at the earth. And I believe there is a distinct possibility that he didn't just give us a description of seven local churches, I think he gave us a view from the heavens of what it would look like from the time that Jesus ascended until the time that he calls us home. Which means that more today than ever, the biblical statement "today is the day of salvation," you may not have the privilege to say, "You know what? I'll get to it next week. I'll get to it next month. Wait till the kids grow up. Wait till things 'slow down.'" Whatever phrase you like to use, today we don't have that privilege because from John's perspective, that day of reckoning could happen at any moment.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. Maybe today you're watching online, maybe you're here in person, maybe you're listening on the radio and today the Spirit of God took the word of God and in spite of all of the descriptions of Revelation, in spite of all the different approaches and ways and all the information, maybe God made it very abundantly clear to your heart that if that day were to come where he would call his children home, you would not be a part of it. Maybe today's the day you realize your desperate need for Jesus Christ, you realize that what the Bible says is true in Romans 10, whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Not whoever becomes a Baptist, whoever joins a church, whoever starts this or stops that, but whoever repents of their sins and says, "Jesus, you're the only one who can forgive me." Maybe you're that person today here in person, online, it doesn't matter if you are, would this be the time that you would cry out? You don't have to do it out loud. You don't have to say the same words or the same phrases that I or somebody else might use. But maybe your heart's cry would go something like this, "God, today I realize in spite of all that has happened and all that is to come, I personally, I've got a sin problem. God, I have rebelled against you. I have lived a life contrary to you and your word says the wages of my sin is death. And God, I believe right now that if something doesn't fix, something doesn't solve my sin problem

according to your Bible, it's not going to be a pretty picture for all of eternity. God, that same verse also says, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And God, that is what I'm believing today, that the salvation of my soul, the forgiveness of my sins isn't in a local church membership. It's not in a denominational distinction. It is in the blood and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ alone. God, that is what I believe. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf, lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, today I believe that when he allowed himself to be nailed to his cross, he was bearing the pain and the punishment of my sin. And God, I believe that three days later when he rose from the grave, he made it possible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers, I don't have the solutions to the struggles of this life, but there's one thing I know: I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can solve. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed, our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who cried out for Jesus to save you. In a moment I'm gonna pray for us, we're gonna stand and sing together and I just want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We have a team set aside, a room set aside. We want to celebrate, we want to hear your story, we want to pray with you and to pray for you. Maybe today you say, "Well pastor, I got that covered," but maybe you need to talk about following in believer's baptism. Or maybe you're one of those that we see each and every week who says, "You know, this is my church home, I need to make it official." Or maybe today you say, "Pastor, I'm just walking through some things, I need somebody to pray with me, I need somebody to pray for me." Whatever it is, we are here for you.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, that's truly what this moment is. Lord, you prepared our hearts for the reading, the hearing, and the doing of your word. Now the big question for each and every one of us is, God, what are we going to do with what you gave us through your word? I pray right now for those who are questioning, those who are doubting, those that are reluctant, God, that your Holy Spirit would supersede any doubt or any voice that is contrary to yours. And God, today, may we only be guilty of one thing, and that's responding to your voice. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.