

# THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

## Revelation 1:1-3

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips  
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, August 12, 2012

---

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place (Rev. 1:1).

**O**n November 27, 1989, the day when Communism fell in Czechoslovakia, a Methodist church in the capital city of Prague erected a sign. For decades, the church had been forbidden any publicity, but with the winds of freedom blowing the Christians posted three words which summarized not only the New Testament in general but the book of Revelation in particular: “The Lamb Wins.” Their point was not that Christ had unexpectedly gained victory but that he had been reigning in triumph all along. Richard Bewes explains: “Christ is *always* the winner. He was winning, even when the church seemed to lie crushed under the apparatus of totalitarian rule. Now at least it could be proclaimed!”<sup>1</sup>

Given its message, Revelation may best be understood by those who are lowly in the world. A group of seminary students were playing basketball when they noticed the janitor reading a book in the corner. Seeing it was the Bible, they asked what part he was reading. “Revelation,” he answered. Hearing this, the young scholars thought they would try to help the poor soul make sense of so complicated a book. “Do you understand what you are reading?” they asked. “Yes!” he said. When they smugly inquired for his interpretation, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bewes, *The Lamb Wins: A Guided Tour Through the Book of Revelation* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 9.

lesser-educated but better-informed man answered: “Jesus is gonna win!”<sup>2</sup>

Not everyone in church history has shared this positive view about understanding Revelation. Martin Luther was so dismayed by the book that in the preface to his German translation, he argued for its removal from the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, the famed 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, exclaimed, “If I only know what to do with Revelation!”<sup>4</sup> Barth’s confusion over this book is shared by many Christians today, especially in light of the bewildering interpretations made popular in Christian literature. Ambrose Bierce thus spoke for many when he defined Revelation as a “famous book in which St. John the divine concealed all that he knew.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet the opening words of the book should lead us in the opposite direction. Revelation 1:1 begins, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” This is a book, therefore, the purpose of which is to reveal. God gave it, verse one adds, “to show to his servants the things that must soon take place,” and “made it known” to his servant John. It does not sound like Revelation is intended to conceal or confuse, since it reveals, shows, and makes things known.

We begin by finding that Revelation is a message from the triune God through John to seven churches in Asia. Before the salutation that begins in verse 4, John penned a prologue which provides four vital pieces of information that will help us understand this book. According to the opening verses, Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy, an historical letter, a gospel testimony, and a means of blessing for God’s needy people. In light of this blessing, John Stott comments: “This last book of the Bible has been valued by the people of God in every generation and has brought its challenge and its comfort to thousands. We would therefore be foolish to neglect it.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St. John,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35: *Word and Sacrament*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 398-399.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bewes, *The Lamb Wins*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1997), 13.

<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*: , 10.

## AN APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY

The word translated as “revelation” is *apocalypse* (Greek, *apokalupsis*), which is why this book is sometimes known as the Apocalypse of John. The word means the unveiling of something hidden. It might be used of a sculpture that had been covered with a cloth, which now is pulled away. Or it might be used of a grand building whose façade was covered by scaffolding, but now with the scaffolding removed the glory of the architecture is seen. The apostle Paul used this word describe Jesus’ Second Coming (2 Thess. 1:7). The book of Revelation will also say much about Christ’s return, yet its panorama is broader than merely the final days of history. Revelation is, more accurately, an “unveiling of the plan of God for the history of the world, especially of the Church.”<sup>7</sup>

The word *apocalyptic* describes a kind of ancient literature, the name of which derives from this first verse of Revelation. Apocalypses became common during Israel’s exile in Babylon, continuing through the inter-testamental period and into the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The Bible books of Daniel and Ezekiel are examples, and Revelation draws heavily from both. Apocalyptic books usually feature an angel who presents dramatic visions to portray the clash between good and evil. These books employ vivid symbols, including symbolic numbers, to depict the spiritual reality unfolding behind the scenes of history. An apocalypse usually contains the message that “God is going to burst into history in a dramatic and unexpected way, despite all appearances that God’s people are facing oppression and defeat.”<sup>8</sup> While there are differences between Revelation and other apocalyptic books, it fits the basic description of the literary genre.

Realizing the kind of book that Revelation is will greatly influence our approach to studying it. Some Christians seek to uphold a high view of Scripture by insisting that it always be interpreted literally. When applied to Revelation, this rule breeds only confusion. It is true that John literally received the visions recorded in Revelation, but the visions consisted of symbols that must be interpreted not literally but rather symbolically. This is true of the fantastic imagery in

---

<sup>7</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940, 1967), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Wilmschurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 12.

Revelation, such as the dragon and his beasts, and of symbolic numbers like 7, 1000, and 666. When we are reading the Bible's historical books, like Samuel or Acts, we will normally take the plain, literal meaning unless there is compelling reason to interpret a passage otherwise. In studying Revelation this approach should be reversed: we will interpret visions symbolically unless there is a good reason to take a passage literally. This is not to say that the visions do not depict real events, whether in John's time or the future, but that the events are symbolically rather than literally presented in Revelation.

Revelation is not only an apocalypse but should also be understood as a book of biblical prophecy. This is how John mainly describes his book: after using the term *apocalypse* in the first verse, he five times identifies the book as a *prophecy*, starting with verse 3: "the words of this prophecy." We usually think of prophecy as foretelling distant events, but the main job of a prophet was to give a message from the Lord that demands an obedient response. James Boice comments: "Prophets speak to the present, in light of what is soon to come, and they call for repentance, faith and changes in lifestyle."<sup>9</sup> It is in this respect that Revelation differs from other apocalyptic writings, since it speaks not only of far-off events but also of those which were soon to break upon the readers. John wrote about "things that must soon take place," urging that "the time is near" (Rev. 1:1, 3). This was not just a way of saying that things, though really distant, should seem near but rather that God was revealing challenges that were immediately before his readers. It is for this reason that Revelation is considered an *apocalyptic prophecy*. While taking an apocalyptic form, it delivers a prophetic message that is directly relevant to its original readers, as well as to Christians of all times.

As a prophecy, Revelation is best understood in connection with the vision of Daniel 2, which foretold a series of four earthly kingdoms – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome – that would rise up in succession, only to be destroyed in the days when "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed" (Dan. 2:44). Daniel 2:28 says that he is revealing "what will be in the latter days." The Greek translation of that verse used *apocalypse* for God revealing. In using the same language, John mimics Daniel 2:28, except that he says that the reign of Christ which Daniel foretold "in

---

<sup>9</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 4.

the latter days” now “must soon take place” (Rev. 1:1). This is all the more poignant when we realize that Daniel prophesied Christ’s kingdom to arise during the fourth worldly kingdom, the very Roman empire under which John lived (Dan. 2:44). The divine kingdom that Daniel prophesied from afar, John prophesied as now happening. This shows that the book of Revelation is not focused merely on the final years before Jesus returns but on the entire church age, the reign of Christ, which began during Daniel’s fourth kingdom with his resurrection and ascension into heaven, and continues until Christ’s return.

In developing and expanding Daniel’s vision of how the kingdom of Christ overcomes the kingdoms of this world, Revelation is organized into seven parallel sections, seven being the number of completion. Each section highlights a portion of the story as the drama advances to the final climax. This drama involves a sequence that was going to happen in John’s time, that recurs through the church age, and that will take concentrated form in the final days before Christ’s return.

Fairy tales begin their story of a fantasy world by saying, “Once upon a time.” In this book, John gives a visionary prophecy of the true story of the world we are living in, beginning, “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1). His visionary prophecy tells us the most important truths about our world. First, he tells us that Jesus Christ, who reigns above, has his church on earth. Did you know that Jesus is in the midst of his church, a bridegroom seeking the love of his bride, as the vision shows him standing amidst the seven lampstands? Did you also know the truth that the world is a dangerous place with enemies opposed to Christ and his beloved? Christ’s bride, the church, is beset by a dragon, which depicts Satan, who is served by horrible, ravenous beasts, a harlot Babylon, and followers who bear the mark of the beast. What will happen to Christ’s bride, the church, with such deadly foes intent on her harm? Revelation’s answer is that God will defend his people, judging his enemies and sending Jesus with a double-edged sword to slay those who persecute his bride. In succession, Christ defeats his enemies, starting with the two beasts and then the harlot Babylon, and finally casting Satan and his followers into the lake of fire. After Christ has come to rescue his bride, Revelation’s true story of our world ends with the church living happily ever after in the glory of the royal heavenly city, awakening to

life forever in the embrace of her beautiful, loving, conquering Prince. (You see, by the way, why fairy tales are popular, since they often tell the story of salvation that our hearts long to be true!)

The prophetic unveiling of this history is the message of Revelation. Revelation does not primarily intend to present mysterious clues about the Second Coming. To be sure, as Revelation advances it narrows its focus on the return of Christ, which brings final victory. But *the message of Revelation is God's government of history to redeem his purified and persecuted church through the victory of Christ his Son.* For this reason, Revelation does not speak merely to the generation in which it was written or to a future generation when Christ returns. Rather, William Hendriksen explains, "the book reveals the principles of divine moral government which are constantly operating, so that, whatever age we happen to live in, we can see God's hand in history, and His mighty arm protecting us and giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ..., [so that we are] edified and comforted."<sup>10</sup>

## AN HISTORICAL LETTER

A second feature for us to realize is that Revelation is an historical letter that is grounded firmly in the times in which it was given. It begins with the customary letter format in verses 4-5, giving the name of the writer and the recipients together with a greeting, and also ends as a letter (Rev. 22:8-21). This is why it is appropriate for Revelation to appear at the end of the New Testament epistles. Michael Wilcock writes: "It is in fact the last and grandest of those letters. As comprehensive as Romans, as lofty as Ephesians, as practical as James or Philemon, this 'Letter to the Asians' is as relevant to the modern world as any of them."<sup>11</sup>

Revelation is traditionally understood as having been written by the apostle John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, during the time of his exile on the island of Patmos. Some scholars have argued that another John may have written this book, but the testimony in favor of the apostle is impressive. Most noteworthy are the statements of the early church fathers in support of the apostle's authorship. These witnesses include 2<sup>nd</sup> century writers such as Justin Martyr (100-165), Melito of Sardis

---

<sup>10</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 42-3.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 28.

(c. 165), who was bishop of one of the churches to which John wrote, and Iraneus (c. 180), who also hailed from Sardis and knew Polycarp of Smyrna, who was a personal disciple of the apostle John. It has therefore been claimed that no other New Testament book “has a stronger or earlier tradition about its authorship than Revelation.”<sup>12</sup>

Equally as important is the date of Revelation’s writing. The strong consensus among evangelical scholars holds that John wrote Revelation during the last years of the emperor Domitian’s reign, probably in 95 A.D. This dating agrees with the early church tradition through Iranaeus, who said it was given “not a very long time since, but almost in our own day, toward the end of Domitian’s reign.”<sup>13</sup>

There are some scholars who argue instead that Revelation was written much earlier, prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Most who hold this view argue that Revelation does not look forward to the return of Christ but only prophesies Jerusalem’s destruction. Important to this argument is the assignment of the symbolic number 666 to the mad emperor Nero, who first persecuted Christians in Rome.

There are important reasons, along with Iranaeus’ testimony, to give Revelation the later date of 95 A.D. First, the persecution described in Revelation involves the beast’s demand for worship, which corresponds not to Nero’s but to Domitian’s reign. Second, while there was no empire-wide persecution in Domitian’s reign, there is evidence that severe persecution took place in the province of Asia, where the churches of Revelation were located, whereas there was no persecution in Asia during Nero’s reign. Finally, the description of the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 fits the circumstances of the later date; indeed, at least one of the churches, Smyrna, may not have existed during the earlier period of Nero’s persecution.<sup>14</sup>

When we realize that Revelation was an historical letter, we see the error of those interpreters in the so-called *futurist* school, who view most of Revelation as speaking only about events yet to take place. As a real letter to real ancient people, the meaning of Revelation had to be relevant and accessible to the original audience. Hendriksen

---

<sup>12</sup> Cited from D.A. Carson, et al, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), which gives a full exploration of Revelation’s authorship in pages 468-473.

<sup>13</sup> *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I, pp. 416.

<sup>14</sup> For a full discussion of the dating of Revelation, see G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4-27.

writes: “The Apocalypse has as its immediate purpose the strengthening of the wavering hearts of the persecuted believers of the first century AD... True, this book has a message for today, but we shall never be able to understand ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ of today unless we first of all study the specific needs and circumstances of the seven churches of ‘Asia’ as they existed in the first century.”<sup>15</sup>

## A GOSPEL TESTIMONY

**A** third feature of Revelation is that this book is the Word of God bearing a gospel testimony to Christ: “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” (Rev. 1:1-2). Although John the apostle was the writer of Revelation, the message came not from him but from God, through Jesus Christ.

The description of how Revelation was transmitted gives us insight into the process known as *inspiration*, that is, the way God used human writers to give a divine message. Many Bible books contain a message God gave immediately to the prophetic writer, who passed it on to other believers. Here, God the Father gave a revelation to Jesus Christ, who in turn sent an angel to show it to his servant John, so that John could write down the message for the servants of Christ in the seven churches. The obvious import of this progression is that Revelation does not consist of a message that originated in the imagination or experience of John himself. Moreover, the idea of Jesus as the Mediator of divine grace is reinforced from the book’s beginning.

The implications of the divine origin of Revelation are significant. First, since God is perfect in all things, his revealed Word is inerrant and true in all that it teaches. As God’s Word, Revelation’s claims are reverently to be believed, all of its promises are joyfully to be trusted, and all its commands are urgently to be obeyed. Moreover, since God is the ultimate author not only of Revelation but also of the entire Bible, there is a unity and harmony between this book and the rest of Scripture. This means that we can interpret difficult portions of Revelation by comparison with clearer teachings elsewhere. Indeed,

---

<sup>15</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 44.



since the images of Revelation are derived from earlier prophetic writings, the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture is especially important when it comes to this book.

Revelation is not only God's Word but John specifies it as "the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:2). Most commentators limit this statement to mean that Revelation is Jesus' testimony to his church. But it is also true that Revelation is a testimony about Jesus as the Lord and Savior who is sufficient to the needs of his people. It is in this sense that Revelation is a gospel testimony. Martin Luther complained about Revelation that "Christ is neither taught nor known in it."<sup>16</sup> How wrong this is! Indeed, it is Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, who in Revelation woos the church as his bride (1:9-3:28). Revelation proceeds to present Christ as the sovereign over the councils of God for history, the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the seals of God's scroll, thus receiving the worship of heaven (4:1-5:14). Revelation concludes with the conquering Christ, whose sword cuts down his enemies (19:11-21), who sits on the throne of God's judgment in the last day (20:11-15), and in whose blessing the church, Christ's radiant bride, now delivered from all the trials of this world, dwells in the light of God's presence forever (21:1-22:21). This is why over and over in Revelation, the angels and worshipers above break out in praise to Jesus. We, too, should respond to Revelation, in the words of Fanny Crosby: "Praise him! praise him! Jesus our blessed Redeemer! / Sing, O earth, his wonderful love proclaim! / Hail him! Hail him! highest archangels in glory / strength and honor give to his holy name!"<sup>17</sup>

This history presented in Revelation is nothing less than *gospel*: the good news of Christ reigning over history to save his church. Seeing this belies the idea that the gospel is only for those who are yet to be saved. Revelation is not primarily an evangelistic book; its intended audience is not the unbelieving world facing divine judgment but the beleaguered church looking to Christ for relief. To be sure, Revelation is evangelistic – the book even concludes with an invitation to receive the free gift of salvation (22:17) – but its gospel message is primarily given to needy believers, who Christ calls to courageous faithfulness in light of his gospel reign.

---

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, 35:399.

<sup>17</sup> Fanny J. Crosby, "Praise Him! Praise Him!" 1869.

## A MEANS OF BLESSING

Finally, like the Bible in general, Revelation is a means of divine blessing for those who read, hear, and keep its message. John concludes his prologue with this invitation: “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” (Rev. 1:3). Since the God who originated this book is still the God who reigns over all with wisdom and power, those who read and believe Revelation will be supernaturally blessed even today.

John specifies blessing, first, on “the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy.” The order of the churches listed in Revelation 2-3 follows the path a messenger would take from city to city. This suggests that John intended the letter to go from one to the next so that it could be read aloud in each congregation. In a time of persecution, this action required courage and a strong devotion to Jesus, for which the reader was sure to be blessed by God. Moreover, just as many of Revelation’s visions take place largely amidst the worship of heaven, so was its reading an act of worship on earth. David Chilton writes: “By showing us how God’s will is done in heavenly worship, St. John reveals how the Church is to perform His will on earth.”<sup>18</sup>

God’s blessing was furthermore given to “those who hear,” and specifically to those “who keep what is written in it” (Rev. 1:3). To keep the book of Revelation is to treasure its message and obey the commands of Christ given in it. This connects with John’s description of his readers as God’s “servants” (Rev. 1:1). Literally, the word *doulos* means “slave.” The point is that true believers are those who accept the obligation of obeying God’s commands, and who not only give outward agreement to the Bible but also confirm it in the faithfulness of their lives. These servants, as these alone, are blessed by God through the grace that comes through his Word.

The urgency of receiving Revelation is made clear by the final words of John’s prologue: “for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). One of the lamentable tendencies in the study of Revelation is to believe that it focuses only on the return of Christ to end history. Under this reasoning, many if not most sermons on Revelation conclude with the question, “Are you ready for Jesus’ coming?” It is true that

<sup>18</sup> David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 54.

Revelation foretells a great event that Christians must face. But that great event is not the Second Coming, at least not first of all. Rather, the event that in Revelation's view is soon to arrive is the persecution of the Christian church by the blood-thirsty world. To be sure, Christ's coming is near – either through the help he gives us now or in his final coming to end all history – but John's appeal to the urgency of his writing pertains to the obedience of his church to the commands and promises of Christ in the face of violent worldly persecution.

Every Christian can be blessed now, John says, though facing persecution and beset with weakness and sin, by hearing and keeping the saving testimony of the Bible. We are blessed in our trials by God's Word. I earlier compared Revelation to fairy tales, like *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, which lift up the hearts of crying children. It is for this same reason that God gave the revelation of Jesus Christ to his servant John for the churches of Asia. In this respect, Revelation presents the same message as given by Paul at the end of Romans 8. It is true, Paul says, that Christians in this life are "as sheep to be slaughtered." Yet when through faith we enter the glorious kingdom of Christ's resurrection power, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Receiving in Revelation the good news that "The Lamb Wins," we are blessed above all other blessings to be persuaded that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:37-39).