

The Book Of Revelation

*3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy,
and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.
(Revelation 1:3. NRSV)*

*5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'
Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'
(Revelation 21:5. NRSV)*

Message 1

Revelation 1:1-20

October 2nd, 2011

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good evening! I want to spend a few minutes talking through the shape and structure of our intended course of study and then a few moments providing some background content that will be helpful for us as we open what is to many of us a strange text indeed. In terms of format, we will begin each night with some worship and then I will teach for about 50-60 minutes. We will then 10-20 minutes for Q & A. It is very important that you arrive on time and you will get the most benefit from this process if you have read the chapter of Scripture ahead of time and if you have read the accompanying commentary in one of the resources we have suggested for purchase. The two best commentaries on the Book of Revelation, from my perspective, are by Leon Morris and William Hendriksen. I've also listed a third option by Beasley-Murray and there are a few others out there that are well worth having also. If you commit to those two disciplines you will find yourself far ahead of those who simply come and sit and our conversation will be able to operate at a deeper level as we go forward. I had originally intended to cover the whole book in these 9 weeks we have together but I've decided that if we attempted to do so we would be forced into unhelpful brevity and so I have decided that we will think of this as Part 1 and there will be a Part 2 either in the spring or summer. Are there any questions about the structure of this group and our intended course of study?

Essential Background:

The first thing I think we need to discuss is the whole issue of genre. Anyone who has read their Bible through understands that the Scriptures are not written in a consistent genre. There are historical books, there are books of law, there are books of poetry, there are books of prophecy, there are Gospels, there are letters and there are what scholars refer to as apocalyptic books. The Book of Daniel in the Old Testament is so called. Then there are books which are mainly one thing, but contain sections of another thing. So for example, the Book of Zechariah would mostly be considered a prophetic book but it contains several sections of apocalyptic. Likewise the Book of Judges would be considered historical in genre but it contains sections of poetry such as Jotham's Fable. The point is, we need to be capable of handling different genres in different ways. The genre that most Christians, particularly Evangelical Christians living in the post enlightenment western world, struggle with is this one of apocalyptic. There is a bit of history to our particular difficulty.

In the 1920's the Evangelical church began a bitter battle against higher criticism and liberalism. They fought to maintain a high view of Biblical authority and they used words and phrases like: "verbal plenary inerrancy". What they meant by that is that the words of the Bible are literally true and entirely true; and I suspect that most of us in this room would say a hearty amen to that. The problem is that the word "literal" can mean various things and it is not always synonymous with the sort of authority and accuracy that the users intended. The long and the short of it is that sometimes, people wishing to espouse a high view of Biblical authority and accuracy mistakenly think that the only truly Christian way to interpret a text is to interpret it in the most LITERAL way. But the Bible clearly indicates that this is not always the case. Let me provide a couple of examples. Do you remember Jesus once warned his disciples: "Beware the yeast of the Pharisees"? How did the disciples interpret that warning? They thought he was rebuking them for forgetting to bring bread. They took him too literally. He actually meant beware the creeping influence of the Pharisees which LIKE yeast can take over your whole mindset and worldview. He was speaking in a symbolic way. Or think of the trial of Jesus. The Sanhedrin was looking for witnesses to bring forth testimony that they could use against Jesus and they finally found two witnesses who could agree on a charge. Do you remember what the charge was? They said: "This fellow said that he would destroy our temple and then build it up again in three days." They were recalling the teaching of Jesus in John 2:19 but again they were taking him too literally. Jesus did not mean that he was going to knock down the temple in Jerusalem and then

put on his mason apron and build it up again in three days, he meant that he was going to completely upend the form of religion and institute a new way of worship centred entirely upon his person and that he would do it through his death and resurrection accomplished over three days. He was speaking in a symbol laden way. Or consider the Lord's Supper. The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks he broke it saying..... "This is my body which is broken for you, do this in remembrance of me." Our Catholic friends teach that what Jesus meant there was that every time you take the communion wafer into your mouth it miraculously becomes the literal body of Christ in your stomach. They call this "transubstantiation". Martin Luther called it a superfluous miracle and one of the aims of the Protestant Reformation was to correct this EXCESSIVELY LITERAL interpretation of Scripture. Jesus was speaking in symbolic language, to recognise that is not to diminish the authority of the text, the text is always most authoritative when you correctly understand it and correctly understanding it means having a sense of literary genre. How is the author speaking here? What did he originally mean to communicate?

This becomes incredibly important when we begin to study the Book of Revelation. For example, in Revelation 12 we have a vision, a "portent" of a great dragon kneeling between the legs of a woman in labour so that he might devour the child as it comes forth from her womb. Now are we to be excessively literalistic and suppose that when Mary was giving birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, poor old Joseph was fending off an actual dragon with his carpentry tools? No of course not. It is a symbol. It is an apocalyptic way of saying that as the Messiah was being born into the world the devil was conceiving plots to devour and destroy him. That is what the symbol means to communicate and we give the text the most respect and the most authority when we interpret it according to its genre. Does that make sense?

So let's talk a little bit about the apocalyptic genre. The first word in the Book of Revelation is the Greek word *apokalupsis* and it can mean "the disclosure", "the revelation" or even "the coming". The correct title for the book is actually "The Apocalypse of John" but in modern English the word "Apocalypse" has come to be synonymous with "disaster" because the Book of Revelation reads as one disaster after another, but the word actually means "the disclosure". As I mentioned before, the Book of Daniel is largely written in apocalyptic genre and it spawned a huge number of imitations in what we refer to as the intertestamental period. The time between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of John the Baptist. By the time the Apostle John

wrote this book, around the year AD 90, the genre of apocalyptic was very well known within Jewish circles. There was a language, a symbol code almost that first and second century readers would have been very familiar with and it would not have seemed as strange to them as it does to us.

The best way of thinking about this genre if you are new to the term, is to think in terms of “dream interpretation”. After all, almost all apocalyptic writings are presented as dreams or visions. The dreams or visions usually involve an angelic presenter, which as we shall soon see is very common in John’s Apocalypse. Think of it like this. Imagine that John falls asleep and an angel comes and takes him on a tour of a museum filled with strange paintings and he presents and sometimes interprets these paintings. That is a decent analogy. John has a vision, falls into a trance and he sees things that are often interpreted or presented by an angel as having symbolic meanings. Now remember that in the Bible God frequently REVEALS things through symbol laden dreams. If you want to learn the language of the apocalyptic genre, you could do worse than to study all of the interpreted dreams in the Bible – and there are many. Think for example of the dreams that Joseph interprets. A baker has a dream about cake boxes and birds. Now does Joseph say: “Tomorrow you will try and carry cake boxes on your head and birds will come and eat the cakes?” No, that would be an excessively LITERAL approach. Instead he says the three boxes are three days and in three days Pharaoh will cut off your head and the birds will eat your flesh. Pharaoh has a dream about fat and sleek cows – do you remember what these SYMBOLS mean? Seven good years of harvest and seven lean years. Reading these dreams and their interpretations is actually good practice for dealing with the apocalyptic.

We also have to remember that these apocalyptic dreams or paintings if you prefer are painted with colours borrowed from the pallet of the Old Testament. There are over 400 allusions to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation and if you try and interpret Revelation without having read Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah, Jeremiah and Daniel you will make a mess and spawn a heresy. Apocalyptic visions are like dreams where all the characters are imported from the Old Testament and they carry with them all of their attached content and meaning as they enter the drama. Does that make sense?

Alright, let’s open the text and begin to read. We will read the entire first chapter tonight and by God’s grace, we will divide it as we go.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place;

Let's stop there. Clearly then, the central focus of the Book of Revelation is Jesus Christ – he is the main topic. The word used which we've mentioned already is the Greek word *apokalupsis* and it means 'disclosure', 'revelation' and also 'coming'. So this book we are about to read has as its aim to DISCLOSE Christ – to reveal the full truth of who he is. In the Gospels we met him as the lamb of our salvation, now we will see that he is also the Lion of Judah and the Judge of the World. The secondary meaning of the word – 'coming' – also suggests that the climax of the book is the Second Coming and indeed that will be born out as we read along.

Notice also the "soon". This revelation concerns things that will begin happening soon. This is the Greek phrase *en takhei* and it means "in a brief span of time" or "shortly". Now this is incredibly important! Some people imagine that the Book of Revelation was given in AD 90 and that it has lain essentially useless until our day. They attempt to interpret all of the pictures and images as relating to events that appear to be drawing near in OUR DAY. But that would mean that when the people read it in John's day these things weren't going to be happening for at least 2000 years which is a bit of a strange meaning for the word "shortly". What we have to understand is that John believed that all of what he was seeing was to begin happening SHORTLY and indeed, I think that is the correct way of understanding these things. William Hendriksen in More Than Conquerors introduces a useful term he coined called "Progressive Parallelism". What he means by that is that these various visions are not meant to be interpreted chronologically, meaning one after the other as though the vision in chapter 13 comes chronologically after the one in chapter 12. They are meant to be seen as parallel or overlapping. Think of it this way: imagine that all of the various visions are painted on transparency slides. You lay one on the projector and it paints a picture. Then you lay another one on top of that and it ADDS DETAIL. Perhaps it emphasises an episode of the story that received no mention at all in the first vision. Then you lay another on and another until finally, once they are all overlapped onto the projector, you have a relatively full sense of the story. Do you see? Now imagine, switching metaphors slightly, that these visions are painted on canvas and that the canvases are all stretched out between two frames: on the left there is the ascension of Christ, on the right there is the return of Christ. These become the two main time indicators that help you locate and

interpret the visions. And that seems to be exactly what is going on. All of the visions seem to cover the time period between the ascension of Jesus and his second coming and if you don't understand that you will make a hash of your chronology. Have you ever tried to read Revelation through while trying to construct a rational chronology in your mind? You feel like you are making progress until things seem to start repeating. You think you've reached the end of your chronology because everyone is dead, the world is in ruins, the Lord is on his throne and eternity is about to begin and then it seems like we go back around for more and our head starts to spin. That is because we are reading in sequence when we are meant to be reading in parallel! If I took all the overheads off of the projector and laid them out in a linear sequence on the floor, NO DISCERNABLE COHERENT NARRATIVE WOULD EMERGE! But if I overlay them, then we get a rational picture.

So, John is telling us that these things will begin presently – presently to his readers who live immediately after the ascension of Jesus.

he made it known **by sending his angel** ...

Remember that angelic facilitators or museum tour guides if you will are a common feature in apocalyptic literature.

to his servant John, ²who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he **saw**.

So these are VISUAL representations of deep historical, theological realities. We are dealing in WORD PICTURES.

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

This is the first of seven beatitudes in the Book of Revelation and it states that a blessing is upon the reading of this book and commentators agree that “public reading” is meant, indeed that was the only possible meaning in those days, so as we sit here tonight publically reading and expositing this text, know that you are under God's promised blessing.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Now let's notice that this book was originally addressed to seven churches in Asia, or what we would today call Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. We'll talk about these cities specifically next week but for now it is enough for us to understand that these writings are now rooted in a specific moment in space time history. Again, these are real churches in the first century and for John to write to them a bunch of prophecies that wouldn't have any relevance to them for 2000 years would be an act of pastoral cruelty. That is not what is going on. John is writing to these churches, several of which were already undergoing persecutions, timely AND TIMELESS truths about Jesus Christ, his nature and his coming. To use the language of progressive parallelism, he is firmly anchoring his disclosure against the left side of the frame: the present day – his present day. He will stretch his disclosure all the way over to the right side – the second coming – but everything he is saying is rooted in and anchored to his present day. That is absolutely critical to understand.

We have no idea why these seven churches are singled out; there were more than 7 churches in Asia Minor at this time and so we are left to wonder at the symbolism of these 7. It is clear that John meant for this book to be read in more than these 7 churches and it is clear that indeed it was read far more broadly than in just these 7, so why are these particular churches addressed? Several answers are POSSIBLE. One answer often suggested is that these churches had within them the specific problems and situations that John wished to address with his both timely and timeless message. Meaning, if John wanted to say something that was immediately relevant and yet had a deeper, more timeless meaning he would have to be somewhat selective. That is possible. Another answer given is that 7 was a typically symbolic number, that it represented Divine Completeness and so it was a way of John saying that while his message is for immediate attention, it will be true in all churches for all time. That is also possible. A third answer that is suggested is that if you were to visit the 7 churches in the order they are listed you would travel in a circle, thus representing the completeness and eternity of the disclosure. Again, also possible. We can't be sure; those all may be correct or none of them may be correct, we can't say for sure.

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Remember that the Book of Revelation is fundamentally a disclosure of Jesus Christ. Here we are told that he is the faithful witness – who can speak of the things of heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, as Jesus said in John 3 to Nicodemus. And now this one has gone back into heaven and sent this revelation to those waiting for his return. He speaks of what he knows!

And he is the firstborn of the new creation and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Now this is very important. John was writing to people who were just beginning to suffer severe persecution at the hands of the Romans. The persecution of Nero was in the rear view mirror but terrible days were just ahead. They will suffer much from the hand of human kings. But John reminds them that they live their lives in the hands of the King of Kings! Jesus Christ is Sovereign over history!

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

We will not be able to point out all of the Old Testament allusions in this book but we will try and note the most significant ones. Here in verse 6 John is alluding to Exodus 19 where God forms his people and calls them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. John here states that through Christ this program has been expanded beyond ethnic Israel and is now rooted in the cross work of Jesus and all who share in his blood share in the kingdom and are commissioned as priests serving God the Father. The Apostle Paul picks this up in Romans 12:1, Peter picks it up also and the Protestant Reformation made much of this. We are a kingdom and a priesthood not a kingdom with a priesthood. Praise the Lord. John continues:

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
So it is to be. Amen.

Here John paints a picture of the end – to use our language of progressive parallelism, he establishes now the right hand frame of reference for all of these overlapping slides: the second coming. He paints with colours taken from two Old Testament Scriptures, Daniel 7 and Zechariah 12. In Daniel 7:13-14 the Bible says:

¹³As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
¹⁴To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14. NRSV)

John also borrows colour and symbol from Zechariah 12 which says:

¹⁰“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for *his* only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. (Zechariah 12:10. NKJV)

So John is saying: “What I am about to unfold for you culminates in the Coming of the Lord Jesus! This story ends with him sitting on the throne of power, judging the nations and inaugurating his eternal kingdom. And that final day will be a day of vindication when every eye shall see Jesus as he is, even the eyes of those who put him to death”.

8 ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Here John makes it very clear that Jesus, the Son of Man, is one and the same with the Alpha and Omega, the Almighty God. This is part of what is being disclosed in John’s Apocalypse. Let me just say a quick word about this term: ‘the Almighty’. John uses it 9 times in his Apocalypse, the rest of the NT uses it only once. The word is *pantokratore* and it means ‘over all ruling’, or ‘dominion over all things’. It is a word that stresses the all encompassing sovereignty of God. Jesus is in control of all things in all times and in all places, John is saying.

9 I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Verse 9 is absolutely fascinating! Look at how John talks about the experience of being in Christ. He says: “I am with you in Christ. I share with you the kingdom of persecution and patient endurance.” Do you see that? The Greek reads literally: “I am gathered together with you into tribulation, kingdom and patient endurance IN JESUS.” This whole Jesus thing, in other

words is characterised by tribulation and waiting on this side of the second coming. Then the tables will flip and it will be a joyous reign with God on the earth, but for now it is the kingdom of pain and patience. Not exactly your best life now!

John says that for him this kingdom of pain and patience takes its particular form as imprisonment on the Isle of Patmos. John is the only one of the disciples of Jesus who was not executed for the Lord. History seems to hint that John had some important relatives who may have been able to work some influence such that he was imprisoned rather than executed. So as a consolation prize he was sent to a slave labour prison on Patmos, where he says:

¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, 'Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.'

The phrase "in the spirit" likely means he fell into some sort of trance state, similar to the state Peter was in when he had his vision in Acts 10:10. It happened on the Lord's Day which does not mean it happened in church, John was in prison on a tiny island and it is unlikely he had Christian company. He was probably in a cave, by himself, reading the Scriptures and praying when he fell into a trance on the day of Christian worship. As a side note, those who suggest that the Sabbath is on Saturday and that we should be keeping the Jewish Sabbath should take note of the several places within the NT that speak of Christian worship being repositioned to the FIRST day of the week in honour of the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and began a new work. John goes on to say:

¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters.

The vision is here presented in colours borrowed again from Daniel 7 which says:

⁹ As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.

¹⁰ A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousand served him,

and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgement,
and the books were opened. (Daniel 7:9-10. NRSV)

This is Daniel's vision of the heavenly throne and the final reckoning and the vision John receives is painted in these shades. The lampstands represent obvious temple imagery. The lamp in the temple represented the presence of God among the people and the light represented the witness of God's people to the nations. As for the appearance of Jesus, white head and hair likely symbolise purity and wisdom, the robe and sash show Jesus as both royal and priestly, his eyes are all seeing and penetrate to the truth of the matter, his feet are like bronze refined in the fire because he has walked the realm of men and proven his worth and holiness and his voice is like the many waters because it is the voice and glory of God. Here the vision is given in colours taken from Ezekiel 43 which says:

²And there, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his glory. (Ezekiel 43:2. NRSV)

This is an apocalyptic way of saying: "When you hear the words of Jesus you are hearing the voice of Almighty God – you are standing in the glory and you are basking in his presence, praise the Lord!"

¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

The seven stars are the seven angels of the churches, and here it is clear that what is meant is that Jesus is personally communicating with the churches and he holds the state of their revelation in his hands. He is the one mediator between heaven and earth and he controls what we hear and what help we are given. The fact that they are held in his right hand indicates he is disposed toward the churches in grace and favour and sustaining them with his strength.

From his mouth comes a sharp, two edged sword and points to his readiness to take sharp, decisive action towards all of those opposed to his word and will. He will cut off the rebellious and chasten the wayward. His face is dazzling because he is the light and he is powerful beyond bearing.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

The presence of God is overpowering and John falls down as though dead. This recalls how Daniel fell deathly ill after his vision of God. The presence of God is so holy, so powerful that it must be heavily veiled while we inhabit bodies of sin and death. But the Lord placed a healing hand upon John and spoke healing words. They are words meant for more than John, they are meant for the churches about to enter persecution and they are meant for the people of God always in the face of trial and tribulation. He says: “I am the first and the last and the living one”. I am God, says Jesus! I have conquered death! And if you are in me and I am in you, then so will you. For I have the keys of death and hell and nothing of mine can be locked in that place.”

¹⁹Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.

We see again that we are talking about things that have present value as well as future value.

²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (NRSV)

Here Jesus completes our work of interpretation. We already mentioned that the stars represent angels – which they generally do in Apocalyptic literature, and now Jesus tells us that the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

As we close, let’s pull back from the tree level, back from our analysis of the paint on these pictures and look at the canvas as a whole. What does the vision mean to say? It means to say the following:

- God is on the throne.
- Jesus is ruling in heaven as King and as our Perfect High Priest.
- History is not spiralling out of control! Things are unfolding according to Divine Plan.
- Jesus is in the midst of the churches.
- He is speaking to them and he is present to help.
- He is testing them and refining them by the sending forth of his Living Word!
- He is well acquainted with our trials because he has walked where we will walk.

- He knows all, sees all and he will not be fooled by the false and the fakers. He sees to the heart of the matter and penetrates deep into the mind of man.
- He watches you as you pass through the trials of life and death and if you belong to him you will surely not be left to perish in hell and Hades. He will set you free unto eternal life there to reign with him forever.

That is the message of this first vision and if the book ended here we would have strength enough for the days that lie ahead. But thanks be to God there is more and it gets better. Let me pray for us and then we can have some Q and A.