

Understanding Revelation

Rev. 1:1-20

When a preacher wants to increase attendance at his church, he preaches on the Book of Revelation, because controversy always attracts a crowd. And when there's a controversy, it usually means there's no definitive answer — so, our opinion is as good as anybody else's. But this is God's word, and there's danger in thinking that ANY part of God's word is either unclear, or untrue, or that it means whatever we think it means.

"All Scripture" – ALL of it – "is God-breathed, and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2Tim 3.16).

Revelation is no different. All of the Bible is sufficiently clear for us to know God's will, and His love for us in Jesus Christ. But some folks make God's word harder to understand than it needs to be, especially Revelation.

Believe it or not, this book is simple and straightforward. Any Christian who has read the Bible, can understand it. It's high drama, and it's THEATER. It has a cast of characters, a plot, and a structure to it. It's more about the past and the present, than about the future. It uses symbolism and types to reveal spiritual truths that apply to what the church is doing in the world — and what Christ is doing in the heavenlies — right now, *today*.

It applies to you and me, as we contend for the faith in our age, as we heard about in Jude. But on a larger and grander scale, it applies to the Church in *all ages*, as we contend for the faith, *together*.

You see, John's Revelation is a book for all seasons. It was *written* to the churches of the first century. But it applies as much to us, as it did to them. It's mostly *historical*. It points more to what happened *before* it was written — to what God **promised** about the Messiah, and **fulfilled** in Christ — than to what would happen *after* it was written.

Please open your bibles to Revelation, chapter 1. We'll read six verses to begin with. It contains a blessing for **all** God's people, who are represented here by seven churches. Let me repeat that. It's a blessing for **all** God's people, who are **represented** here by seven churches.

Revelation 1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants-- things which must **shortly** take place. And He sent and signified *it* by His angel to His servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.

³ **Blessed** is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.

⁴ John, to the seven churches which 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 from the dead**, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who **loved us** and **washed us** from our sins in His own blood, ⁶ and **has made** us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him *be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

Over the next six weeks, we'll look closely at what Christ says to these seven churches, and how it applies to us *here*, at Hope Chapel. **Why** is Christ addressing these churches? What's he *preparing* them for?

Verse 1 says this is Christ's Revelation. **He's** the one speaking. It reveals things that are *imminent*. They "**must shortly take place**," *unavoidably*. So get ready. Verse 3 calls these words a PROPHECY. But prophecy is more than predicting the future. *It prepares and encourages God's people for what's to come*. Christ prepares us with a reminder in verses 5 and 6.

First, He reminds us that He is the FIRSTBORN from the Dead, with all the rights and authority of the Firstborn. It's His **promise** that we too will rise from the dead. *Second*, He tells us that He *loved* us when he went to the cross and died for us. It's His **promise** that *we* will live. *Third*, He tells us that when he did that, he **washed** us from our sins in his own blood. It's his **promise** that we're pleasing to God. And *fourth*, He tells us that in Him, we've been made **kings** and **priests** to God, to whom is glory and dominion forever. Our **duty** is to serve him accordingly. That's the Gospel. And that's just the opening salvo of this wonderful and very **practical** book.

The Purpose of the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is a handbook for spiritual battle. It describes the nature of the battle, and its ultimate outcome. It instills faith and courage in believers who face seemingly insurmountable odds. How? By emphasizing over and over again, that the battle is fought in the heavenly realms by Christ Himself. **He** is already the conqueror king, and **we** are an occupying army on earth. Satan is defeated, because Christ has conquered him.

A Reformed View of Revelation

There are many interpretations of the Book of Revelation, especially of the millennium in chapter 20. That's usually where the controversy arises. But rather than compare and contrast all the views as we did with 1Thess 4.17 in 2014, I'll give you the interpretation favored in Reformed circles.

First, let me say that we're not going to teach the whole Book. That's not because we want to avoid controversy, or because we think it's unclear. We simply want to focus on its applications for *our church*, rather than explore all the exquisite symbolism of the book. If you want to go deeper, I highly recommend *Triumph of the Lamb* by Dennis E. Johnson.

The view that I'm going to give you today may be different than you've heard before. But I want to assure you that it's **not new**. As Jason shared from Greg Laurie, *if it's new then it's not true, and if it's true, then it's not new*. This view has been widely held by the reformed churches for 500 years, and as far back as Augustine in 400 AD. There was another view held by radicals during the Reformation, called the *Jewish Dream*, or *Chiliasm*. It predicted a millennial reign of Israel in the world, a *Golden Age* for that nation. Those who favor that view today, insist that the United States support Israel, because they're God's chosen people. They hold out two salvations for the lost: one through faith in Jesus Christ, and another for the physical nation of Israel. Such a view has always been rejected by the reformed churches.

The Church is Spiritual Israel. It is the Mystical Body and Bride of Christ. **We** are the people of God. *There is no other*. Nor is there any other path to salvation. Why? Because we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The people of the nation of Israel in the Middle East have the same path to salvation that we have. Jesus said, **"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me."** (Joh 14.6) Paul made it clear that we're saved by **faith**, not by our heritage or our nationality. Those who have the *faith* of Abraham are the sons of Abraham (Ro 4.9-13; 9.6-7; Ga 3.7-9), not those who are simply of the *line* of Abraham.

The Church has not replaced Israel. The Church has been *grafted into* Israel. "Israel" is the collective name for the *People of God*. We're a people defined by faith in God. Rahab was from *Jericho*. Ruth was from *Moab*. Others came from various lands. They *became* the people of God by placing their faith in God, **not** by entering the land of Israel. And the *people* of God, have always been opposed by the *enemies* of God, led by Satan and his servants. Revelation is all about **that struggle, that** battle between good and evil.

God's Word reveals **God**. It reveals His Gospel Plan of Salvation. It summons God's people to live a godly life that's glorifying to Him. And it summons His people to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Everything we read and study in God's word, equips and enables us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. What Christ told the seven churches, does that for us.

The Pattern of Revelation

If you've tried to read Revelation from start to finish, thinking that it's written in chronological order, you probably got lost. If you didn't recognize the characters and events in it, or the symbols used, you probably aren't familiar enough with the rest of the Bible. There are over 400 references to the imagery and Scripture of the Old Testament in it. If you read Revelation before you've read the rest of the Bible, it may throw you for a loop.

Revelation is a summary of Scripture, all of which has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. *There's a Judgment to come. **Get ready. Christ will return. Get ready.** THAT'S THE MAIN MESSAGE.* And the Judgment that it describes, has both a Present and a Final fulfillment. God may pronounce a Judgment on a country, like the United States, in our lifetime. That's not THE Judgment; it's a demonstration and pledge of the Judgment to come. When the temple was destroyed in 70 AD, that was a judgment, a terrible portent of the Final Judgment to come. "[Behold, the old is gone; the new has come.](#)" 2Cor 5.17

Revelation is a book woven together in seven strands, to create a *pattern*. There are seven parallel sections in the Book of Revelation that repeat the same theme in each section, but with increasing detail in each re-telling. Among those seven strands we find groups of seven things: seven lampstands for seven representative churches in the world, seven seals opened on seven scrolls of tribulation, seven trumpets with seven warnings, seven years of tribulation, and seven bowls filled with seven woes.

Seven is the mark of the Holy Spirit, but it's also a symbol of perfection or of fulfillment. There are only seven churches listed here, because they represent the seeds of the **whole** Church on earth, now spread among the nations.

Two Sides of Revelation – Revelation has two main parts, roughly chapters 1-11, and chapters 12-22. In a sense, Christ is the VEIL between the two. He bridges the gap between the EARTHLY realm on **this** side of the veil in chapters 1-11, and the HEAVENLY realm on **that** side of the veil in chapters 12-22. He now rules in BOTH.

On THIS side of the veil, we see the struggle among men on earth, that is, between believers and unbelievers. The world attacks the Church, but the Church *will be* avenged, protected, and victorious. We can **trust God** for it.

On THAT side of the veil, we see that this struggle on earth is actually the outward manifestation of the SATAN'S attack on the Man-child, the Christ. The dragon attacked Christ. But being defeated at the cross, the dragon now directs his fury against the children of promise, "the children of the woman," as John puts it. The term "woman" variously applies to Mary and the Christ

child, AND to the Church and her children — *all believers in all ages*. We're the spiritual offspring of Christ, as many as the grains on the shore which cannot be counted — as Isaiah revealed in 53.10 — and as God revealed to Abraham in Genesis. We're engaged in a battle of good and evil, an army of light against an army of darkness. But we have no doubt about the outcome. The war was won in a decisive battle, fought by Christ 2000 years ago. The fight we're waging is **not** to *defeat* Satan; that's been done. The fight is to overcome evil — evil *within* us, *among* us, and *around* us — *through* Christ.

Revelation is God's Plan of Action for the Church Age. And we're **in** the Church Age today. We've **been** in the Church Age since the beginning, and **we 'll be** in the Church Age until the end.

The Structure of Revelation — There are seven parallel divisions in Revelation. The divisions and their chapters are on a separate handout.

(chaps. 1-3) Christ in the midst of the 7 golden lamp-stands (representing the 7 churches). *This is the section we're going to focus on.* Everything else flows out of this section. If we understand this one, the rest make sense.

(4-7) The book of seven scrolls, with seven seals.

(8-11) The seven trumpets of judgment (w/warnings or announcements).

(12-14) The seven years of tribulation: the woman and Man-child are persecuted by the dragon (Satan), the beast (his agents), and the harlot (representing his "city" or prison).

(15,16) The seven bowls of wrath to be poured out on the earth. But God's people are sealed, **protected in Christ**, against God's wrath.

(17-19) The fall of the great harlot (Babylon or Rome) and of the beasts.

(20-22) The judgment upon the dragon (Satan) followed by the new heaven and earth, and the perfected New Jerusalem — the City of God on earth.

The time frame is ALL of church history, from the beginning of God's plan to its conclusion. And, again, it is applicable in ALL ages of the Church. The original prophecy was written to a specific audience, at a specific point in time, with a message for *them* to understand, about *their* circumstances. However, the lessons and principles that were taught to **them** apply to similar circumstances in **our** time. That means we need to recognize today's circumstances for what they are, to recognize when their *pattern* matches the pattern we see laid out here in Revelation. And then, to respond to them biblically, with godly understanding, and *without* fleshly fear.

Again, these are *representative* churches. There is an aspect of each one of these seven churches, that applies in some way to **every** church, including **our** church. We need to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." That phrase is repeated... um, **seven** times in chapters 2 and 3.

Let's continue in chapter 1, verses 9-20. Here is John's description:

⁹ I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos – Why was he there? – for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ I was in the Spirit **on the Lord's Day** – Sunday – and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, ¹¹ saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send *it* to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

These are located in present day Turkey. Patmos is a small island southwest of Turkey, in the Mediterranean. John didn't plant all these churches, and there were many more churches. So what is it about them, that's instructive for *any* church, even ours? That's what we'll explore over the next six weeks.

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ This reveals that behind every church on earth, lies a spiritual and eternal force, the very presence of God... and in the midst of the seven lampstands *One* like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.

¹⁴ His head and hair *were* white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; ¹⁵ His feet *were* like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; ¹⁶ He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance *was* like the sun shining in its strength.

This alludes to Daniel 7.13, affirming that Jesus is the *Son of Man* in Daniel's vision, fulfilling that prophecy. More than that, it tells us that each faithful church is an expression of Christ in the world, under the guidance and protection of his *messenger, his angel*, for that church. A lampstand is placed in each church, signifying Christ's presence there, by his Spirit.

¹⁷ And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ "I *am* He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And **I have the keys of Hades and of Death.**

¹⁹ "Write the things which you **have seen**, and the things which **are**, and the things which will take place **after** this.

We're told in Rev 1.4, that Christ is the one who was, and is, and is to come. He'll never leave or forsake us. John is then given an interpretation of the images he just saw – Christ interprets his own words – they're figurative:

²⁰ "The mystery of the seven stars which you saw **in My right hand**, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw **are** the seven churches.

Notice Christ's statement in verse 18, that he *has* or *holds* the keys of Hades and Death. He *conquered* death, *defeated* the Jailer, and *freed* the captives. As for us, we were freed to *participate* in the divine nature, and in God's Plan of Salvation. We weren't freed to go fishing, as **Peter** once learned.

We're given a picture of this in the Old Testament. The land of Canaan was promised to God's people. God went before them to conquer it. Their mission was to **take possession** of the Promised Land. It was *theirs* for the taking. Only three things were required: *obedience*, *trust*, and *courage*. Those same three things are required of us today: *obedience*, *trust*, and *courage*.

As Jason reminded us from the Book of Jude, we are to **CONTEND** for the Faith. But we *contend* by standing firm. That's how we should be looking at our present spiritual battles. We're not told to conquer, because we're *more* than conquerors, *beyond* conquerors (Rom 8.37). In both the Old and New Testaments, we're told to **stand firm**.¹ Advancing the kingdom is done by staking out our territory and defending it.

Then we grow our occupying force by setting free the prisoners of our enemy – by evangelizing with the Gospel call. God's elect **will** respond to His call. These new creatures will stake out their own territory, and also **stand firm**. At every turn, we need to expect that **Satan** will *oppose* us. And we need to expect that **God** will *test* us. And we need to expect that we **will** be *victorious in Christ*.

There's a repeated pattern in this, and that's what I want to finish with today. Why is John told to tell these things to the churches? Because they must prepare themselves for battle. They must put on the whole armor of God, because the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are coming, and **soon**.

¹ OT - Ex 14:13; 2Ch 20:17; Isa 46:8; Da 11:32; NT - 1Co 16:13; 2Co 1:24; Ga 5:1; Eph 6:13; Php 4:1; 2Th 2:15; 1Pe 5:12;

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – Turn to Chapter 6

Contrary to popular belief, the four horsemen are sent by **God**, not by Satan. They ride out from **heaven** into the earthly realm, with devastating effects. *We can see those effects physically*, in the world around us. And there's a **sequence** to their coming. We'll read about the first *four* seals being opened – and then a *fifth* seal, revealing the MARTYRS of the Church.

(6.2-3) The First Seal - the White Horse –

And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

This is Christ, who **has conquered** (Joh 16.33; Rev 3.21; 5.5; 17.4; 19.11), **is conquering**, and **is to conquer**. In Rev 1.16, we read that a sharp two-edged sword went out from Christ's mouth, and that sword is the Word of God. But the **bow** he carries is the symbol of God's wrath against the wicked.

Psa 7:11-13 God is a just judge, And God is angry *with the wicked every day*. ¹² If he does not turn back, He will sharpen His **sword**; He bends His **bow** and makes it ready. ¹³ He also prepares for Himself instruments of death; He makes His arrows into fiery shafts.

(6.4) The Second Seal - the Red Horse –

Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that *people* should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

Its rider was a peace-taker, not a peace-maker; for Christ is the Peace-maker for the **elect**, but not for those who reject him. He is given a short-sword used for close battle, as Christ brings the sword of truth (a long sword) to divide families and mark his enemies (Mat 10.34; also Psa 45.3-5). The Church is not at peace with the world, but instead it is persecuted by it. And it is "granted" to this rider, that one should kill another – meaning that God will grant martyrdom to some. This is not an avoidable accident, but God's ordained means of spreading the seed of the Gospel.

Joh 12:24 Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.

Christ says this not only of himself, but of believers. *His* work is *our* work (Joh 14.12). And so Stephen falls (Act 11; 22.20); and James falls (Act 12.2), and Paul and Peter fall, etc.

(6.5-6) The Third Seal – the Black Horse –

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius [a day's wages], and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine."

Its rider carries the **scales of justice** in his hands, meaning that those who harm the elect of God will be weighed in these scales. It ties this horse and its rider to the second one. The **oil** of God's grace and the **wine** of gladness, will not be withheld from believers. Ours is a costly faith, and honor awaits those who withstand such trials, including the crown of life (Rev 2.10).

(v. 7-8) The Fourth Seal – the Pale Horse –

⁷ When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see." ⁸ So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.

Its rider is death, and Hades followed with him – war, famine, and pestilence. The whole world will be shaken, and the Church won't escape these earthly disasters. There's no special protection; only special providence. Death cuts down, and Hades gathers the slain. However, Death power and authority is governed by God. This isn't random, limitless mayhem, but it is directed and restrained by the hand of God. It has *bounds* set on it – only a quarter of the earth may be impacted.

These are the four horsemen. Christ rides out on the white horse with his sword of the Gospel. Following close behind is the red horse, raining persecution on **the church**. Then come the **scales of justice** recording the wrongs done to the church. **Death and destruction** follow in the form of earthly disasters, from which the church is not exempt.

⁹ When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. ¹⁰ And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both *the number of* their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they *were*, was completed. (Rev 6:9-11 ^{NKJ})

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride in every generation, with increasing intensity. But believers are *sealed* in every generation. God grants *martyrdom* to every generation. And therefore, God's *judgment* falls upon every generation. More Christian martyrs died in the 20th century, than in all previous centuries combined, nearly a million between 2000 and 2010. *Since 1900*, more than **262 million** people have died by *war, genocide, and mass murder*. Tens of millions have died from famine and earthquakes since 1950. We can visibly see the increasing intensity, **which fits the pattern of Revelation's prophecy**. Are we prepared for what lies ahead? One horse inevitably follows the other.

For us Christians, living in such an apocalypse, there is yet hope in Christ. Not just hope for eternal life in the *hereafter*, but hope in the *present*. We've been called into fellowship with Christ, **now**. We labor with Christ, **now**.

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was, and is, and is to come." (Rev 4.8) He **was** victorious over Satan, sin, and death. He's alive *in* and *among* us, **now**. And **through** us he's active in the world. He **will** come again in judgment – to execute the Justice of the Father, to bring His people into an ever-present – and ever-lasting – kingdom of righteousness on earth.

As John tells us, we worship the Risen Lord, **who is the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. He loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, ⁶ and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.**