

Revelation – Part 1

Behold, He is coming with the clouds

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Today we will begin a 9-week series through the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. Why Revelation? Isn't that book impossible to understand? We are only doing the first three chapters, and they are much easier. Let me be the first to admit that I do not understand it all. At times, the meaning is very clear, and at other times it is hard to grasp. At other times it feels like a coded message. I don't have all the answers, but I think I can begin to help you. If you've ever thought how strange the book of Revelation is and how difficult it is to understand, you're in good company. Hundreds of years after it was written, some Christian leaders did not think that it deserved to be in the New Testament, because they did not understand it. Those Christian leaders were not Jews, and they had no idea what to do with Revelation.

Revelation is a rare kind of Jewish literature. One that exists nowhere outside of Jewish writings. People who study literature understand that there are many types of writings: poetry, plays, letters, novels, proverbs, songs, historical narrative, and hundreds of other kinds of writings. Each of these should be understood and interpreted in their own way. You cannot apply the words of a proverb in the same way as you would a code of laws. They are different and need to be understood differently.

The book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature. There are many examples of this in the Bible itself, as well as many outside the Bible. Parts of Daniel, Zachariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel use this style of writing. John, in the book of Revelation, is the only person to use it the way he does. To understand the book of Revelation, you need to understand the characteristics of this kind of writing as it does not exist today, nor is there anything close to it. When you do, it is much easier to understand.

I am going to share three very helpful tips. First, **apocalyptic literature is from a heavenly perspective**. In other words, it is trying to give you God's view of history and of what is happening. For example, according to God's perspective, the time is near. But what does that mean to a God who lives outside of time? It means that he can say that the time is near, and 2,000 years later he still has not come. "Near" to the eternal God is not "near" to you and me. It is a heavenly perspective. The heavenly perspective describes angels as causing the different events that are

happening, not natural laws or science. The heavenly perspective shows decisions and actions taking place in the heavenly courts, not on earth between government leaders. The heavenly perspective describes things in very black and white contrasts, not in the gray we see it in. Either you are good or bad, either you are in or out; either you were in God's people, or you were marked outside of God's people. But there is nobody in the middle. This is how Revelation allows us to see like God sees.

Second, **apocalyptic literature is symbolic**. Numbers are round instead of exact, many of them are divisions of 12 or 7, which are symbolic, and the places like Babylon and Egypt are figurative, representing oppressive nations in the lives of God's people by comparing them to Israel's past enemies. The key to interpreting the symbols is understanding the symbols in the Old Testament. Of the 404 verses in the book of Revelation, 278 of those verses contain some sort of allusion or reference to the Old Testament. In those 278 verses, there are 505 different mentions of the Old Testament. Without an understanding of the history and prophecy of the Old Testament, Revelation would be impossible to understand.

Finally, **apocalyptic writing is difficult to understand**, and some scholars think that this is on purpose, which forces us to be very humble in our interpretation. Today, we will begin by just taking a look at the first eight verses of Revelation. I believe we can learn three valuable lessons for our lives as we try to understand the meaning of the book.

1. God's word prepares us for his coming. (V. 1-3)
2. To persevere, we must remember who God is and who we are in him. (V. 4-6).
3. Be ready, because Jesus will surely return. (V. 7-8)

1. God's word prepares us for his coming

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 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.

The book begins by stating that it is a revelation of Jesus Christ. In the Greek language, "of" and "from" are the exact same word. So is this the revelation of Jesus Christ, in other words, is this a book revealing to us the person of Jesus? Or is it a revelation from Jesus Christ, meaning coming from the person of Jesus? This book is both a revelation helping us to see Jesus in all of his glory and, at the same time, a revelation coming from Jesus the Son of God. I hope that as we learn about Jesus, you see how amazing he is. He is alive, and He is reigning over the church and the world. John makes it clear that this book is scripture, the very word of God, and not some science fiction novel. The book of Revelation comes from God himself. That is why there is a blessing that accompanies this prophecy.

Verse three is helpful when we want to understand the idea of prophecy. What is prophecy really like? Prophecy in the Bible always has two aspects. The first aspect is that prophecy is future-focused. Revelation is a book of prophecy, and the time is near, as is mentioned in verses 1 and 3. There is no doubt the Revelation reveals God's plan for the future. The second aspect of prophecy is for us now:

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.”

It is a blessing now to those who read it, hear it, and do what it says. So, this prophecy is both telling the future and guiding us on how to live now. All prophecy is this way. For example, imagine that we lived on an island that was big enough to have jobs, schools and supermarkets and all of the modern conveniences. Now imagine that you knew that, in two years, the entire island will disappear into the ocean. How would that affect the way you live today? Would you invest in buying a home? Would you prepare to leave? What would you do? That is what Jesus wants us to know. Without faith, people live for this world, and they miss out on the blessings of God. The blessing mentioned in verse three is not magical, like wearing a lucky charm. It is a blessing by revealing God's plans and therefore helping us as his people to live in the light of those plans. A billion years from now, in the presence of God, what will you wish you would have done with your life on earth? Right now, the earth's future feels uncertain, but the reality of the future promised by God is always absolute. I am not saying you should all be Pastors or missionaries. I am saying that whatever God has given you, whatever that he has placed in your hands, do it the best you can. Love God more than the world. This book reminds us that nothing on earth lasts. But the love of God endures forever. Jesus can never be taken away from you. The Holy Spirit will never abandon you. Invest in your future that cannot be taken away. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

2. To persevere, we must remember who God is and who we are in him

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.

There are too many details in the text to stop and explain everything. I will explain the meaning and then pick a few details to highlight and apply to us. John is writing this to real people in seven real churches in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. This is a letter. You can see that by the traditional greetings. *“Grace to you and peace”* is a Christian greeting and also the desire of God's heart. All the believers throughout the history of the church will need God's grace and peace to endure for Jesus in this world. The grace and peace come from the Trinity: God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God the Father is described as the one *“who is and who was and who is to come.”* Parents, do you want to be able to answer your kids when they ask you who made God? The answer is clear. He has no maker, because he is the one who is and who was and who is to come. That means he has always existed.

“The seven spirits who are before his throne” are a reference to the Holy Spirit. Seven is the number of completion or perfection. It is a symbolic way to express the many ministries and dimensions of the Holy Spirit, and may be a reference to the way the Holy Spirit inhabits the seven churches in Asia, and so it speaks to the way he can be in us all at once. Jesus is also described as *“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.”* Jesus faithfully witnessed to God even though it cost him his life. He is the firstborn of the dead. Being the firstborn

has nothing to do with birth. As New Testament scholar Thomas Schreiner says, "*Firstborn* in Hebrew culture designated privilege and rule, as formalized in the practice of primogeniture." In Psalm 89:27, God says to David, the youngest son of his family, "*And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.*" How can the last born be the firstborn? It is possible because David is the firstborn metaphorically, not the first physically born son of Jesse. That means Jesus is the greatest. How great is he? Let's compare Psalm 89:27 with Revelation 1:5 and see:

Psalm 89:27 – *Firstborn. The highest of the kings of the earth.*

Revelation 1:5 – *Firstborn of the dead. And the ruler of kings on earth.*

This comparison between David and Jesus shows us how much greater Jesus is. David is the firstborn of the living only. Jesus is the firstborn of the living (on earth) and even of the dead. David was the highest of the kings of the earth at his time. Jesus, because he resurrected never to die, not only is the highest ruler today; he is the highest ruler of any who has ever lived. This is a way to say that Jesus is the supreme authority over every person and place. He does not tell us this only to amaze us in the greatness of Jesus. He tells us this to remind us that this same amazing Jesus has done things for us!

"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."

Jesus loves us. Jesus has freed us from sin by his blood. Jesus has made one nation and one people from all nations and races. There is only one people of God and one Kingdom. His kingdom is spiritual and holy, and we are all priests. Let stop and think about the idea that we are priests to God. Did you know that God's desire for Israel was to make them a kingdom of priests? Look at Exodus 19:5-6: "*Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*"

God wanted Israel to mediate between him and all the other nations. Are you a priest? Do you think of yourself as a priest? What image comes to your mind when you think of a priest? May I take a moment and give you a new image? Priests were mediators between God and people. Have you ever translated for someone? That is a kind of mediation. I am sure you have had an experience of translating something. Maybe it was for a family member. Language translation is complicated. Maybe you were not translating language, maybe you were explaining your culture to someone else. What a priest does serve as the bridge between God and people. He prays for them. He serves God in all that he does. He explains God to people. This is what we do as God's people today. We are a kingdom of translators, we are the bridges to Jesus, and we are ambassadors.

It is not easy to do. One time, I was translating for a Pastor who got excited and raised his Bible and hit me in the face with it on stage in front of a lot of people. Sometimes translating can hurt. Sometimes being God's mediators on earth can hurt emotionally or physically. Sometimes people do not care about what God says, and they take it out on us. But we are the people of love. We turn the other cheek. Jesus' kingdom does not grow through the sword or violence. It grows as more people join as priests. Being a part of Jesus kingdom as priests to God has nothing to do with clothes or rituals. We dress the same as always because our clothes do not determine our role, nor does a title given by men.

The leaders of the early Christian church were never called priests. That did not begin to happen until about 250 years after Jesus died. The original leaders were called Shepherds (Pastors), Overseers, or Elders. In a sense, there are only a few people who shepherd the congregation, but every Christian is a priest. Over time, the idea that there was only a particular group that served God as priests led to the creation of secular and sacred jobs. But that is not what the Bible says. The original people who broke away from the Catholic Church, called the Reformers, used call the doctrine that all Christians are priests, "the priesthood of the believer." They taught that if the farmer and the baker treated their jobs as worship, they would find joy, purpose, and even change the economy. Do you know what that means? When you do your job, whatever it is, you do it for God. You do it as holy people who are the temple of God. As you interact with many people in a Catholic country, remember that their concept of service to God is different from ours. We emphasize that every person has a direct relationship to God and that we were all working for God, no matter our job. Colossians 3:23-24 says: ***"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."***

You are a priest, so you should act like one. Start thinking of the work that you do as worship. Read and study the Bible, instead of having someone else teach you everything. Pray for your own problems, instead of going to a Saint or to a Pastor. If you are a Christian, God is your God, and you are a priest. The days that are coming may become dark ones for the world, but remember, God has a plan for all of them. Depend on God and let your life be an act of worship for who he is and all that he does. He is worthy of worship. That is why we say with John, ***"to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."***

3. Be ready, because Jesus will surely return

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."

So, you ask what will the coming of Jesus be like? What will happen? In verse 7, we get several clues about the return of Jesus. First, the coming will not be secret. It will be public, and Jesus will be visible. ***"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him."*** This is repeated in other places of the Bible. Second, all the peoples of the earth will mourn, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Here, it means the lost. Have you seen a person wail, that is shouting in grief? There is a sense of terror and regret. That is the scene. It is the world's largest and longest funeral cry. Some of the people will know Jesus and be terrified because they rejected him, and others will be terrified by the sight of his majesty coming with the clouds, even if they do not know him. Finally, John knows that this means pain and judgment for the lost. It is their end, and John does not rejoice in that.

Christ is coming for his people. He will end their pain, persecution, and suffering. Though it is difficult for some, even so, Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus! God closes this part with a solemn statement: ***"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."*** Alpha and Omega are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet.

The first and last means the beginning and the end, the beginner, and the ender. Thought it is beautiful, I could not figure out why God gave verse 8 after verse 7. They seemed disconnected to me, but then I understood why. When I was growing up, I would argue with my Dad about his plans, and I would say, "But why?" and my Dad would say, "Because I said so." What he meant was, "I am your father, I pay the bills, I buy your food, I am responsible for you, and I teach you what is right and wrong. You should not doubt my plans or my judgment." In the same way, God is saying: "My Son, Jesus, will return with the clouds, and all the peoples will mourn. It will be a beautiful and terrible day. There are many who doubt that this will happen. They think it is a myth or a fairy tale. But I think God is ways to you. Jesus is coming, and you better believe it because I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord God, the one who is and who was and who is to come, and the Almighty, and I have spoken."

What about you? Do you believe? Every day his coming is getting closer. If you study the prophecies about Jesus, one metaphor sticks out. Like the pains of a woman in childbirth, things will intensify little by little. Do you feel the intensity? Famine is happening as locusts devour the crops in Africa. Coronavirus is locking up the world's economy, leaving death everywhere. False prophets preach on TV and the Internet selling Jesus out and lying to people. People are turning away from Jesus in apostasy. The hearts of Christians are growing cold. They are bored with the Bible. The persecution gets worse every year, with more people dying each year. Natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanoes seem to constantly be in the news. I don't know about you, but I feel the intensity rising. I do not know when, but **"Behold, He is coming with the clouds."** Are you prepared to see him? Will you wail in sadness, or will you weep for joy? It is simple to be prepared. You need to be saved. You need to know Jesus and you need to follow him. You need to change your life and live for God. Romans 10:13 says, **"For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Come to Jesus, before he comes with the clouds.**

Questions for thought:

1. Why do you think Revelation is so hard to understand?
2. Explain how prophecy is both telling us the future and changing us now. (Think about the island sinking.)
3. Read verses 4-6 and think about who God is and what he has done. What stands out to you in these verses?
4. Using verse 7, describe the coming of Jesus. What will it be like?
5. How can a person get ready for the coming of Jesus?