

REVELATION

INTRODUCTION AND 1: 1-8

The book of revelation is not for the religiously advanced or the biblically literate. Neither is it intended for those who are spiritually advanced or morally pure. Rather, it is intended for those who are looking for hope in troubled times. It is not only about the victory of heaven over earth, but about hope for a world where there is injustice and pain as much as joy.

1) The book of revelation was written for Christians who were suffering uncertainty and persecution or were afraid of suffering and therefore tempted to cave in. The hope it offers is not about escaping the world, complying with the powerful, fitting in to the dominant culture identity or just patiently waiting through its injustices. Rather it seeks to draw forth from above, forces for good to bless human life. For early Christians, it kept them from giving up, selling their souls, or committing suicide to escape their pain and suffering.

2) Revelation teaches us how to live in the face of uncertainty, suffering, fear and despair. It offers water to the thirsty soul. It offers grace to those wracked with guilt and failure. It challenges the complacent to wake up and stand up and be counted. It offers encouragement to trust that all shall be well with God in the soul in spite of all that oppresses from the outside, and tempts us to compromise conscience and justice from the inside.

3) The Revelation is the revelation of Jesus Christ and it is a revelation to one named John (believed for centuries to be the author of the gospel and epistles, but probably not). The time is near and Christ is coming (2nd coming) to make all things right. It is a communication to churches, and at this time the churches were suffering persecution from without and conflict from within because of the pressure to compromise principle to escape persecution.

4) The book of Revelation itself is difficult to understand because it is 'coded' information, intended for those who are taught the code and kept hidden from the rest. Code is a way of communicating when people are afraid of being caught, labelled and punished. In times of persecution, code language was a way of keeping the faith alive against the powers who wanted to crush it. The word 'Revelation' (*apokalypsis* in Greek or *Revelatus* in Latin) means 'uncovering.' It is a revelation uncovered to those given the eyes of faith and closed to the rest.

5) Revelation is not about the end times and neither is it about what will happen in the afterlife after this world has passed away. Rather it is about how God will bring about a new thing in this world that will transform it. It calls people to live now in anticipation of a transformed world to come. A transformed world will involve a coming together of heaven and earth as is the hope of the Lord's prayer: 'thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

6) As a literary genre, Revelation can be termed 'apocalyptic'. Apocalyptic writing developed among the Jews several centuries before Christ, during the time of exile and persecution. The book of Daniel is an excellent example of this genre, especially toward the end when Daniel has visions and talks about them. There are bizarre creatures and cosmic, natural wonders. And all of it has to do with political events that have been taking place. The faith of the apocalyptic writer is that all these 'earthly' events have a divine significance, that God is ultimately in "control" (because love will ultimately triumph over hate, injustice and indifference, even though these currents seem to be in charge right now); and God will bring about God's will through human affairs to the blessing of the world and the vindication of the faithful (even though the faithful are currently suffering difficult persecution and temptation). One way or another all the world will be held accountable to God. The wicked will be judged and the righteous (innocent or unjustly suffering) will be vindicated and healed.

7) The writer of Revelation believed that he was living in the end times, and therefore, that God was going to act soon to bring about the vindication of the innocent just and the condemnation of the wicked who oppressed them. But the hope it engenders is not limited to what will happen, but what can happen within a person's soul when they become convinced God is on their side and good will ultimately triumph. It feeds an inner resistance to tyranny and an inner strength against evil. It holds together the soul's dignity and refuses to be crushed by those who want to crush it. It is also a call to remain true to principle and right when there is massive pressure to compromise and cave in to survive. What inspiration can we gain from Revelation to live in our times? Let's explore this.

REVELATION 1: 9-20

The context is being set for the vision of John. What is this context?

1) John is a prisoner in exile on the Greek Island of Patmos. Why is he there? He shared with the believers to whom he is writing 'the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance.... because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.' He suffered because he was speaking about Jesus, but his suffering was also a 'testimony' or a 'sharing' meaning that Jesus' cross had now become his own in the form of persecution.

John was 'in the spirit on the Lord's Day' which means that during worship on a Sunday, on this Island, he was transported in mind, imagination, or vision to another place, where he heard a loud voice like a trumpet (trumpet symbolizing a call to hear and to be attentive). And what does the voice ask of him? 'Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches,' and each of the seven churches are named.

The number seven is important in the bible. It is a sacred number. It is also a number of completion. All the elect, all the chosen, all the churches are represented in the seven. This is

a letter to the Christian church at large even if it is also a particular letter to these particular churches named. They are representative of what a lot of churches are going through – persecution for remaining true or benefitting by compromising their conscience and principle and becoming complacently lulled into the oppressive lifestyle of an empire built on vast inequality and injustice.

2) We receive a wild description of the ‘Son of Man’, an apocalyptic term used by Jesus in the gospels, also found in apocalyptic books like Daniel. He is clothed in a long robe (he reigns in kingly dignity), a golden sash across his chest (gold is important in this book and it refers, again, to kingly royalty). His head and hair are white as wool (white is an important colour for moral and spiritual purity in Revelation. Purity is defined by love, and God’s love is the highest truth to which the colour white points).

His eyes are like a flame of fire (fire is a symbol both of purification as well as judgement) his feet are like burnished bronze and his voice was like the sound of many waters (References to feet of bronze are to Daniel 10:6 and the many waters to Ezekiel 1:7. The many waters could also be imagined by hearing the waves crash onto the shores of Patmos). From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword (symbolizing the penetrating power of the word of God in heart and conscience) and his face was like the sun shining in full force (all is revealed and opened up before God’s shining and penetrating presence, and evil is exposed and scorched also). The truth is to be feared only by those living in deception.

3) The image of Christ may be remote, strange, and fearful, yet when John falls to the ground, Jesus touches him and tells him not to be afraid. He is the first and the last (meaning eternal) the living one, resurrected, and he holds the keys of death and Hades (Hades was different than Hell in the ancient world. Hades was the abode of the dead, a temporary receptacle. Hell was the eternal abode of those who would suffer the second death, the death of the soul. More to come on this). Jesus holds the power of resurrection for the dead. Hence his kingly reign is not only over the living but also the dead. This, of course, is comforting to those who face persecution and death for Jesus’ sake. Even if you die at the hands of injustice, there is eternal justice in store. No tyrant or oppressor will escape accountability.

4) Seven stars and seven golden lampstands represent seven angels for each of the seven churches. Each church had a protecting angel. And the image of the lampstand represents light in the midst of darkness, hope in the midst of despair, love in the midst of hate, life in the midst of death. The angels, and ultimately the Son of Man in the midst of all the churches (v.13) keeps the light lit. But it also requires faithfulness on the part of the churches in order to maintain the relationship alive. More to come on this.