

# Last Things – The Beginning of the End

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It is my distinct privilege this morning to invite you to open your Bibles to the very last book of the Bible, that which we know as the book of Revelation. If you're here as a guest or visitor, allow me to set the scene for just a moment. Over the course of this previous calendar year, we as a church body, we took a journey through the book of 1 Thessalonians, and this was very strategic, because if we look back chronologically, what we know as 1 Thessalonians was the very first communication that the Lord gave us his church through whom we know as the Apostle Paul. You may remember that almost 20% of what we know as 1 Thessalonians involved what we commonly refer to as the Second Coming. And so we studied for months the first things that God gave the church. It just seems natural to follow that with studying the last things that God gave the church, what we know as the book of Revelation.

Today, we're going to be in chapter 1, verses 1 through 18, and so as you're finding the first page of the last book of the Bible, known as Revelation, allow me to kind of give us some parameters. I joke all the time that when you get two Baptists together, you're going to get three opinions, and I realize that. When it comes to the book of Revelation, when you get two of us together, you're probably going to get about 13 or 14 different opinions. But allow me to identify two camps that people typically navigate or gravitate toward. There are some of you that are frightened by the book of Revelation. You've read the content, you've read the imagery, and you don't want to have any part of it. It doesn't necessarily scare you, you trust the Lord, it's all going to work out, you don't necessarily need the details. And I respect that. But then there are some of you, can we just go ahead and say you're obsessed with this stuff? I mean, you read the headlines, you listen to a podcast, and you're trying to figure out, "Is that the third trumpet or the fifth seal? Where are we in all this?" My goal, as we take this journey through the book of Revelation, is to hit it right down the middle of the fairway. For those of you who are apprehensive about studying the book of Revelation, I hope over the course of the next months that you embrace and that you love the comfort that it brings, and for those of you that are reading and listening to all the news stories, can we just pull it back a little bit for just a season of life as we study this incredible final book of the Bible?

Today marks the beginning of the end. Chapter 1, verses 1 through 18, it says,

1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and

signified it by his angel unto his servant John: 2 Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. 3 Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. 4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; 5 And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, 6 And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. 8 I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. 9 I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, 11 Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. 12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; 13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. 14 His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; 15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. 16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. 17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: 18 I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

What we've just read is the beginning, the prologue of the final book of the Bible, which reveals to us the last things that God has for us. And today, as we begin this journey, I really have three goals that I'd like to accomplish in studying this text. The first one is to make very clear what the purpose of the book of Revelation is; not only why do we have it, but why is it important for us to understand the contents therein. Secondly, I want to look at the person of Jesus Christ. Notice the very first statement, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." There is so much in the book of Revelation involving judgments, perdition, etc., however, if we're not careful, we can get so into and so obsessed with all these cataclysmic events that we forget about the one who's being revealed, Jesus Christ. And

then finally, we're going to discover that there is a parallel between you and I, the church, and whom we know as the Apostle John.

But let's begin with the purpose. Why do we have what you and I know as the book of Revelation? Well, let's just read the very first verse. It says, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him to show unto his servants." The purpose of Revelation is to communicate a message, not to conceal it. In fact, when we think about that which is involved in the final book of the Bible, we think of words like apocalyptic, and mysterious, and veiled, and hidden, etc., but much to the contrary, what we discover in the book of Revelation is God is not trying to hide something from us, God is desiring to disclose information to us. This isn't a book of hidden things, and codes, and mysterious things, in fact, you're going to discover that the book of Revelation, like all the rest of scripture, it says what it means, and it means what it says. It is desirous to communicate, not to conceal.

Secondly, it wants to clarify some information. Notice the next verse. It says, and he "bare record," in verse 2, "of the word of God, the testimony of Jesus Christ, and all of the things that he saw." In other words, what he's clarifying is, it just is what it is. Now the reason this is important is later in chapter 19, verse 10, it says the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy and when we look at the life, the ministry, the death, the resurrection, even the ascension of Jesus Christ, all of those events were prophesied years before in what we know as the Old Testament. But here's why that's important: they didn't just prophesy that at some point, at some time, in a small rural village, a very different baby boy is going to be born. No. It said in a place called Bethlehem. Daniel even gave us the date, and Isaiah told us his name would be Emmanuel. These are very specific prophecies. The Bible said that when he died, he wouldn't just die a gruesome death, it says specifically that he would be pierced in his hands and in his feet. The Bible specifically said that he would raise from the grave and that he would ascend on high.

Now the reason that this is clarification for us is there is a very natural tendency to read the contents of the book of Revelation and go, "Well, I know what it says, but last week on the news I saw... Or there's a book out there that I read, there's a podcast, and it sounds a whole lot like what they were speaking of." And what the book of Revelation will clarify for us if we will read it and study it as we should, is that we don't go to it with other people's ideas and concepts and force it upon it, just like Jesus being born in Bethlehem and crucified on a cross, just let it speak as it speaks. You know what that will do? It will give you a lot of comfort because if you've watched the news lately, it sounds like you're in the second and the third trumpet all day long. There will always be events of great destruction and death and disease and such, but I want you to hear me clearly: if you are a child of God, if you are someone who at some point in your life has admitted you've got a sin problem and you've asked Jesus to save you, the book of Revelation may be the most comforting book of the entire Bible.

You say, "It's comforting?" Now, see, we typically read the book of Revelation and go, "Oh, there is chaos everywhere." Yes. There is chaos for those that have rejected Jesus Christ. There is chaos for those who've rebelled against God and who will not repent of

their sin. But for those who have believed on Jesus, these are some of the most comforting words in all of the Bible. In fact, look at verse 3. It says, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear these words of this prophecy, and they keep those things which are written therein, for the time is at hand." Your Bible consists of 66 respective books. 2 Timothy 3 makes it very clear that no scripture is of any more inspiration than any others. In other words, we don't elevate or lower portions of scripture or books of the Bible as being less than or more valuable than. However, did you know that right here in chapter 1, verse 3, this is the only book of your Bible that says you'll receive a blessing by reading it. It's the only book of the Bible that says you will be blessed by living it and understanding the contents therein.

So when we look at the book of Revelation, this isn't material that is concealed and mysterious and confusing. What we really have is communication that's very clear, clarifies a whole lot, and should, as a child of God, bring us great comfort in the midst of a world that is tumultuous at best. Why can we have comfort? Because it's the revelation of Jesus Christ, the one who lived for us, the one who died for us, the one who raised for us, the one who ascended, and the one who is coming back for us.

And so when we go to verse 5 and 6 of chapter 1, we see this incredible declaration of who he is. "He is the faithful witness. He's the first begotten of the dead. He's the prince of the kings of the earth, unto him that loved us and he washed us from our sins in his own blood. He has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever." We see his identity, that as throughout all scripture, we see him as prophet, we see him as priest, and we see him as king but here he is the faithful witness. In fact, it was in John 17, hours before his crucifixion, that he made this incredible statement to the Father. He says, "Father, I've completed everything that you've asked me to do." In Hebrews 12:1-2, it says that he endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. In our culture today, that word for "witness" is the word we often see "martyr." He was faithful to the death. He was faithful to accomplish that which he was tasked to do.

And not only was he faithful to his death, the next statement says, he's the first begotten of the dead. Now, there had been others that had been raised from the dead. The widow Nain's son came up from the dead. Lazarus came up from the dead. But everybody previously and since who "has come back" has descended again into the grave. When it says he's the first begotten of the dead, that means he's the first to not only raise from the dead, but to never die again, and when we are in him, then we are raised from the dead as well.

But it's this next statement on his identity that I want to focus on. He is the prince of the kings of the earth. Now when you get to chapter 19, the sky is going to open up, the heavens are going to reveal and Jesus Christ is pictured as physically, literally returning to the earth, and when he does so on his thigh, it is written King of kings and Lord of lords. But that's not what it says in chapter 1. It says he's the prince of the kings of the earth. You say, "Why is that so important?" Because a prince is one who has a position that's waiting, but not yet realized. You want some historical evidence? Just talk to a guy

across the pond by the name of Charles. Poor guy waited 74 years but when the queen passed, did anybody question who was next? Nope. We knew because for 74 years he was the prince of that country. When it says that Jesus is the prince of the kings of the earth, the Bible says in the last days there will be mockers that question, and there are times as a believer you look around and say, "I don't know if he's really going to wrap this thing up." Here's the good news: he may be the prince today, but he's the King tomorrow. He may be the prince at this time, but one day the Bible says he's going to be the King of kings and he's going to be the Lord of lords.

That's not just his identity though. I want you to notice his intentions. It says he loved us. He washed us from our sins. He has made us to be kings and priests. You know, when we speak of love, we naturally quote John 3:16, nothing wrong with that, however, one of the aspects of love that I don't think we give enough biblical attention to is that sometimes love is demonstrated either A) in what God warns us from, or B) shows us what he delivered us from. Sometimes you don't realize and you don't appreciate all that somebody who has authority in your life has done for you until you're "on the other side." And what we see in the book of Revelation is there's all kinds of calamity. There's all kinds of chaos. There's all kinds of things that are happening. And one of the ways that we know that he loves us, we're going to talk about this more in just a minute, is how much of that he keeps from us. Yes, he lived for us. Yes, he went to the cross. Yes, he raised from the grave. Yes, he ascended. Yes, he's coming back. But one of the ways he loves us is what he spares us from.

He washed our sins in his own blood and then it says that he has made us to be kings and priests. Later in chapter 5, verse 10, it's going to clarify that a little bit more. It says he's made us to be kings and priests on the earth. In a moment, we're going to speak about those who desire to silence you as a believer, those who desire to marginalize you as a believer. But I got news for the world: according to the word of God, there's a day coming not only will Jesus come back, but those who believe in him, they will reign with him, they will serve with him, and all of the marginalization of today will be flipped the proverbial script in the days to come.

But then there's his image. Notice what we see in chapter 1. Can we all just agree that the picture we have of Jesus doesn't match Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. There's not a description here that, for a lack of better terms, we're familiar and/or comfortable with. I mean, after all, his eyes are as fire, his feet are as brass. He's got a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. This is not the Jesus that took the woman caught in adultery and said, "Where are your accusers? Go and sin no more." This is not the Jesus that took Nicodemus by the side and said, "You must be born again." This isn't the Jesus who took the blind man and healed him and said, "Go and tell people who made you whole." See what we see in the book of Revelation, this isn't the Jesus of the cross, this is the Jesus of the crown. This isn't the Jesus, the lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world, this is Jesus, the lion of the tribe of Judah. What we discover is that that which possess and is owed to God himself is revealed in the vengeance and the wrath of God.

Now this is vacation Bible school week. This is one of the most exciting weeks of the year because we will probably have no more energy on our campus this year than we will this week. Okay. It's vacation Bible school. It gives kids the right to be kids and adults the right to be kids all at the same time. It's a lot of fun, but you know, times have changed since I was in vacation Bible school as a kid. We have technology and videos and apps on our phone. I'm going to take a survey. I don't normally do this, but this could be a little fun. I'm going to ask for a physical response. I want you to think back, now not everybody had the privilege, but if you attended vacation Bible school when you were a kid, at least once, maybe you're visiting grandparents, maybe you're in your own, whatever, you attended vacation Bible school, you could possibly include Sunday school in this, if you were ever taught a story from the life of Jesus with a flannel board, raise your hand. Oh yeah. Now some of these young people are going, "A flannel what? Do you wear that hunting? What is that?" A flannel board was a piece of fabric that was hung over an easel and we took pictures of biblical scenes that the flannel that would stick to it and we moved Jesus and the apostles. But I want you to think about flannel board Jesus. He healed people that were sick. Flannel board Jesus took food and he multiplied it. Flannel board Jesus, he walked across water. This stuff in Revelation, they didn't include that in the packet in the flannel board. The flannel board packet doesn't include the seven seals. No. There's no, the mark of the beast, I never saw that in a flannel board kit.

The reason that it's important is because one of the things in the book of Revelation that can cause the most discomfort for you is that this isn't the Jesus that you learned about in vacation Bible school. Same Jesus, different purpose. He came the first time to seek and to save that which was lost. When he comes back the second time, he's coming to pour out the wrath of God on those who will not repent. In fact, there was a bumper sticker years ago, you may have seen it somewhere. It says, "Jesus is coming back and, boy, is he mad."

That's the image that we have, so much so, notice in verse 17, this is John the apostle. This is the one who sat next to him at supper. This is the one who, by the way, when he was being crucified, he was the only apostle on the scene. This was one of the ones who ran to the empty tomb and according to the Bible, because it was him that wrote it, he beat Peter there. Typical man. "I won that race." That's what he said. He knew Jesus better than anybody. What happens when he sees this Jesus? He falls at his feet. This wasn't the Jesus walking on water. This wasn't even the Jesus raising from the dead. This was a Jesus like he had never seen before and the Jesus the world has never seen before.

Which leads to the final point, the parallel. When you're reading through the book of Revelation, when you're studying the contents, there is going to be a tendency to question, "Where do I fit in this equation? Where's my story? Where do I cross thread? Where do I intersect? When this happens, am I a part of that? Is that a part of my life? Am I just observing?" And there's a lot of questions that naturally come because we're going to read a lot of things that we may or may not be familiar with; they could at times be less clear than others, and so I want you to hear from the very beginning, as you're reading through what we know as the book of Revelation, your life, my life as children of

God, our parallel is the person of John. I want you to pay close attention to not only who John is, but what he experiences because he's a picture of you and I as the body of Christ.

And the first thing we notice in verse 9 is this, he experienced persecution. Now we expect to hear that. In fact, for 2,000 years, biblical Christianity has experienced some level of persecution, some more intense than others. There have been untold millions that have lost their life because they would not renounce the person of Jesus Christ. But John's experience is very much a parallel of you and I today, at least in the 21st century Western civilization. Thirty years earlier, there was a guy named Nero. Nero liked to burn Christians at the stake. He liked to publicly flay them for all to see. But Domitian, he was a little more sophisticated. So what did he do to John? He silenced him. He put him on the island of Patmos. He stuck him where nobody could hear him. Do you not see a parallel in our context today? All voices, all opinions, all perspectives are welcome to the table except biblical Christianity. There is the goal of our culture to silence the message. I daresay that not already, but the days are coming where those who preach and speak the name of Jesus and they preach the Bible as it should be preached, their programs, for lack of better terms, may not be allowed to be broadcasted when others are. Their books may be burned when others are not. It's called the silencing of the messenger. But he wasn't just silenced, he was marginalized. I mean, they stuck him in the middle of nowhere. They literally put him on a deserted island and said, "Fend for yourself." Has not our culture already begun the marginalization of Christianity? In other words, we want it as far from "Main Street" as possible. In fact, if the culture had their way, they would shove us off the cliff like they tried to do Jesus in Luke 4.

Guess what? What happened in John's life is happening in yours. This desire to silence, this desire to marginalize, but I want you to notice his priorities in verse 9. It says, "I'm your brother," not I'm your apostle, not I'm your preacher. "I'm your brother and companion in tribulation in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ. I was in the isle that's called Patmos," listen to this, "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus." You know what John's priority was? And this is needs to be a parallel in our life, not just what he experienced, but his priority was the word of God. Listen, we live in a world today that at this very moment, the agenda of this world is loud and it is proud, and that was a pun, by the way. It is vocal. It is numerous. And it is vicious at times. And you know what they're trying to convince you is to compromise the word of God. They're trying to convince you to not stand so firm on your convictions of what you believe. You know what the Apostle John did? He said, "You know what? You can shove me all the way to the isle of Patmos, I'm never going to shut up about what is true." Our priority should not be to bend at the loudest voices or to break at the most threatening voices, but to say, "I love you in spite of it, but I cannot and I will not defer from what God has said." Now it may push us to Patmos, but at least we'd all be there together nonetheless. But his priorities were on the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Last but not least, John serves for us as a very prophetic figure. What I mean by that is, again, let me repeat myself, you're going to read through Revelation, we're going to study through the book of Revelation, and there is going to be some parts of this book of the Bible where it's going to sound a whole lot like yesterday's newspaper headline, there's

going to be some parts that make us a little uncomfortable, there's going to be some parts that at times need some clarification, and so where are we in all of this? Well, John serves in a very prophetic manner because I believe that we're going to see throughout our study that as you see John, you see the church.

Allow me to explain. The Apostle John, he sees what we would call the end of the age. He sees the seven seals opened up. He sees the trumpets. He sees the vials. He sees the mark of the beast. He sees the Antichrist, the false prophet. He sees death, destruction, disease, famine, economic collapse. He sees it all. But you know what? He never personally experiences it. Isn't that interesting? All the judgments, all the wrath, he observes it, he views it, he records it, but he never has to "walk through it." Here's what's interesting: we're reading through the book of Revelation, it talks about these seven churches, we'll address that in subsequent weeks, and then in chapter 4, it says that all of a sudden he heard a voice behind him as a trumpet and what did that voice say? "Come up here." Y'all remember our study of 1 Thessalonians 4, there's coming a day where the voice of God is the trumpet of God, where the dead in Christ and alive in Christ are all caught up to be with him? It says he is caught up. Here's what's interesting: all the stuff that the book of Revelation is famous for, Antichrist, mark of the beast, judgment, death, disease, all that stuff, you know where John is when it happens? He's in the throne room of God. He's in the presence of Jesus Christ himself. He sees it. He witnesses it. He observes it. He records it. But he never actually personally experiences it.

Did I mention that this is a book of comfort? That in all that stuff, it's known of but not experienced, and then when all that stuff ends in chapter 19, heaven opens up. Jesus comes back and guess who's with him? John. In other words, he is a parallel. He is prophetic for us. Did he experience some hard times? Absolutely. He's on the island of Patmos. Did he experience persecution? They tried to marginalize him and ultimately he died on the island. He experienced difficulty, struggles, heartache, and persecution but there's one thing that he personally never experienced, the wrath of God was never personally approached toward him because as a child of God, we've been saved from the wrath of God.

Now do you see why in verse 17 he fell at his feet as if dead? As I conclude, that's the posture that we should take. When we read through this book of the Bible, as we see some things that we may or may not be familiar with, may we consistently fall at his feet and realize that he is the one who's in charge. He is the one who has paid the price for our sins. He is the one that raised from the dead. And he is the one that is coming back again. The posture that we must take is the same one that John did. He is our parallel. May we fall at his feet as if we are dead.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. Maybe today, whether you're seated here in person, maybe you're watching online or listening on the radio, maybe you're one of those individuals that say, "You know what? I've never fallen at the feet of Jesus." Maybe today's that day where the Spirit of God took the word of God and as that sharper than any two-edged sword, it did a surgical procedure on your heart. You realize not only your rebellion against God, but your need for Jesus. The Bible says in Romans 10:13,



whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It doesn't say whoever joins a church. It doesn't say whoever starts doing this and stops doing that. It doesn't say whoever checks off a box or crosses a T. It doesn't even say whoever becomes a Baptist. It just says whoever calls on the name of the Lord. Maybe today's that day the Spirit of God made it so clear that it's your time to call on the name of the Lord. It's not about the exact words that you would use. It's not about repeating what I or somebody else might have you to say. This is a heart's cry. This is your prayer. This is you falling at the feet of Jesus as if dead, confessing your sin and your need for Jesus. Maybe your calling out would go something like this, "God, today, I'm owning, I'm confessing what you already know. I've got a sin problem. I've rebelled against you. I've rejected your word, your way, and your will for my life. And according to your Bible, it says the wages of my sin is death. I don't just believe it, God, I own it and I deserve it. But your word also says, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So God today, I believe. I believe that Jesus is the only answer to my sin problem. God, I believe that just like we talked about today, that he loved me so much that he came on my behalf. He lived a sinless life on my behalf. And God, when he went to that cross, he was bearing the pain and the punishment of my sin. And God, today I believe that when Jesus Christ rose from the grave, he made it possible, he made it feasible for my sin to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers to all the problems of this old world, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. 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 your head still bowed, your eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today who cried out for the very first time. In a moment I'm going to pray for us, we're going to stand and sing, and we want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We'd love the privilege of not only having a conversation with you, but praying with and praying for you. Maybe today you say, "Well, pastor, I already got that covered." But maybe you're like one of the six individuals on our campus today who need to follow in believers' baptism. We'd love to talk about that. Or the many others who on a regular basis talk to us about becoming a part of this incredible body of believers. Or maybe today, you say, "You know what? I'm just, just struggling, just walking through some things. I need somebody to pray with me. I need somebody to pray for me." We want you to know that we have a team, we have a room set aside, whatever the situation, whatever the scenario.

*Lord Jesus, as we come to this time in our service, God, thank you, thank you that according to Isaiah the prophet, your arm of mercy is so much longer than our transgression. God, thank you today we can be forgiven, we can be saved, we can be redeemed, we can be restored. Thank you, God, today that your voice should reign above all others. May we respond to you and you alone. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

If you would stand with me as Bruce leads us, whatever decision, we'll be right here at the front.