

1. Introduction: Seeing Jesus

Revelation 1:1-20

Prayer

“By your Spirit, O Lord, may we now engage in the serious consideration of the mysteries of your heavenly wisdom with ever increasing commitment to your glory and our growth in Jesus. Amen.”

Introduction

A healthy church needs the Lord Jesus Christ.

In easy times and in tough times, a church that wishes to endure and flourish needs to see Jesus, know Jesus, depend on Jesus, be in awe of Jesus, trust Jesus, listen to Jesus, serve Jesus, worship Jesus and obey Jesus.

Today we’re beginning a new preaching and Bible study series in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. And this is the central message of the part we’ll be looking at today.

Now, as many of you will know, the idea of studying the book of Revelation can be a very scary one. The book has once been called ‘the happy hunting ground of heretics’.

Because it’s filled with so many mysterious and cryptic symbols and imagery, many have drawn all sorts of creative conclusions about the message of Revelation. It’s also provided lucrative raw material for a whole genre of Christian fiction!

Even the great 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, in his preface to a translation of Revelation, wrote:

“...they are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. This is just the same as if we did not have the book at all.”¹

Like Luther himself, we can be left not knowing what to believe about Revelation. But, with respect to brother Martin, I think we can do better than that. And the key to it is going to be

¹ <https://gervatoshav.blogspot.com.au/2009/02/martin-luthers-preface-to-revelation-of.html> (Accessed: 28 January 2017, 15:15)

reading this book both prayerfully, and carefully. After all, the book is called a 'Revelation', so we should expect things to become more clear, not less, as we read it.

As I said earlier, we're only going to be covering the first three chapters over the next eight weeks. This is essentially the first of two visions John receives. It consists of an introduction, and a vision of the ascended and glorified Jesus himself, which we'll cover today. The rest of the vision contains seven dictated letters from Jesus, delivered through John, to churches in the Roman province of Asia.

Though short, this section will also provide us with a foundation for studying the rest of the book.

We'll take this chapter section by section as well, because understanding what John writes here is necessary for making sense of the letters that follow.

Just so you know where we're going this morning, I want to deal first with the introduction to the book, which is basically v1-8, then look at the background to the writing of the book (who is John?, where are these churches?, what's going on at the time?, etc.). Finally, I want to talk about the vision of Jesus that John receives, and just what he actually sees when he sees Jesus.

The Introduction (v1-8)

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever bought something, especially something you had to put together yourself, thrown away the packaging, and then wished you hadn't? I know I have. Maybe it was some IKEA furniture, or maybe a Lego set?

You thought you knew how it all went together, but suddenly the pieces aren't making sense, and you wish you had the picture on the front of the box to remind you!

The book of Revelation can be a bit like that. We can skip through these first eight verses, and then get stuck on the symbols and codewords that follow.

These first eight verses are kind of like the packaging that Revelation comes in. This is where John actually tells us what this book is about, and also what to do with it.

If you've got a Bible, follow with me from v1:

"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, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 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."

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, 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 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 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.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

(Revelation 1:1–8 ESV)

Let's start in v1 with what John calls the book — *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ”*. This is actually a much better title than most English Bibles have. We usually call it ‘Revelation’, for short. It's also been called, ‘The Revelation of St John’, and ‘The Apocalypse of St John’ (after the Latin word for ‘revealing’). My Bible calls it ‘The Revelation to John’, which is probably better, but the original title in v1 is probably still the best.

So we can expect this book to reveal Jesus, the Son of God and risen, glorified Lord.

We also get the purpose of the Revelation in v1 — for God to *“show his servants the things that must soon take place”*. This is important, because it helps us to understand the historical context for the book. Many have made all sorts of anachronistic interpretations in the book of Revelation, forgetting that, as John says, it was written for real people, in real churches, in a real period of history.

With that in mind, we are never going to get the most out of reading this book if we bypass and ignore what it meant to its original readers in those seven Asian churches. Our understanding will only come via their understanding. For example, when we come to some of the strange symbols later in the book, we have to start by asking the question, “What would this have meant to someone in the first century church in the Roman province of Asia?”

That's not to say that this book has nothing to say directly to us, nor that everything it refers to is limited to the first century A.D. Chapters 21-22 clearly talk about the end of time, when Jesus return. But the first readers must be our starting point. Starting in the 21st century is going to get us into all sorts of confusion.

John goes on in v1-2 to explain his role in delivering this revelation: God gave it to Jesus, for his servants — those who trust in him for salvation. It gets from Jesus to the Christians in the Asian churches via an angel (or a messenger), who shows it to John. John becomes a witness of the things he is shown, obediently writing down everything he sees and hears.

Then John declares a blessing for the one who reads aloud the book, to those who hear it, and to those who keep (or obey) what is written in it. We could go so far to say that if Christians who read it aren't blessed by it, they might not be reading it right.

This also completes the chain of delivery. John would send what he had written to the churches via a messenger, who would read it aloud to the whole church.

So in v4, John greets the churches in Asia that he is writing to, and identifies himself as a messenger himself on behalf of the Lord Jesus.

For now, I want to jump over v4-5, and pick up the words of praise in v6, because these also form an important part of the introduction to the letter.

John writes:

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 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.”

(Revelation 1:5–7 ESV)

This little ‘doxology’ is important because it gives us a further framework for reading the whole book of Revelation. What John is saying in simple English is this:

“Jesus is coming back. Everyone will see him. There will be those he has made his own, freed from sin by his blood, and who will part of his Kingdom forever. And there those who will wail in sorrow and terror at Jesus’ arrival, because they are not part of his kingdom.”

I was talking to my dad yesterday, and back in South Africa they’ve just been watching last year’s Masterchef season. The thing with my dad is, when he watches a show like that, he’ll watch the first episode, then go online and find out who wins. Then he’ll watch the whole season week by week knowing how it ends. He likes it better that way. I don't get it, personally, but this is actually a great way to read Revelation.

Knowing how Revelation ends helps us to make sense of most of what happens in the middle. If we skip to the end, we see Jesus returning, Satan being defeated, the eradication of sin, and God's people being established in a new heaven and a new earth, in a new city, where God himself dwells among them. In the end, Jesus wins.

So when John write what he does in v5-7, he's saying, "Jesus wins, so make sure you're on the winning side, because the losing side is going down, hard."

That's why he finishes his doxology by **quoting** what Jesus himself says right at the end of the book of Revelation:

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

(Revelation 22:12–13 ESV)

The Circumstances (v9-12)

In v9-12, we learn about the circumstances under which the book of Revelation was written.

The book was written by John, who witnessed everything he wrote about. Because of what he says about himself here, we can be sure that this John the Apostle, one of the first apostles Jesus called.

Apart from Revelation, he also wrote a gospel, and three letters in the New Testament.

John worked in his dad's fishing business with his brother James when he was called by Jesus to follow him.

John became very close to Jesus during his ministry. He got to see things, along with Peter and James, that the other disciples didn't get to see. He was known as 'the disciple Jesus loved', though this didn't happen overnight - it seems both he and his brother had a lot of rough edges smoothed off in the process!

It was John who quietly and privately asked Jesus at the Last Supper who the betrayer was, and Jesus told him that it was Judas. He also seems to have been the only disciple who stayed with Jesus right through his trial and his crucifixion. As Jesus hung on the cross, he entrusted his mother to John.

John became a founding member of the church at Jerusalem. He was jailed with Peter for preaching the gospel in Acts 4.

The New Testament itself doesn't have any more information about John until we get to Revelation 1:9:

"I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

(Revelation 1:9 ESV)

At the beginning of Revelation, we find John exiled on the small Greek island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey. He says he was there because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus - he was a victim of persecution.

Tradition may help us to fill in the blanks here. It is commonly believed that John was banished to the rocky island of Patmos by the Roman Emperor Domitian, who ruled from A.D. 81-96. The story goes that he was arrested for preaching the gospel, and was sentenced to death by being boiled in oil in the Coliseum. Apparently, the oil didn't harm him, and many in the coliseum became Christians as a result.

A frustrated and embarrassed emperor then banished John to Patmos. It is believed he was recalled after two years by Domitian's successor, where he returned to Ephesus and died of old age.

So he may well have been in his eighties when he had the vision he wrote down in Revelation.

John then says:

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

(Revelation 1:10-11 ESV)

John received this vision on a Sunday, i.e. the Lord's Day. He tells us he was "in the Spirit". It's hard to know exactly what John means by this. In any case, it's clear that he was in a state that was suitable for receiving this vision from God.

We'll get into a bit more details about each church as we cover it in the coming weeks. Suffice to say, there is nothing mystical about these churches. They were real churches, that existed in history, consisting of real people with real needs.

However, numbers in Revelation often mean something, and the number seven here is no exception. There weren't only seven churches in Asia, we know of at least two more.

They were all in the Roman province of Asia, in modern Turkey, where John may have ministered after he left Jerusalem in the early 40's A.D.

Also, Ephesus, the first city mentioned, was the nearest by sea to Patmos, and would have been where John had set sail as he was exiled. From there, the cities mentioned are arranged more-or-less in a circle, and would have formed a practical mailing route as the book were circulated.

The number seven often indicates completion, or wholeness, like the seven days of Creation in Genesis 1-2. As much as these churches were written to in their own historical situation, they also form a representative whole of the church in every age between Christ's ascension and his second coming.

As we get into the letters to each of the churches, we'll see that these churches all faced real challenges, which are no more unique to the than they are to us. The challenges came from outside and from inside.

From outside, the church suffered *persecution*, both from Rome, as less and less tolerance was shown to those who didn't demonstrate devotion to the emperor as divine, and from zealous Jews, who saw the early Christians as heretics.

From inside, the church suffered from false teachers, teaching things with no basis in the Bible, and from sin, which was seeping into the church and taking hold.

And behind all this, Satan was at work, attempting to destroy what God had paid for with the blood of his own Son.

Sound familiar? The church right from it's inception has been battling pretty much the same things.

Let's turn finally to John's vision.

The Vision (v13-20)

First John hears a voice:

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

(Revelation 1:10–11 ESV)

Upon hearing the voice, John turns to see who is speaking to him. What he sees leads him to write, in v17:

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”

(Revelation 1:17 ESV)

John had seen the risen and glorified Lord Jesus. We know this because of how the speaker identifies himself in v17. as *“the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”* (Revelation 1:17–18)

Only Jesus fits this description.

But remember who John is. John was one of the first disciples called by Jesus. He followed Jesus for three years. In fact, he was especially close to Jesus.

His experience of Jesus also wasn't limited to the merely physical. He was with James and Peter when they saw Jesus on the mountain top, when *“his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”* (Mark 9:3) Mark records that they also saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus, and heard the voice of God from out of a cloud, and were terrified.

John saw Jesus die, but he was also one of the first to see his empty tomb, and to see him raised to life. He saw Jesus ascend to heaven.

John was as familiar with Jesus as anyone could get, yet what he sees of Jesus here is enough to make him want to drop dead on the spot. This means we've got to take the time to realise what John saw, and what it means.

“Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.”

(Revelation 1:12–16 ESV)

Jesus himself explains later in v20 that the lampstands symbolise the seven churches that he has commanded John to write to, and the stars are the angels, or 'messengers', of those churches, probably the teaching elders of those churches.

Lamps and stars shine light into darkness, as the church shines the light of the gospel of Jesus into the dark world. Jesus is in close proximity to these churches, and he holds the leaders of these churches in his hand.

But the person John sees is "*one like a son of man*" (v13). This is exactly what Daniel saw in Daniel 7:

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

(Daniel 7:13–14 ESV)

He might look like a man, but this is no ordinary man. He is God's chosen one, the one of whom God approves, the one to whom God has entrusted his kingdom.

John says he is "*clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.*" (v13). This is the uniform of a priest, a judge, or a king.

"The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow." (v14) Again this is also referred to in Daniel 7. Perhaps the closest we can get to explaining this image is in Proverbs:

"Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life."

(Proverbs 16:31 ESV)

We might use an old word here, and say that the white hair signifies how 'venerable' the son of man is. His glory and righteous life make him worthy of respect and honour - and the whiter the hair, the more glorious, the more righteous, the wiser, the more dignified, the more honourable, the more venerable.

"His eyes were like a flame of fire," (v14). He sees all with a penetrating gaze, burning up any pretence or facade. One commentator writes: "This has at least three implications: 1)

no sin that we commit will escape his notice, 2) he will see every faithful thing his people do, and 3) he will note every injustice done to his people by their enemies.”²

“...his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace...” (v15). This indicates his refined purity, but also strength and might, perhaps in the trampling down of his enemies.

“...his voice was like the roar of many waters.” (v15). This must have been especially vivid for someone on a small rocky island, who was always aware of the sound of waves crashing against the shore. If you’ve ever had the experience of being near a large waterfall, or near waves breaking during a storm, you’ll know how they drown out all other sounds but their own.

It’s interesting to note the similarity again to what Daniel saw when he saw the Son of Man:

“...his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.”

(Daniel 10:6 ESV)

Aside from the stars in v16, John also sees that *“from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword,”* (v16). We don’t need to go further than Hebrews to understand this image:

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

(Hebrews 4:12 ESV)

Finally, John says, *“his face was like the sun shining in full strength.”* (v16) He shone with an unbearable radiance, the radiance of his perfect, divine and unmatched holiness.

Add to this picture what John says about him in the section we skipped, in John’s greeting, v5. There he is *“Jesus Christ the faithful witness, (witnessing to God’s plan of salvation, faithfully, even through trial and suffering) the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.”* (v5)

It’s this vision of Jesus, which causes John to collapse in fear.

And yet, it’s this Jesus which lays a reassuring hand on John, tells him that he has nothing to fear, raises him up, and commissions him for a special task.

² James M. Jr. Hamilton, Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches (Preaching the Word; ed. R. Kent Hughes; Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012), 49.

It's also this Jesus who has loved John, and has freed him from his sins by his blood, to make part of God's kingdom, and to be made a priest in that kingdom - along with all the rest of God's chosen people.

This is an awe-inspiring vision of Jesus, and one which we must take the time to reflect on.

Conclusion

As we said at the beginning, a healthy church needs the Lord Jesus Christ.

But, we must ensure that the vision of the Lord Jesus Christ that we have is the right one.

To have a false vision of Jesus, one which bears no resemblance to who he actually is, will do no good for our church, or any church.

Do we believe Jesus to be some outdated historical figure? Then our church will be irrelevant.

Do we believe Jesus to just be some kind of moral teacher? Then our church may be full of 'good people', but who are destined for an eternity of God's anger for sin undealt-with.

Do we believe in a Jesus who is a heartless judge? Then our church will be characterised by heartless legalism.

Do we believe in a Jesus who is only a gentle, delicate, soft-hearted buddy? Then our church will be characterised by a lazy attitude toward sin.

We could go on. But I think the point is clear.

In each of the letters that follows, Jesus introduces and describes himself in one or more of the terms borrowed from John's list here in chapter one. The church in John's day needed a revelation of Jesus Christ, and this is the one they got. This was essential to their needs as a church. It's essential to our needs as a church.

Friends, the Christ of our Christianity is eternal, holy, mighty, just, pure, sovereign, worthy of all glory, honour and praise. He is full of love, grace, and concern for his people and his church, and full of contempt for his enemies. He sees all and knows all. His Word is the final word. Having the keys of Death and Hades, he controls the eternal destiny of every single person who has ever lived. Being the firstborn from the dead, he is the only way that we too will rise to eternal life.

If you don't know a Jesus like this, then turn to him today. Don't be part of those that will wail in terror at his return. It will happen soon. Instead, turn to him, and ask for his mercy, ask him to free you from your sins by his blood.

And if you know this Jesus, if all of this is familiar to you, can I ask you one question? Are you submitting to Jesus, worshipping and obeying him as you should, and looking with hope to his victorious return?

The book of Revelation, as I hope we will see, is all about Jesus, and it's a call to remember who he really is. Remember who he is then, and let that be a blessing to you.

Let's pray.