

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1–8)

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Some of you know that I first met my wife, Kathy, online. We met on Match.com, a dating website. At that time, in September 2003, I was living in Austin, Texas, where I was a graduate student in music. Kathy was living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where she was a legal secretary. We connected online, started chatting (typing out messages to each other over the now-defunct MSN Messenger), and before I long, I thought, “This is crazy. I’m spending up to two hours a day communicating with someone I’ve never met.” So, I decided to come visit her.

During that first weekend of spending time together, one of the things we did was go to the Vancouver Art Gallery, a modern art museum. There were some strange bits of modern art that looked more like piles of garbage, but one striking piece was a 1980s sports car that had writing etched onto the surface. All over the car’s metal body an artist had written very small words. Upon closer inspection, I could see that the words were the entire content of the book of Revelation. The piece of art was appropriately called, “Trans-Am Apocalypse,” by Canadian artist John Scott.¹

The book of Revelation has long had a powerful grip on the imagination of artists. It has influenced musicians. Around the time that I met Kathy, I was listening to Johnny Cash. Toward the end of his life, Johnny Cash had something of a resurgence. One of the songs on the last album released before his death is called “When the Man Comes Around.” It begins and ends with Cash reading some words from Revelation 6, and the song goes on to refer to other parts of the book of Revelation. More famously, the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s *Messiah* is based on passages from Revelation 11 and 19.

Movies have been influenced by the book of Revelation. The title of Ingmar Bergman’s famous movie, *The Seventh Seal*, is based on a passage in Revelation. Surely, you’ve heard of movies with “Armageddon” or “Apocalypse” in the title. Those words come from the book of Revelation. *Pale Rider*, the Clint Eastwood film, owes its title to the book of Revelation. And

¹ <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2016/02/23/raising-the-dead-the-resurrection-of-trans-am-apocalypse-no-3.html>.

Eastwood's character, the Preacher, may be the kind of otherworldly agent of retribution that the book of Revelation seems to describe.

The book of Revelation has inspired many poems, novels, and paintings, too. And its images have made their way into the public consciousness. Even if you are not familiar with this final book of the Bible, you've likely heard of things like the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," the "Mark of the Beast," and the number 666. These things are also found in the pages of Revelation.

The reason why such figures or images have fascinated people is because Revelation is a book about the future. It's a lot more than a book about the future, as we'll see, but it looks forward to a day when history as we know it will come to an end. This age will end, and a new, glorious age will begin. So, the book of Revelation is as much a book about beginnings as it is endings. Still, it does deal with the future. And who doesn't want to know the future? Think about how knowledge of the future could help you today. Those who invest money want to know if a particular stock, commodity, or piece of real estate will increase or decrease in value, and by how much. If exactly one year ago, you invested money in Bitcoin, a cryptocurrency, you would have four times as much money right now. If you knew that a year ago, it would be reasonable to free up as much money as you could to buy as much Bitcoin as you could. If exactly one year ago, you bought shares of Zoom, you could sell it today for five times that value.

Knowing something of the future could change the way that we live now. It could change the decisions that we make. If you worked in the World Trade Center and you knew on September 10, 2001 that the next day planes would crash into the Twin Towers, it would be reasonable not to show up to work the next morning. If you knew certain investments would go up by a lot within a year or a decade, it would be reasonable to invest as much as you could now. And if you knew that one day, God would triumph over all evil, and that one day you would stand in judgment before God, who would decide your eternal destiny, it would be reasonable to do all that you could to know God and understand how you could escape condemnation. And that is what the book of Revelation is about. It's as much about how we live today as it is about what happens in the future.

The book of Revelation is fascinating and strange and hard to understand. And it often either attracts or repels people. Unfortunately, it has attracted a lot of end-times theorists who obsess about whether the book has a code that can be cracked, so that we can know when Jesus

returns. It has attracted many people who write and preach about the book and distort its message. The witty Christian author G. K. Chesterton once said, “though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.”²

Others often steer clear of Revelation. Even brilliant Bible preachers and scholars often fail to teach about it because it is difficult, hard to understand, or controversial. John Calvin, the great theologian of the Protestant Reformation, wrote commentaries on every other book of the Bible, but he claimed not to understand this book. Many good theologians have not written much on the book, perhaps in order to avoid getting sucked into the vortex of end times mania.

The theologian Gerald Bray made this observation about the book of Revelation:

The book of Revelation is in a category all its own and has frequently been misunderstood. One of the real advances in twentieth-century biblical scholarship was its rediscovery of the genre of apocalyptic literature, which has made it easier to interpret the last book of the Bible and to justify its place in the canon. For many centuries, Revelation was either ignored or misunderstood because no one really knew what to do with its rich symbolism.³

Understanding the book of Revelation, and making sense of all its fantastic images, takes a bit of work. Understanding it requires trying to figure out what the original audience would have understood when they first heard it or read it. Understanding this book of the Bible requires knowing the time, place, and culture in which it is written. It requires knowing something of the whole Bible and knowing what it was like to be a Christian in the Roman Empire over nineteen hundred years ago. My goal over the next several months is to help us understand how to read this book. My goal is to help us see why it matters. The book of Revelation is vivid, graphic, provocative, and even shocking. It is meant to wake us up, to inform us that there is more to reality than we can see.

With all that being said, let us start to read this book. We’ll go slowly. Today and next week are just introductions. But introductions are important. They set the tone for what comes next.

Let’s start by reading Revelation 1:1–3:

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to

² Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 29.

³ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 51.

his servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ 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. ⁴

We're told that this is the revelation of Jesus Christ. Note that the book is not called "Revelations." It is one revelation given by Jesus to a man named John, who is communicating to us. Let me start with that idea. This message ultimately finds its source in God, whom we should understand as God the Father. I'll say more about what that means later. God the Father gave this revelation to Jesus, the Son of God, to give to an angel, who gave it to John, who gave it to God's servants. So, the message goes from God to Jesus to an angel to John to Christians.

In a way, this is similar to the way God gave us the Bible. The Bible was given by God through the power of the Holy Spirit, who led certain people to write various books of the Bible over many centuries. These authors, like John, bore witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. In this case, John is telling us that he saw these things, that they came from God through Jesus, by way of an angel. This message is true. It is vital.

That word, "revelation," is a translation of a Greek word, Ἀποκάλυψις, which could also be translated "apocalypse." When we hear "apocalypse" or "apocalyptic," we often think of the end of the world, or at least the end of the world as we know it. But the word literally means an unveiling, or a revealing. And that's what this book is. It's like we have been living in a small part of reality. The rest of reality has been veiled to us, hidden by curtains. And now, God removes that veil and throws back those curtains to reveal much more of reality. Some of this reality concerns the future, but it some of it also deals with the past and the present.

To understand a piece of writing, you must know what kind of writing it is. We read and understand language differently according to what kind of literary genre it is. Genre simply refers to a type or category. And the fact is we understand how to interpret different genres without thinking about it. When we read poetry, or hear poems (often set to music), we understand that poets use images and symbols. A Robert Burns poem begins with these words: "My love is like a red, red rose." That's a simile. He's not saying his love *is* a red rose, but she is *like* a red rose, at least in some sense. But if the poem began, "My love is a red, red rose," we would understand this is a metaphor. It is not to be understood literally. We wouldn't think, "Oh,

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

so your beloved has red petals and thorns!” We would understand that line literarily: the beloved is being described as delicate, or fragrant, or precious, or beautiful. The point is that we don’t read poetry the way we would read a recipe or a technical manual. We expect precision in recipes, in instruction manuals, in scientific journals. When we read letters or emails, we expect some combination of literal language and idiomatic phrases. If someone said, “That joke killed me,” we wouldn’t stop and wonder how a dead person could still write.

If we want to read the book of Revelation and understand it, we should understand that one of its genres is apocalyptic. There are some other passages in the Bible that are apocalyptic, such as the second half of the book of Daniel, found in the Old Testament. Apocalyptic literature contains a lot of symbols that are fantastical and even strange. They are not meant to be taken literally. That doesn’t mean they are any less true. Symbols communicate truth. But, ironically, if we take the symbols literally, we will not understand the true meaning of that expression of truth.

Apocalyptic literature often deals with the future. It often displays events in heaven. It often features a mediator or guide, usually an angel, who leads a person in a dream or vision into that otherworldly realm.

I think that one reason we don’t understand this type of literature well is because we want to take it too literally, or treat it as an allegory, where every single detail in an image must represent something in life. Another reason we don’t understand apocalyptic literature is because we don’t understand that this was a genre of literature written around this time. There are various apocalypses outside of the Bible, like the *Apocalypse of Abraham* or the various books of Enoch. These books, though not God’s word, are similar to Revelation in some ways. Original readers of these texts would have understood them to be highly symbolic.

In this introduction, we also see that the book of Revelation is prophecy. We see that in verse 3. Sometimes, when we think of prophecy, we think of something foretelling the future. But most of the time, prophets were not foretellers, but “forthtellers.” They reminded God’s people of the covenant that God made with them. They reminded God’s people of the terms of that covenant. And they urged people to live according to those terms. In many cases, prophets urged people to turn to God, to stop ignoring God, breaking his commandments, and worshipping other things.

So, this book isn’t just apocalyptic, it’s also prophetic. It is meant to cause us to change the way we live right now. That message had to be meaningful for the first audience, when this

book was written, which was probably around the year 95. And that message is meaningful today. God wants to get our attention. And he says, “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.” We are reading aloud and hearing this prophecy right now. We’re blessed if we hear it, which doesn’t just mean hearing a certain arrangement of vowel and consonant sounds strung together. Hearing in the Bible means listening with the intent of obeying. We’re blessed if we hear it and keep what is written in it. That means that this book has a strong ethical component to it. It’s not a book that should lead us to sit around and try to figure out when Jesus will come to earth to judge the living and the dead. It is meant to get us to live for God—right now.

We’re also told that the time is near. That time could be a reference to Jesus’ return. It was near over nineteen hundred years ago because, in God’s perspective, a long time is but a blink of an eye. To God, a thousand years is like a day (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8). So, Jesus’ coming was near then, and with every day that has passed, it has come nearer. But Jesus’ coming may not be his final coming. When people come to entrust their lives to Jesus, Jesus has come. Every time someone dies, God has judged someone. We die because of sin, our rebellion against God. And even in this life, we will either come to Jesus in faith, so that he comes into our life as Savior, or we reject Jesus and we will know him as Judge. The time to turn to Jesus is now.

Let us continue to read the introduction to this book of Revelation. Let’s read verses 4–8:

⁴ John 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, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. 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’s another thing to know about Revelation: It’s not just an apocalyptic prophecy, but it’s also a letter. It’s a circular letter addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. This isn’t our modern continent of Asia. No, it was a province in what is today known as Turkey. Each of these seven churches is addressed in chapters 2 and 3. The number seven is likely symbolic, just as all the numbers in Revelation seem to be symbolic. The number seven, in the

thought world of the Bible, is a number of fullness or completion. The seven churches represent all kinds of churches. So, while this book might have first been written and sent to these seven churches, this book is for all churches, in all times and places.

And since it's a letter, sometimes it must be read as a letter. It has the typical beginnings of a biblical letter. John writes a message of grace and peace to these churches. We all need grace and peace. We need God's grace to be reconciled to him. We need his gifts of faith and repentance, of strength and perseverance, in order to make it through this life. We also need peace, particularly in a hostile world. John was writing to Christians who were at times persecuted within the Roman Empire. They were certainly a minority, with little power or status. Life as a Christian was hard then. It can be hard now. But John's message, which ultimately comes from God, is supposed to give Christians comfort and assurance as well as a motivation to life for God now.

John says this message is from the one who was, and is, and is to come. Here, this is a reference to God the Father. God sometimes refers to himself as "I am." He exists. He has always existed. He always will exist. Without God, nothing else exists. So, he is sometimes called the ground of being. God knows the past, present, and the future, because all things are according to his plan. And here, he shares some of that knowledge with us.

The message also comes from "the seven spirits." Now, this is a bit odd. We often read of the singular Holy Spirit. This must be a reference to him. Yet he's called the seven spirits. It's a bit odd to refer to him that way, but remember that symbolic number seven and that this message is being sent to seven churches. The Spirit fills all real churches. In fact, he dwells in all real Christians. The complete, perfect Holy Spirit extends to all churches and Christians, communicating God's truth, empowering God's people.

And the message also comes from Jesus, the Son of God. He is called the faithful witness. When Jesus came to earth over two thousand years ago, he faithfully witnessed to the reality of God and his kingdom. He always told the truth. Jesus witnesses to us still through the Bible. Jesus also died to free us from our sins. Only Jesus lived a perfect life, yet Jesus died on the cross in order to satisfy God's righteous demand that crimes must be punished. Jesus died for those who come to trust in him. Those who put their lives in Jesus' hands have their sins removed. They are free from guilt and shame, free from condemnation. Jesus laid down his life for his people because he loves us, as John says in verse 6.

Jesus is also the firstborn from the dead. Firstborn can refer to a literal first in terms of chronology. But it also refers to status. Jesus was indeed the first person who died and back to life in a body that can never die again. We call that the resurrection. Others have died for short periods of time only to be revived, but they would die again. Jesus died and rose in a body that cannot be destroyed. Jesus is the first and greatest of all those resurrected from the grave. All who trust in Jesus will be resurrected and live with him in a perfect world, a world described at the end of this book of Revelation.

So, we see this message comes from God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus. This is a bit of Trinitarian theology. We believe that there is one God, because the Bible says that in both the Old and New Testaments. We also believe there are three persons, called Father, Son, and Spirit, who are God, because the Bible indicates that as well. These are three distinct persons, not one person in three different guises. So, we believe there is one God in three persons, and we call that the Trinity.

John starts his letter with a word of praise to Jesus. Jesus laid down his life for his people because he loves them, and he saves them from sin in order to make them something, a kingdom of priests who reign with Jesus forever. If you're a Christian, you're part of something much larger than yourself. You're a citizen of Jesus' kingdom. And you're a priest. You represent Jesus on earth. You pray for those who don't yet know Jesus. You speak God's word to others. And not only are you a priest, but you are also reigning with Jesus. Jesus is the King. He rules over all the kings, all the presidents, prime ministers, and dictators of the earth, even though they don't recognize it. And though Christians often seem to have a very low status in this world, the truth is that they are little kings and queens. That's an important message of Revelation: In this world, Christians may seem to be very little people, but the reality is that they are people with the greatest status. That's a reality that we can't see, but one God has unveiled for us in this book.

Another reality that is that while we can't see Jesus now, because he is in heaven, he will return to earth some day and all will see him. John says, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him." John is referring to two different Old Testament passages. And that's something to be aware of in this book. It is full of Old Testament references, sometimes subtle ones. One of the major influences on the book of Revelation is that Old Testament book of Daniel. And in Daniel 7, we're told that there is a figure called the Son of Man who comes on the clouds to the

Ancient of Days to receive an everlasting kingdom. We understand that as a reference to the Jesus coming to God the Father, after living, dying, being resurrected from the grave, and ascending to heaven. Jesus, the God-man, receives a kingdom. He has all authority and power. John is reminding us of Jesus' great power, authority, and status. That's important for us to know, since often the world looks as though it is beyond God's control, as if evil so often wins, as if Jesus did not triumph.

But Jesus' coming with the clouds is a reference not just to Jesus receiving a kingdom, but also his coming back to earth to fully establish his kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus will come in power and glory to bring this age to an end, to reward his people and to condemn those who have shrugged their shoulders at him, ignored him, and rejected him. John wants us to live in light of that reality.

John also refers to a passage in Zechariah 12. In that passage, there's a prophecy that says that those who pierced God will look on him and mourn and weep. And, in that context, it appears that they will mourn in genuine, repentant sorrow. So, it seems that John is saying that people from across the globe will come to understand that Jesus was slain for sin. They will genuinely repent, they will feel sorrow for their sin, they will forsake that sin, and they will turn to Jesus. But it is also true that those who rejected Jesus will also see him on that great day. Those who trust in Jesus will willingly bow before him out of respect and honor. Those who have rejected him will bow in terror and fear. They will be crying not because they were sorry that they sinned against God, but because they will be punished by God. All of us should want to be on the right side of Jesus.

John closes this section with a quotation from God. God says that he is the Alpha and Omega. Those are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the original language of Revelation and the New Testament. God is saying he is the A and Z, and everything in between. All things have their origin in God, are sustained by God, and are made for God. Romans 11:36 says that "from him and through him and to him are all things." All things (other than God himself) were created by God, all things continue to exist because of God, and all things were intended for God's purposes. All things are under God's control, even when things seem to be out of control. That's a major lesson to learn from this book of the Bible. And there will be a day when God tears the veil off, when the curtains are removed, when everyone will see that he is real, and that all things were made by, through, and to him.

What is the message that we should learn today? If you not yet a Christian, you need to know that there is more to reality. There is a heaven and a hell, there are angels and demons, and there is a God and the devil, Satan. What we experience is only a small slice of reality. Are you prepared for what lies beyond the veil? Are you ready to meet your Maker? If God were to present to you all the evidence of your failure to love him, your ignoring him and disobeying his commands, how would you do? When you see that you have sinned against God, and that it took nothing less than the death of the God-man to pay for the penalty of sins, do you mourn? My hope is that you would come to know who Jesus is. One way to do that is to continue learning about him from the Bible. Stick with us through this whole sermon series. There is no more important education than learning about God. My hope is also that when you come to understand who God is, and what the problem of humanity is, you would turn to Jesus and ask him to forgive you. Know that if you do that sincerely, he will forgive of everything—everything!—you have ever done. That is good news.

If you a Christian, despite how things look now, know that you are reigning with Christ. You are a priest of the King. Your Lord and Savior loves you and died for you. He has freed you from your sins. He wants you to keep the words of this book, to live right now with the end in mind. Though things may seem like they are depressing, though things seem like they are outside of God's control, they are not. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end. He knows the end and everything that happens before the end. He is telling us that he triumphs over evil. You may suffer now, but you will be exalted just as Jesus was exalted when he rose from the grave. Continue to trust in God, and hang on.