

Chapter One

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, the Ruler of Kings on Earth

(Revelation 1:1-8)



The book of Revelation has one primary and profoundly simple theme or big idea: *God wins!* This remarkable and challenging book explains to us how God rescues and redeems his people, defeats Satan, routs evil, transforms creation, and eventually and eternally dwells among us forever.

I can't conceive of another book of Holy Scripture more relevant to our day. But that isn't because it provides us with a blueprint for events at the end of history. If you think Revelation was given to answer all of your speculative questions about current events and when Jesus might return, you will be sorely disappointed by this commentary. Revelation is in our Bibles to reassure suffering Christians of all ages that God wins. *Its focus is the unimpeachable and irresistible sovereignty of our great Triune God in his determination to bring his people into everlasting joy in the new heavens and new earth.* To the degree that you have been led to think otherwise is indicative of how far removed the church today is from the teaching of Revelation.

The word translated "revelation" is the Greek term *apokalypsis* that means something revealed or disclosed or uncovered or made known or unveiled. The English words "apocalypse" and

“apocalyptic” are surely familiar to you all. And by the way, the title to the book is Revelation (singular), not Revelations (plural).

The author of the book identifies himself four times as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). I personally believe this is the same John who was one of the twelve original apostles and wrote not only the Gospel account that bears his name but also the three shorter epistles we know as First, Second, and Third John.

There have been extensive debates about when the book was written, but most believe that it was composed either in the decade of the 60s in the first century or more likely at the close of that century, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, in approximately the year 95. I am inclined to embrace the latter view.

How Should We Interpret Revelation

The battle over the book of Revelation typically begins with differences over the way in which it should be interpreted. I’ll only briefly mention here the more popular views and take up this matter in more detail when we arrive at the beginning of Chapter 6. Or you can turn to the Introductory Issues where I explain these alternative positions in greater depth.

So, simply stated, some Christians advocate what is called the *Preterist* view of the book. The word “preterist” comes from the Latin word *praeteritus* which means “gone by” or “past”. Proponents of this view contend that the book was written in the decade of the 60s in the first century, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70. Therefore, the major prophecies of Revelation describe events leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem.

By far and away the most popular view of Revelation is the *Futurist* perspective. According to this interpretation, virtually everything from Revelation 6:1 through to the end of Revelation 19 is concerned almost exclusively with what will happen in a seven-year period at the end of history known as the Great Tribulation. In other words, the judgments of God that come in the form of seven seals, trumpets, and bowls describe events that have not yet happened but remain future to all of us.

The so-called *Idealist* view of Revelation contends that the prophecies in this book are not concerned with any specific period, event, or series of events in church history. Rather, its primary purpose is to describe symbolically the conflict of good and evil throughout history and the principles on which God acts at all times. It is a timeless portrayal, therefore, of this ethical struggle.

My view of the book most resembles the idealist view but also includes a mixture of the other perspectives. It doesn't go by any particular name but argues that there are parts of the book that describe events that have already happened in history and are thus in the past, as well as events that are going to happen at some time in the future, in particular the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

But more central to this view is the belief that *Revelation portrays through vivid and often bizarre symbolism the entire course of events throughout the history of the church from the ascension of Jesus Christ all the way to his Second Coming*. In other words, as we will see when we come to Chapter 6 and following, the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are trans-temporal in that they describe the on-going, increasingly intensified conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan at any and all times. These judgments are not reserved for the end of history, immediately preceding the Second Coming. They do, indeed, describe that period of time, but they also portray what has happened in centuries past as well as what is happening today.

How the Heavenly Vision was Communicated

I'll only say a few things about the opening three verses of Chapter 1. The first thing we see is how the visions in this book were communicated to John. Note that it begins with God the Father, who in turn "gave" (v. 1) it to Jesus, God the Son. Jesus then sent "his angel" (v. 1b) to make it "known" to John, who in turn communicated everything to the people of God, in particular the seven churches in Asia Minor (v. 4).

(from) God the Father



(to) Jesus Christ
↓
(to) his angel
↓
(to) his servant John
↓
(to) all his servants

Now, just a brief comment on four things in these opening verses.

First, that to which John bore witness was “the testimony of Jesus” (v. 3). This may be understood in one of two ways: either Jesus is the *object* of the testimony, i.e., it is testimony *about* or *concerning* Jesus, or Jesus is the *subject* of the testimony, i.e., he is its source or origin; he is the one who actually testifies or bears witness. The latter is more likely (cf. 6:9; 11:7; 12:11; 20:4). That to which Jesus testifies or that to which he bears witness is “all” that John “saw,” i.e., the actual contents of the book.

Second, the content of this “testimony” concerns what “must soon take place” (v. 1). Notice at the end of verse 3 we read that “the time is near” (v. 3b). In Revelation 22:7, Jesus says, “*I am coming soon.*” In 22:10, the angel declares that “*the time is near,*” and again in 22:12 Jesus says, “*I am coming soon.*” What do these statements mean?

These statements have become the principal basis for the preterist interpretation of the book. Preterists insist that we should interpret these time indicators literally. Thus, John is saying that the vast majority of events in Revelation are all to transpire within the first century (primarily in the events associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70).

Some say that the words “near,” “shortly,” and “soon” mean that once the appointed time arrives the events will unfold suddenly or will occur rapidly. In other words, the emphasis is on the speedy *manner* of fulfillment. Still others contend that all that is meant is that the events are *certain* to occur.

Some point to 2 Peter 3:8 (“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years”) and argue that John is writing from the divine perspective. What may seem like incessant delay to us is “soon” and “near” for the Lord who views time from a heavenly perspective.

Yet another view is that behind these words is the prophetic principle of *imminence*: i.e., John’s point is that the events could transpire *at any time*, even soon (although there is no way for anyone to know that with certainty; therefore, we must always be ready).

I personally agree with G. K. Beale who contends that John’s words “quickly” (or “soon”) and “near” are a substitute for Daniel’s phrase “in the latter days” (e.g., Dan. 2:28). In other words, Daniel, in the sixth century B.C., referred to events that would occur in some distant future, in a time that he called “the latter days.” John, in the book of Revelation, understands Daniel’s words as applying to his own time. “What Daniel expected to occur in the distant ‘latter days’ – the defeat of cosmic evil and the ushering in of the divine kingdom – John expects to begin ‘quickly,’ in his own generation, if it has not already begun to happen.”¹ John is declaring that prophetic fulfillment has already been inaugurated in his own lifetime, in the first century. But the consummation, however, is yet to come.

We know from numerous texts in the New Testament that the “last days” began with the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father and will extend all the way until the Second Coming of Christ at the close of history. That is why John substitutes the words “soon” and “near” for “the last days” as found in Daniel. His point is that what was future to Daniel is now being fulfilled in John’s day and will continue to unfold and occur until the time of Christ’s return.

It seems as if John’s intent is to bring events which were once in the distant future into the immediate present. In *that* sense, then, “the time is near.” Thus we may translate this phrase, “things which must soon begin to happen.” Again, “as soon as his letter reaches its

1. Beale, *Revelation*, 153.

destination in the churches of Asia, they will be able to say, “These things are happening *now*.”²

Third, we have here in verse 3 the first of seven “beatitudes” or “blessings” in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Why is a blessing pronounced on the person who “reads aloud” the words of the book? Because in the first century only a minority of people were literate and there were no individual or separate copies of Revelation that everyone could personally own. But the important thing to note is the blessing is also pronounced on “those who hear” and “who keep” what is written in it. Owning a copy of Revelation isn’t enough. Merely reading it or even interpreting it correctly isn’t enough. The blessing of God rests upon those who “keep” the things written in it. We “keep” this book when we cherish its every word as God’s word. We “keep” it when we respond appropriately to its teaching, whether that be by believing or by repenting or by worshiping or by obeying its commands.

Contrary to what many have said, although Revelation is difficult, God intends for his people to understand it and to obey it. Revelation was never intended to remain a mystery or to tantalize the intellect or to fuel sensational apocalyptic end-time speculations. It was given to instruct Christians how they should behave in light of the marvelous work of redemption in Christ and God’s ultimate victory over all evil.

Fourth, you will note that in verse 1 we read that God “made it known” what will soon take place. The verb here literally means “to communicate by means of symbols or signs or pictures.” In other words, we are told right from the start that Revelation is a book that contains signs and symbols and figurative language and must be interpreted accordingly. Although everything in Revelation is true, it is rarely literal. It is most often truth communicated through vivid images and pictorial symbols.

2. Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 33. This volume was originally published under the title, *I Saw Heaven Opened*.

The Greeting from the Trinity

The book of Revelation is clearly addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (v. 4a). Asia was a common designation for what is today western Turkey. These seven churches are probably to be viewed as *representative of all the churches* then active on the earth and, by extension, the church universal. We deduce this not only from the use of the number “seven” but also from the fact “that the letters addressed to particular churches in chapters 2–3 are also said at the conclusion of each letter to be addressed to all ‘the churches.’”³

The greeting is unlike anything you or I have ever received from someone writing us a letter. It comes from the Triune God, beginning with the Father. He is described as the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (based on Exodus 3:14 where God is portrayed as “I am who I am”). Some have found in this title a reference to past, present, and future existence. However, the third term is not the future tense of the verb “to be” but the present participle of the verb “to come”, lit., “the one who is coming.” John’s aim is not so much to tell us that God will always exist, although, of course, he will. Rather his point is to remind us that our God is the one who is coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ at the close of history to bring everything to its proper consummation.

The greeting also comes from the Holy Spirit: “the seven spirits who are before his throne.” Four times we read of the “seven Spirits” (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). No, there are not seven Holy Spirits! The number seven in Revelation almost always points to perfection or fullness. So the “seven spirits who are before” the throne is simply a vivid way of saying that the fullness or totality or perfected completeness of the Holy Spirit is at work in our world in conjunction with the other two persons of the Triune Godhead, the Father and the Son.

Finally, the greeting comes from Jesus Christ, the Son: “from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” Let’s consider each of these three descriptive titles of Jesus.

3. Beale, *Revelation*, 187.

First, he is “the faithful witness.” This is a reference to the faithfulness with which Jesus bore witness to his Father. He spoke truthfully of who God is and why he came into this world. That is why we can trust fully in his promises to us. Second, he is “the first-born of the dead.” This phrase is what makes Easter Sunday so directly and personally relevant for all of us. Jesus was the first to be raised from the dead but not the last. The fact that he was raised is God’s assurance to us that we who are in Christ by faith will also one day receive our resurrected and glorified bodies! The idea in the word “first-born” is that of a high, privileged position with great prestige similar to the principle of primogeniture in the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 89:27). The first-born son in a family carried a special rank and privilege in inheritance and succession. This position is Christ’s by virtue of his resurrection from the dead.

Third, he is “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” and that includes Assad of Syria and Kim Jong Un of North Korea, and yes, he is the ruler of every President of the USA as well. Solomon said it with the utmost clarity: “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1). When God’s purpose was to bring the people of Israel back to Jerusalem from their time of exile in Babylon, how did he do it? He “stirred up the spirit” of the pagan, unbelieving king of Persia, Cyrus, “so that he,” Cyrus, “made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing” (Ezra 1:1).

We will see this incredibly wonderful and reassuring truth all through the Revelation, but especially in Chapter 17. There we read how God will make use of the kings of the earth and even the leaders of the corrupt religious system to accomplish his purpose. We read in Revelation 17:17, “for God has put it into their hearts,” that is, into the hearts of the ruling leaders of the pagan kingdoms of the earth, “to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled” (Rev. 17:17).

Today we hear and read and see on every hand the movements and decisions and plans of earthly leaders in their efforts to expand their power and gain new territory. And people tremble in fear.

Do not be afraid, Christian! Do not be afraid. Everything they do, down to the most strategic plans formulated in back rooms under the strictest of secrecy, is all in the hands of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. They are unwittingly doing his will.

It often appears that the entire world reels with one blow after another. In Egypt dozens of Christians are killed when ISIS detonates a bomb on Palm Sunday. Bloody civil wars continually erupt all around the globe. Racial strife plagues our own country. Threats against Israel by Iran and other Muslim countries is a daily fixture. And drug cartels continue to supply a seemingly endless flow of illegal narcotics into various countries. The world, by all external appearances, appears horribly unstable and chaotic and out of control.

The churches in Asia Minor, to whom Revelation was first written, were facing their own fair share of persecution and political turmoil. But John speaks words of unimaginable encouragement to them and to us today.

Jesus Christ is alive from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high, reigning and ruling and exercising absolute sovereignty over all the kings of the earth, all the events in the Middle East and throughout Central and South America, and even in the lunatic plans of North Korea and China and Russia.

Jesus does not approve of their wicked ways, but he irresistibly overrules the sinful acts of evil rulers and makes their sin and their folly a part of his wise plan for history. I cannot fathom how he does this. In the end, I must fall back on the words of Paul in Romans 11:33, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

As “the ruler of the kings on earth” he mysteriously governs and regulates what all earthly kings and presidents do, sometimes restraining them from doing evil, sometimes frustrating their plans, sometimes ordering events so that they might serve his purposes. We can’t figure out how he does it, but do it, he does! Thus, Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:25 that “he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” So don’t just read

the newspaper or scour the internet. Read and reflect with the eyes of faith and confidence in the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all things.

A Doxology for the Son

John can't contain himself. No sooner has he said these three things about Jesus than he explodes in praise of him. This is one of those doxological outbursts where a biblical author erupts with exalted worship of God. Again, John mentions three things.

First, to him who "loves us" be "glory and dominion forever and ever" (v. 5b). This the only place in the New Testament where Christ's love for us is in the present tense. John wants you to know that no matter what you endure, no matter how sorely you may be persecuted, no matter how badly circumstances may turn out for you and me, Jesus always has, does now, and always will love us. No matter what we face, he always has our best interests in view. His heart beats with passion for his people at all times. And how do we know he loves us? What has he done to demonstrate that love? The last phrase in verse 5 tells us.

Second, "he has freed us from our sins by his blood." Here we see two motifs joined: the *love* (motive) of Jesus for his people and his voluntary expression of that love by *freeing* (action) us from our sins. This is an echo of what Paul said in Galatians 2:20 – "And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Again we read in Ephesians 5:2 – "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

If your life is a shambles, if nothing has turned out as you hoped it would, if you are alone and financially destitute and your body suffers from chronic pain or a terminal disease, and all this stirs in your heart the question: "Does he really love me?" ... hear the declaration of John: Yes! He loves you, and you can know this by turning your heart to the concrete, historical, tangible reality of Jesus on a cross for you, shedding his blood for you, and setting you free from death and condemnation.

One more thing to consider here. To say that he has “freed us from our sins by his blood” means that the guilt of our sin that exposes us to divine justice and wrath has been finally and forever removed. We are free from that guilt that puts our souls in eternal jeopardy. And please take note of how this happened. It isn’t because we are physically impressive or because of our good intentions or because of our eloquence, intelligence, or the many promises we have kept. And it certainly isn’t because we are sincere. We are liberated from guilt and divine judgment because our guilt was imputed to Jesus, our judgment fell upon him. His “blood” shed on the cross is what cleanses us from the stain of sin.

Third, Jesus didn’t shed his blood and deliver us from condemnation as an end in itself. He did more than simply save us “from” eternal damnation. His substitutionary death in our place was in order that he might make us “a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.” The language in verse 6a is an unmistakable allusion to Exodus 19:6. There God declares of Israel, “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This high calling and privilege is applied specifically to the church in 1 Peter 2:9 and here again in Revelation 1:6. Note also that what in Exodus was a future announcement (“you *shall* be”) is in Revelation the proclamation of an accomplished fact (“he *has made*”).

It is “to him” that we ascribe “glory and dominion forever and ever.”

His Coming

Make no mistake: although Revelation is primarily about the way in which God proceeds to secure the ultimate victory for himself and us, his people, it is also most assuredly about the blessed hope, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. We see this in verse 7.

Here we see the combination of Daniel 7:13 with Zechariah 12:10 which also appears in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. In the latter texts it refers to the coming of Christ in judgment against Israel in A.D. 70 and his consequent vindication. Here, in a text written subsequent to A.D. 70, it is universalized

(“every eye”) and applied to his final coming at the end of history, the Parousia (see 14:14).

This should not surprise us once we recognize that the pattern of events that transpired in the period A.D. 33–70, leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, functions as a local, microcosmic foreshadowing of the global, macrocosmic events associated with the Parousia and the end of history. The period A.D. 33–70 provides in its principles, (though not necessarily in all particularities), a template against which we are to interpret the period 70–Parousia.

One more thing. We can't be certain about the nature of the “wailing” of the peoples of the earth when he returns. That is to say, we don't know if this is the wailing of repentance as they suddenly realize the truth about the one they have rejected, or the wailing of mere pain and anguish as they suffer the penalty of eternal destruction. It may be both.

His Claim

The words “the Alpha and the Omega” are, of course, the first and last words of the Greek alphabet and are taken from Isaiah where it occurs as a self-designation for God (44:6; 48:12). One could hardly find a more explicit claim to exclusive deity than this. As the first and the last, Jesus is not only claiming equality of nature with the Father but is declaring that he both precedes all things as their Creator and will bring all things to their eschatological consummation. He is the origin and goal of all history.

The title “the Lord God, the Almighty” occurs seven times in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22). A shorter form, “God the Almighty” occurs twice (16:14; 19:15). This is probably a translation of the Old Testament title, “the LORD, the God of hosts” (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:10; Jer. 5:14). The word “almighty” points not so much to God's abstract omnipotence as to his actual providential control and oversight of all things. This is designed to reassure Christians in the first century and in every subsequent century up through our own that God and God alone is in absolute control of the affairs of mankind.

Don't be deceived by appearances or boastful claims or threats of mass destruction. The Lord God Almighty has everything completely in hand. You and I may not be able to decipher his ways or understand why he ordains or allows what he does, but rest assured that nothing is outside his control or can ever threaten his ultimate victory. Simply put, with these words Jesus stakes his claim on every millisecond of human history, from the time of creation to the final consummation. He is the Lord over history. He is sovereign over all nations and their armies and over all peoples and their hearts and over all of nature and its multitude of species.