

# Lesson 1

## Introduction

What is Revelation? This would seem to be an odd question to ask about a book of the Bible, but Revelation is like few other books of the Bible. Is it prophecy? Is it history? Is it literal? Is it figurative? Is it art? Just what is Revelation? Here are several modern answers to that question.

Philip Carrington wrote:

In the case of Revelation, we are dealing with an artist greater than Stevenson or Coleridge or Bach. John has a better sense of the right word than Stevenson. He has a greater command of unearthly supernatural loveliness than Coleridge. He has a richer sense of melody and rhythm in composition than Bach. It is the only masterpiece of pure art in the New Testament. Its fullness and richness and harmonic variety place it far above Greek tragedy.

Novelist Will Self in an introduction to a pocket edition of Revelation wrote:

In its vile obscurantism is its baneful effect; the original language may have welded the metaphoric with the signified, the “logos” with the flesh, but in the King James version, the text is a [puppet show] of tedium, a portentous horror film.

Hal Lindsey wrote in 1973:

The information in the book you are about to read is more up to date than tomorrow’s newspaper. I can say this with confidence because the facts and predictions in the next few pages are all taken from the greatest sourcebook of current events in the world.

Williams Barclay, referring to Revelation as “the strange book,” wrote:

When a student of the New Testament embarks upon the study of Revelation, he finds himself projected into a different world. Here is something quite unlike the rest of the New Testament.

And not only is it different, but it is notoriously difficult for a modern mind to understand. As a result it has sometimes been abandoned and has instead become the playground a religious eccentrics. One despairing commentator said that there are as many riddles in the Revelation as there are words. And another that the study of Revelation either finds or leaves a man mad!

Another wrote:

There is a choral, symphonic nature about the book of Revelation that stirs up our feelings as much as it does our ideas. It is a dramatic, forceful, yet surprisingly tender and comforting book. The result is that this remarkable book is both hard to understand fully and impossible to forget.

And another wrote:

Beautiful beyond description is the last book of the Bible. Beautiful in form, in symbolism, in purpose, and in meaning. Where in Scripture do we find a more vivid and picturesque portrayal of the Christ, Faithful and True, going forth unto victory, seated upon a white horse, arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood, followed by the armies of heaven?

And yet another wrote:

The Greek title of this book is *Apokalypsis* (that which is being uncovered), but readers may feel that not much is revealed. The Book of Revelation appears not to accomplish what its title promises, confusing its readers by all the images, figures, and numbers they encounter.

What is Revelation? There are as many answers to that question as there are commentators. We will see how we answer that question at the end of our studies.

What is Revelation about? Either Revelation is almost totally neglected or it is elevated to a prominence shared by no other Biblical book. No other part of the Bible has proved so fascinating to commentators, and no other has suffered so much at their hands.

What is this book all about? If you asked the man on the street, you would most likely hear that Revelation is all about the end of the world. And perhaps that is what we will find as we unravel this book. But perhaps we should heed

the advice of Mark Twain when it comes to popular ideas about Revelation: “When you find yourself on the side of the majority, it’s probably time to change sides.”

Perhaps a good starting point to properly understanding the book of Revelation is to recognize that not every verse that sounds like the end of the world is actually describing the end of the world. Matthew 24 provides a good example.

*Matthew 24:29-30 — The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.*

That really sounds like the end of the world, doesn’t it? But if we keep reading, we find something interesting in verse 34: “Truly I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until all these things take place.” Verse 34 provides the time frame—the most important feature of any prophecy. Whatever the “coming” was in verses 29–30, it must have happened in the first century! And it did, in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed. Is Revelation describing that same event? No, but Revelation, like Matthew 24, also provides a time frame.

The point is this: The language in Matthew 24:29-30 is language of judgment, and there are many judgments in the Bible: Sodom, Gomorrah, Egypt, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Babylon, Assyria, Judah, Israel, Jerusalem, Rome, and the World. The same sort of language used in Matthew 24 to describe a judgment against Jerusalem in AD 70 is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other judgments.

If anyone ever tells you that such and such language in Revelation can only be talking about the end of the world — you should grab your concordance. The chances are pretty good that you will find that same language used elsewhere in the Bible to describe something other than the end of the world.

So what can we conclude about Revelation from Matthew 24? Only that we should be careful not to automatically assume that language of judgment must apply to the final judgment of the world. It definitely does not in Matthew 24, and I think we will discover that it does not in Revelation.

But, back to our question — what is Revelation all about? One thing we can say for sure is that Revelation is a book about Jesus. Some of the most wonder-

ful titles and images of the Messiah in all of Scripture are found in Revelation, including:

- The faithful witness
- The first born of the dead
- The ruler of kings on earth
- The first and the last
- The living one
- The true one
- The one with the key of death
- The one with the key of David
- The lion of Judah
- The lamb that was slain
- The King of kings and Lord of lords
- The alpha and omega
- The bright morning star

Revelation is a book about Christ. But Revelation is also a book about the kingdom of Christ, the church of Christ. Some of the most beautiful descriptions of the Lord's church found anywhere in the Bible are found in this book.

***Revelation 21:2-3** — And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.*

Revelation is a book about Jesus, about the church, and about judgment. And how do those three topics come together in this book? In a word — victory! Because of Christ, the church is victorious over its enemies.

***1 Corinthians 15:57** — But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Why should we study Revelation? The easy answer is that we should study Revelation for the same reason we study any other book in the Bible. It is the

Word of God, and we should want to know everything about it. But there are other reasons that apply specifically to this book.

First, few evangelistic tools are more effective than a knowledge of Revelation. Just placing a commentary on your desk at work can create an open door for spreading the gospel. (But, of course, we can't stop there. We need to know how to respond when someone notices the commentary and asks us a question.)

Second, people out in the world are interested in Revelation. Historian Timothy P. Webber tells us that a resurgence of interest in prophetic themes is one of the most significant developments in American religion since World War II. This fact, he says, is evidenced generally in the rising flood of eschatological literature pouring forth from the so-called "Christian" publishers.

One of the most widely distributed religious books of the present era is Hal Lindsey's multi-million copy *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It has been translated into no fewer than thirty-one languages and circulated in more than fifty nations. It was Lindsey's book that caused *Newsweek* magazine to report that in America there is a "boom in doom"!

There is a widespread popular interest in Revelation today. Unfortunately, most of the interest in Revelation is based on a radical misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the book. If we can answer their questions about this difficult book, then they may trust us on other questions. People are interested in Revelation, and their interest provides us a great open door.

A third reason to study Revelation is that it is incredibly interesting. If you enjoy Bible studies that cause you to search for clues all throughout the Bible then you will love Revelation. If you enjoy the study of history, and particularly the history of Rome, then you will love Revelation.

A fourth reason to study Revelation is that the book is incredibly beautiful and dramatic. Some today think we need to add drama to the gospel by presenting dramatic plays in the worship service or by adding dramatic music to cassettes of the scriptures. The Bible is already dramatic enough! It does not need any help from us. How exactly does man increase the drama of a story that involves the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of deity? Simply reading the book of Revelation from the pulpit would provide more drama than any play or musical that man could ever write.

This book contains images that outdo much of what we find in the movies. Blood and horror? In Revelation 14:20 we read of a river of blood two hundred

miles long that comes up to a horse's bridle. Fierce creatures? How about seven headed beasts and dragons? Success of an underdog? How about the church versus the greatest political and military power the world had ever known? Happy ending? How about the victorious church triumphing over Rome?

Does it matter what we believe about Revelation? Can't we all just agree to disagree when it comes to Revelation? Yes, up to a point. We can agree to disagree about whether Rome is the villain or Jerusalem is the villain. We can agree to disagree about when the book was written. But, we can't agree to disagree when it comes to theories about this book that violate other Scriptures; theories that belittle the church; theories that denigrate the plan of God — and there are many such theories about this book.

Premillennialism, for example, involves much more than a thousand year reign of Christ. As we will see, the false premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel.

Many of the false theories about Revelation come more from Hollywood than from the word of God. Revelation has permeated the popular culture. There are many people who can't name the first four books of the New Testament yet who have heard about 666.

Revelation forms the basis for virtually all of the predictions by the end-is-near prophets. Many feel that the Middle East and especially Israel will play a special role in the end of the world.

Here is a list of book titles from the 1980's and 1990's when I first taught this book: *Armageddon*, *Oil and the Middle East*, *Iraq in Prophecy*, *Holy War for the Promised Land*, *Prophecy 2000: Rushing to Armageddon*, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*, *Global Peace and the Rise of the Antichrist*, *The Coming Russian Invasion of America*, *The New Millennium* by Pat Robertson, *Road to Armageddon* by Billy Graham, *88 Reasons why the Rapture is in 1988* and its much anticipated (and unexpected!) sequel, *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*, and *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey.

An Amazon search today turns up the following titles: *The Book of Revelation Decoded*, *Revelation Deciphered*, *The Book of Revelation for Dummies*, *The Book of Revelation for Blockheads*, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Book of Revelation*, *Unlocking the Last Days*, *Final Warning: The Trumpet Days of Revelation Are Here*, *Hold Your Horses: The Four Horsemen of Revelation Reexamined*, and *Hillary Rising: The Specter of Absolute Power in the Prophecies of Daniel & Revelation*.

One book that I purchased recently is entitled *Armageddon, Oil, and Terror*, by John Walvoord, someone we will have more to say about later. That book lists a series of twelve catastrophic events that will supposedly take place as the fulfillment of Revelation. Walvoord writes on pages 4-5:

The rapidly increasing tempo of change in modern life has given the entire world a sense of impending crisis. ... How long can world tensions be kept in check? ... As alarming as these events are, they really are not surprising in light of the Bible's end-time prophecies.

Let me read next from the introduction of another similar book:

It is impossible for the most thoughtless to overlook the impressive and almost unprecedented character of the age in which we live. Events, as rapid in their succession as they are startling in their magnitude, ... chase each other like waves on the sea....

And where did that second quote come from? From another modern end-is-near bestseller? No. It came from *The Great Tribulation, or Things Coming on the Earth* by John Cumming, which was published in 1863 in New York at the height of the U.S. Civil War!

The first time I taught this class in 1990, we were at war with Iraq—the site of ancient Babylon. Popular books at that time told us that the locusts were smart bombs, and Saddam Hussein was the Antichrist.

The second time I taught Revelation was in the aftermath of Janet Reno's war on Waco. David Koresh's crazy ideas about the seven seals in Revelation were broadcast by the national media, which seemed to particularly enjoy an opportunity to heap ridicule on the Bible.

The third time I taught the book, we were once again at war in Iraq. And once again, the books and the preachers were shouting that the signs were clear that the end was near.

Now, with my fourth time to teach the book, the famous Doomsday Clock is set at two and half minutes to midnight, and we are told that planetary destruction is nearer than it has ever been. And the false prophets are again telling us that the end is near.

Do we really believe that God's word changes with the headlines? Is that what we want the world to believe? These modern day false prophets of doom are

doing great damage to God's word. It matters what we believe about and what teach about this book.

Do misconceptions about Revelation make any difference? Yes. In fact, misconceptions about the Jews and the end of the world may have effected political decisions. President Ronald Reagan said, "I sometimes believe we're heading very fast for Armageddon." And, in 1983, he told *People* magazine:

Theologians have been studying the ancient prophecies — what would portend the coming of Armageddon — and have said that never, in the time between the prophecies up until now, has there ever been a time in which so many of the prophecies are coming together. There have been times in the past when people thought the end of the world was coming, but never anything like this.

Will a president one day mistakenly see himself as an instrument of God destined to make end time prophecies come true?

Who wrote Revelation? Revelation 1:1 tells us that the author was John, who bare record of the word of God and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things things that he saw. Although the text just says "John," in my opinion, that John could be no other than the Apostle John.

There is significant *external* evidence from early writings that John the Apostle wrote Revelation. Those writings say that, later in his life, John moved from Palestine to Ephesus, and that there he wrote the fourth Gospel and his three New Testament epistles. Those writing also says that during the persecution carried out by Domitian, John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he wrote Revelation. Further, thy say that after Domitian's death, during the reign of Nerva, John returned to Ephesus, where he died during the reign of Trajan after living an unusually long life. (We'll talk more about these writings and the dating of these events later.)

That external evidence agrees with the internal evidence, which suggests that the author was a Palestinian Jew named John, exiled to Patmos, writing to Christians in Asia during a time of severe persecution. That John the Apostle wrote Revelation has been the traditional view of the church for centuries, and I see no reason to doubt it.

What is the time frame of Revelation? The time frame is vital to understanding any prophecy. Absent a time frame, we are left with what I call the *Nostradamus Effect*. That is, we have vague statements with no anchor in time that could

apply to any of dozens of events that have happened throughout history. If I told you a king would arise, and he would be followed by another king who would do this or that, and then by a third king who would be evil, would you be surprised if that happened at some point in the next 2000 years? But what if I told you exactly *when* it would happen? And what if I told you all of that 600 years before the fact? Prophecies without time frames are usually not that impressive. For one reason, how can they ever be proved wrong? They still might happen someday.

Fortunately, Revelation has a **very clear** time frame. John says that the events dealt with in the book would occur shortly after the book was written, and he tells us that at least four times!

**Revelation 1:1** — *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must **shortly** come to pass*

**Revelation 1:3** — *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is **at hand**.*

**Revelation 22:6** — *And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must **shortly** be done.*

**Revelation 22:10** — *And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is **at hand**.*

Two different Greek words are used in those four verses — *tachos* (1:1 and 22:6) and *eggus* (1:3 and 22:10). *Tachos* means “a brief space of time” and is found five other times in the New Testament:

**Luke 18:7-8** — *And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them **speedily**. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?*

**Acts 12:7** — *And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying,*

*Arise up **quickly**. And his chains fell off from his hands.*

***Acts 22:18** — And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee **quickly** out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.*

***Acts 25:4** — But Festus answered, that Paul should be kept at Cæsarea, and that he himself would depart **shortly** thither.*

***Romans 16:20** — And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet **shortly**. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

*Eggus* means “near (literally or figuratively, of place or time)” and is found thirty times in the New Testament. The word is translated: *nigh* (thirteen times), *at hand* (six times), *nigh at hand* (four times), *near* (four times), *from* (once), *nigh unto* (once), and *ready* (once). Here are some verses that use *eggus*:

***Matthew 26:18** — And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is **at hand**; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples.*

***Mark 13:29** — So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is **nigh**, even at the doors.*

***John 2:13** — And the Jews’ passover was **at hand**, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

***Romans 10:8** — But what saith it? The word is **nigh** thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach.*

***Ephesians 2:13** — But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made **nigh** by the blood of Christ.*

***Philippians 4:5** — Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is **at hand**.*

The meaning of these Greek words would not be disputed in any other context. In Revelation, however, the passages conflict with men’s interpretation of the

book, and, instead of changing their interpretation, many change the clear meaning of these important time frame verses. Many commentators ignore or try to explain away those clearly stated time frames. We will not do that. If we begin our study of Revelation by ignoring the time frame given in the very first verse, what hope do we have of correctly understanding this book?

Walvoord recognizes the proper meaning but ignores it. Hinds inserts a word in order to have John say that his writings concern events that were to shortly *begin* to come to pass. Others say it means that the events in the book would happen quickly once they eventually started to happen. None of that, however, is what John wrote.

The time frame in Revelation 22:10 is particularly instructive. In that verse, John was told to “seal **not** the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.” Daniel received a vision in 550 BC (described in Daniel 8) that was fulfilled 400 years later in 165 BC when the sanctuary was restored after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. In Daniel 8:26, Daniel was told to shut up the vision because its fulfillment was a long way off. In Revelation 22:10 John is told just the opposite — don’t seal up the vision because the time for its fulfillment is at hand. By what theory do we argue that the “long way off” in Daniel is 400 years, while the “time at hand” in Revelation is 2000 years and counting? Does that make any sense?

But what about 2 Peter 3:8 where we see that to God 1000 years appears as one day? That verse tells us that time does not mean the same thing to God as it means to man. God does not experience time as we do. But in Revelation 1:1-3 God is not talking to himself — God is talking to man. Which time frame do you think he would use? In Daniel 8, God said that 400 years were “many days.” Whose time frame was God using there? As one commentator correctly noted: “Whoever speaks to men, must speak according to the human mode of viewing things, or give notice if he does otherwise.”

Everything about this book, from the beginning to the end, shouts “Soon!” Let’s pay close attention to what this book is telling us over and over about its own time frame.

Why was Revelation written? In studying any book, one should always begin with same question: Why was the book written? What was its initial purpose?

A short answer to this question is that the book of Revelation was written to provide comfort and encouragement to the people of God who were suffering

persecution. The book was written to convince the church that God had not abandoned them. It was written to convince them that the victory was theirs!

**Revelation 6:10** — *And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?*

**Revelation 17:14** — *These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.*

We will have much more to say later about the theme of the book and its initial audience, but one thing we can say now is that we should be very wary of any view that makes our own generation the focus of this book! This book was written to first century Christians suffering persecution, and any interpretation that ignores their suffering is a fatally flawed interpretation.

God was not comforting persecuted first century Christians by telling them about some great battle that would happen 2000 or more years later! Their persecution was a first century problem, and this book gives them a first century answer. Revelation was written to provide hope, comfort, and encouragement to first century Christians who were suffering severe persecution.

What is the context of Revelation? Let me ask a related question — is the book of Revelation one book or two books? I think we would all agree that it is one book — and yet we often treat it as if it were two books. That is a mistake — Revelation is a single unified book, and we must treat it that way if we are to have any hope in understanding it.

In what way do people often treat Revelation as two books? They drive a wedge between the letters to the seven churches in Chapters 2-3 and the vision that begins in Chapter 4.

But how is that issue related to our question — what is the context of Revelation? The answer is that Chapters 2 and 3 are the context of Revelation. Those letters provide detailed descriptions of what was happening in the cities to which the book of Revelation was first delivered. Those letters give us the all-important context of the book.

If our view of the vision in Chapters 4-22 doesn't make any sense when viewed next to the letters in Chapters 2-3, then our view of that vision is wrong.

Let me give you an example. Soon we will consider the identity of the villain in this book. In my view the villain is Rome. Many incorrect views of Revelation are based on the mistaken view that the focus of this book is Jerusalem rather than Rome. Let me ask a question: If the focus in this book is Jerusalem, then why does the book begin with seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor? What did those congregations have to do with Jerusalem? The answer is very little if anything, but they had everything to do with Rome.

Asia was the epicenter of the imperial Roman cult, and the cities in Asia competed for the privilege of erecting a temple. In 29 BC Pergamum was the first to erect a temple, and Smyrna the second in AD 21. Ephesus was the third, and it was especially linked with establishing the Flavian dynasty (Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian) in Asia. A twenty foot statue of Titus (some think Domitian) was erected in the temple there. Worship of the emperor in Asia Minor was meant to bind the province of Asia together under the *pax Romana*.

If anyone ever tells you that Revelation is not focused on Rome or the Roman emperors, ask them why the book begins with the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Asia Minor was known for its pro-Roman zeal, especially in terms of the imperial cult.

When we get to Chapters 2 and 3, let's be sure to read those letters with an understanding that those seven letters set the stage for everything else that follows in this book. If that is not the case, then why are they there? Why did God include them? The answer is that those letters are included because they provide the context for what follows. Too many Christians had gotten "cozy with a pagan world," and so Revelation calls them to choose allegiance to Christ or to the emperor.

If there are any today who worry whether Revelation is relevant in our modern world, they need not worry about that — and the opening seven letters are a big reason why. Those seven letters peg Revelation firmly to our world. Their problems are also our problems. Their issues with the Roman state are largely our issues with the modern state. They needed hope and comfort, and so do we. They needed to know that they had the victory, and so do we. They needed to know that the glorified Christ loves and cares for his church — and so do we.

What is the context of Revelation? We find that in the seven letters.