

The Lord of the Rings is an epic fantasy story from the creative mind of English author and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien – a story that is set in the land called “Middle Earth” – a place like Earth, but at some time in the distant past.

In the story, the land of Middle Earth is threatened by the power of an evil overlord, and it can only be saved by the daring deeds of a few hobbits. Now, if you don’t know what hobbits are, they are halflings, about half the size of normal people which is odd because they eat seven meals a day. They walk around barefooted, and they dress in bright colors. Hobbits like a quiet and peaceful life, typically shy in nature, but, if need be, they have great courage.

So, four of these little hobbits are on a quest to save Middle Earth, and unknown to them, they are helped on their quest by the true king of Middle Earth working undercover. The hobbits only know him as “Strider” – the humble ranger, who wanders the land homeless and seemingly friendless.

In the great climactic battle at the end of the age, good is surrounded by evil until at the last moment, Frodo, the main hobbit, performs a heroic deed and destroys a magical ring. Then, darkness turns to light, and Strider is revealed as “Aragorn” the King of Middle Earth.

In an odd way, the creation of this fantasy story suggests that Tolkien knew the true King of kings. It is told that Tolkien was a believer and he was instrumental in leading his friend C.S. Lewis to Christ. Tolkien knew that human history is all about a very real, yet unseen battle between good and evil, and he knew that one day the true King would be revealed in all His splendor and glory.

The book of Revelation is the divinely inspired drama of good engulfed by evil until good prevails at the end and the real King – Jesus is revealed. What Tolkien presented as a fantasy – the Bible presents as a reality.

This morning we are beginning our sermon series through the book of Revelation, so if you have your Bible, turn to the first chapter of the last book – **Revelation 1**, and we will begin with **verse 1**.

¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

The first chapter of Revelation is a greeting and it serves as the introduction to the entire book, and I use the word “book” only because that is what we commonly

call it. Actually, it's a letter, a very long letter, written to seven real churches in Asia Minor – what we would refer to today as Turkey, who faced intense persecution by the Roman government and they were under extreme pressure to compromise.

It is a letter. Just like Ephesians is a letter – just like Galatians is a letter, this is a letter to seven churches who needed encouragement to endure and to never give up. They were churches who needed to be challenged to live godly lives in an ungodly world, and they were churches who needed hope for tomorrow – for the future. They needed to know that in spite of their present reality – God is still on the throne, Christ will return just as He promised, He will be victorious, good will triumph over evil, and in the end, it will all be worth it for those who overcome. That's the message to these churches and that's the message to us as well.

Now, the key to this chapter is found in the first part of **verse 1** which reads – **The Revelation of Jesus Christ**. The word “**revelation**” comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis* which is where we get our English word *apocalypse*, and that might lead us to think that the word “**revelation**” automatically pertains to a catastrophe – something terrible is going to happen, but that's not necessarily the case. This Greek word for “**revelation**” *apokalupsis* simply means *to disclose, to reveal*. It gives us the picture of taking a top off a box to see what's inside it or to pull back the curtain to see what's behind it. That's the picture here.

It's **the revelation of Jesus Christ**, and that phrase is where the title of the book comes from. It's not the revelation of John as some translations may read, and it's not the book of Revelations. It's not plural, it's a single revelation. It's the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and that seems to have a two-fold meaning.

First, it's the unveiling, the revealing of Jesus – the uncovering of the truth about Him that was previously unknown and hidden to us. As we work our way through this book, we're going to learn things about Jesus that we wouldn't know if it weren't for this book, and that brings up an important point.

As we study this book, if we get a better understanding of the tribulation period – that's awesome. If we get a clearer picture of the Anti-Christ and the False Prophet, that's okay too. If we become more informed about the mark of the beast or the battle of Armageddon – that's great, but if we don't get a better understanding and a deeper love for Jesus Christ, then we've missed something.

If we get a clearer picture of everything else, but miss Jesus in this book, then we miss the book of Revelation. This is the revelation of Jesus Christ – and although we will cover a lot of wild and crazy stuff later on – He is the object of this book.

Now secondly, this revelation belongs to Jesus. In this book, Jesus unveils, He uncovers hidden mysteries that were only possessed by Him. These mysteries uniquely belong to Jesus, and He is pleased to reveal these mysteries to His servants – His followers.

So, Jesus is the object of this revelation and He is also the source of this revelation. It is from Him and it is about Him, and we need to keep that in mind so we don't go running off on rabbit trails.

Now, I also want you to notice the flow of this revelation in **verse 1**.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John.

It starts with God the Father, it's given to the Son, then it is communicated by an angel to John. That's the flow we see, and that flow will give us some clarity later on in the chapter, which we will get to next week.

So, who is this, John? This is the Apostle John who was the brother of James. If you remember, amongst the twelve original disciples of Jesus, John was part of inner circle along with his brother and Peter. John wrote the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, and now he is putting pen to paper in Revelation. At the writing of this letter, likely around 95–96 A.D., John was about 90–100 years old, and he is probably the last surviving apostle, now banished to the island of Patmos, and we will talk more about that next week as well.

Let me say something before we press on. Two times I have told you we will look at something next week. We are in this book for the long haul, and some of you may be chomping at the bit to get to the wild and crazy stuff contained in this book. **“When does the rapture occur?” “What's that 666 all about?” “What's up with the locust coming out of a pit that act like scorpions?”** We will get to all that stuff when we get there, but we can't rush this. Since this is a letter, we need to start at the beginning like we would any other letter, so be patient.

Now back to **verse 1**. If you notice, we are told that the things revealed to us **must soon take place**, and there are a couple of ways to interpret that phrase. It is true

Peter tells us that with God, “*a thousand years is only a day,*” so from a heavenly perspective, this book was only written for us less than two days ago, but there is another way to interpret the phrase which I think is more helpful. It can also be taken to mean “*quickly or suddenly coming to pass*” expressing the idea that the things and the events revealed to John may not necessarily come as soon as they were given to him, but rather when they do come, it will be quick in nature. Hopefully, that makes sense.

Okay, let’s move to **verse 3** where we are told,

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

The book begins with a blessing and it ends with a blessing. In **Chapter 22 verse 7** we read, “**Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.**” It is the only book in the Bible that begins and ends with a promise of blessing to the one who reads it, to the one who hears it – suggesting it is meant to be read aloud, and the one who keeps it – who takes it to heart.

From **verse 3**, we are told that the book of Revelation is not only a letter, but it’s also **prophecy** which has a two-fold meaning. First, we should think of it as the forth-telling of God – in other words “*Thus says the Lord*” meaning “*Now hear this, I have spoken it – it’s going to happen just as I planned.*” It’s the forth-telling of God, and secondly, we should think of it as fore-telling of God – where God is telling us what happens next. So, this prophecy refers to both direction and prediction of what happens next.

And speaking of what happens next, in this book, John writes down what he hears and sees in a chronological sequential order; however, the actual events may not always be in a chronological sequential order. In other words, it’s not so much what happens next, but what is revealed to John next – what he hears and sees next. For example, in **Revelation 12**, beginning with **verse 1** we are told,

¹A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; ²and she was pregnant and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. ³Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven crowns. ⁴And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and hurled them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her Child.

So, this is in **Chapter 12**, well into the book of Revelation, but this sign that John sees is something that occurred way back in the past when Jesus was born into this world and King Herod wanted to kill Him. I only bring this up to make the point that what John hears and sees and what we read is not necessarily chronological and sequential in order. It's given to us as it is revealed to John – as he hears and sees it, and that can create some confusion for us as we navigate through this book. So, we need to be careful.

Now back to the **Chapter 1**, beginning with **verse 4**. It reads,

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood— ⁶and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

As I already stated, this letter is written to seven churches in Asia Minor, and we will talk about them in a couple of weeks. These are real churches, probably on the same postal route, but because only seven churches are mentioned here – for there could be more in the area, it is suggested that they may also represent all churches, at all times, worldwide, because the number seven represents fullness or completeness. There are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. In this book, seven is an important number.

And, this brings up a good point. Although I tend to take the Bible literally until it is clear it is not to be taken literally, I know going into this book that John uses an apocalyptic writing style with lots of signs and numbers, odd looking creatures, and various colors. There is a lot of symbolism using Old Testament imagery in this book, and it comes across like a drama created by Jesus with numerous scenes and props and characters in different costumes that can change their appearance at a moment's notice, and John is getting all of this and then describing it for his readers. John is not interpreting what he hears and sees, he is merely describing what Jesus is revealing to him.

So, there are a lot of symbolism in the book of Revelation, there is a lot of mystery to explore, but as we proceed in this book, I don't want to get caught up on every detail; otherwise, we will be in this book for five years. I don't want to dissect every word or image to seek out some symbolic or hidden meaning. The details

only make up the background of the bigger picture. It is much like viewing an artist's painting of a forest. We view the picture of the forest as a whole. We don't pick out a leaf, or a twig, or a stump of a tree and begin assigning some special hidden meaning to each of them. They are just parts of the whole – and viewed as a whole they make up a beautiful picture, and so, it is with the book of Revelation.

Continuing on with **verse 4**, we are given a very special greeting,

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.

This is a greeting from the Trinity who extend **grace** – the result being **peace**. This greeting is from **Him who is and who was and who is to come** – the Father. This greeting is from the **seven Spirits who are before the throne**, referring to the Holy Spirit – again there is that number seven which represents the seven perfect attributes of the Holy Spirit and the fullness of His work mentioned in **Isaiah 11:2**. And last but not least, this greeting is from **Jesus Christ**.

In **verse 5**, Jesus is described as **the faithful witness** who can be trusted and we can take Him at His word. He is the **firstborn of the dead**, raised to life, never to die again. And we are also told that Jesus is still **the ruler of the kings of the earth**.

We know the kings of this earth come and go, but Jesus remains constant and He continues to rule over them all. This is so important to remember as we make our way through this book, and as we make our way through this life. It may seem chaotic, it may seem out of control, it may seem that evil is getting the upper hand, it may seem the wrong kings are in charge, but God is still on the throne. He still rules and this was important for these churches to understand because they have many years of persecution and struggles ahead of them to endure. They lived during a time when Roman Emperor Domitian who called himself “savior” and “lord,” demanded that he be worshipped as such. Emperor worship was full-blown during this time period, and those who did not worship the emperor – namely Christians, were hated and severely persecuted by the government. These churches needed to know that the Lord God was still in charge, even in their hardship.

John also tells us in **verse 5** that Jesus **loves us and released us from our sins by His blood**. Jesus loves us and has released us from the power and the ultimate consequences of our sin – that being eternal separation from God, by His finished work on the cross. To Him who **loves** us, and I believe this is the only time in the

New Testament where God's love is written to us in the present tense not past tense. Yes, Jesus loved us for He proved it way back when, but He still loves us.

One of the greatest theologians that ever lived, Karl Barth, was asked to be a guest lecturer at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of a captivating closing lecture, the president of the seminary announced that Dr. Barth was not feeling well and was quite tired, and though he thought that Dr. Barth would like to be open for questions, he shouldn't be expected to handle the strain. Then he said, "Therefore, I will ask just one question on behalf of all of us." He turned to the renowned theologian and asked, "Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?"

It was the perfect question for a man who had written literally tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put into print. The students grabbed their pencils and writing tablets, ready to take down verbatim the premier insight of the greatest theologian of their time. Karl Barth closed his tired eyes, and he thought for a minute, and then he half smiled, opened his eyes, and said to the young seminarians, "The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

This might sound really odd, but this last book in the Bible is a love letter from God – a desperate, last ditch, love letter for lost people to turn from their sin and to turn to God. It's a love letter. Now you might ask, "How can that be so, especially during the wrathful time of tribulation?" And my response is: Even during the terrible tribulation period, out of His love, God is giving lost people a small taste of hell on earth to see what it is like so they will repent. God does not want people to go to hell, He loves them, but if they reject Him, if they reject His love, if they reject their Savior – they have sealed their own fate. This is a love letter.

Then we come to **verses 7 and 8**. We are told,

⁷ Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. 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, the theme of the book is given. Jesus is coming back to the earth in glory and all will see Him. The first coming of Jesus could be described as lowly and humble in nature – born in a manger; however, here we are told that when Jesus comes to the earth a second time, it will be in splendor and majesty. Every eye

will see Him, and those who intentionally rejected Christ will realize their terrible mistake as their doom sinks in. They will mourn as they realize it's now too late – they had their chance and they blew it.

John wrote, **“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”** God introduces Himself. He is the beginning, the origin, the source. He is also the end. He is the past, the present and the future. He is first and the last and everything in between.

Throughout this book, God is on the throne and He is inescapable. Don't forget it! During hardship for these churches and for us as well, it is very important to understand that God is still in control – He is the Lord God Almighty and He has a purpose and a plan for the world, for His people – the church, and for you and me.

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