

Lesson 6

Chapter 1

Revelation 1:1-3

1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: 2 Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. 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.

We are about to proceed through the text a few verses at a time, and we should recall the truism that dissection is not infrequently the death of beauty. If this book is an oil painting from God (as it is sometimes described) then we need to do more than just analyze each individual brushstroke. We need to keep the entire painting in mind, and we need to frequently step back so we can see the entire painting.

Verse 1 tells us that the revelation in this book is from Christ, that it was received by John, and that it concerned things that must shortly come to pass.

Many “liberal” commentaries reject the notions that this revelation is from Christ and that John received and recorded it, and the “conservative” commentaries rightly castigate them for disbelieving the opening words of the book they purport to explain. **But many of those same “conservative” commen-**

aries then proceed to ignore the equally clear statement in the same opening verse that this revelation concerns things that must shortly come to pass! Why don't we just believe ALL of verse 1?

“The Revelation **of** Jesus Christ” means that the Revelation is given **by** Jesus Christ, not that it is a Revelation **about** Jesus Christ, although it certainly does have much to tell us about Jesus Christ and about his body, the church.

The Greek word for Revelation is *Apokalupsis* where “Apo” means “away from” and “kalupsis” means a “veiling.” Thus, the Revelation is an unveiling. The message of the book is not hidden or veiled, but rather it is unveiled. It may have formerly been a mystery, but no longer. This book unveils the struggles through which the church would pass and unveils its ultimate triumph under Christ.

This same word translated “revelation” is used elsewhere in the Bible but in this book it is used only here. In Galatians 1:11-12, we see that Paul received the gospel by *apokalupsis* from Jesus Christ. In Galatians 2:2, Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem “by revelation” to preach. See also 1 Corinthians 14:6 and Ephesians 1:17.

The story of the Bible is one of revelation, with the ultimate revelation being Jesus' perfect revelation of the Father. In John 14:9, Jesus said, “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?” In God the Father there is no Christ-unlikeness! If you want to know how God the Father would react to something or someone, look in the gospels to see how Jesus reacted. When you see Jesus, you see the Father. God the Son reveals God the Father perfectly.

It is a wonderful and comforting thought to know that **God reveals**. God wants to us know; He wants us to understand; He is not in the business of hiding things from us. Men, by contrast, try to hide from God as in the Garden, and they try to hide their evil deeds. When Christ comes, he will “bring to light the hidden things of darkness” (1 Corinthians 4:5). In Revelation 6:15, we will find people who say to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” God reveals; Man hides. What a contrast!

The time frame given here is crucial to understanding the book. John was shown things that “must shortly come to pass” in verse 1 and was told that “the time is at hand” in verse 3. In other contexts, the interpretation of those

clear statements would present no difficulty, and yet here for some reason they are almost universally ignored, rejected, or explained away.

Under what theory of interpretation should we take “must shortly come to pass” to mean “must come to pass thousands of years from now”? Under what theory of interpretation should we take “the time is at hand” to mean “the time is not at hand”? These statements could not be more clear — this book concerns things that “must shortly come to pass.” “The time is at hand!” Those premillennialists who pride themselves in interpreting each word of the Bible **literally** should start with these words in the opening verses of the book!

If we can't understand what “must shortly come to pass” means in verse 1, what hope will we have when we get to 16:13? “And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet.”

Notice the word “must” in verse 1. The things in this book “must” soon take place. God has spoken, and Rome has been judged. Those judgments must now take place. Those who first read this book needed to know that this judgment of Rome would come soon. God tells them it *must* come soon!

One of the many books about Revelation available on Amazon is entitled “Time’s Up!” What caught my attention was the book’s subtitle: “How the Bible Shows Us the End is at Hand.” What do you suppose the author of the book meant by that phrase, “the end is at hand?” We know what he meant — and it is the same phrase we find in verse 3: “for the time is at hand!” He seemed to know what that phrase means when he wrote his own book — why can't he understand it in verse 3?

In verse 3, a blessing is given to those who read and keep the book. This book is meant to be understood! Otherwise that blessing is just an empty promise!

In fact, there are seven blessings in this book:

- Those who read, hear, and obey are blessed in verse 3.
- Those who die in the Lord are blessed in 14:13.
- Those who are awake and watchful are blessed in 16:15.
- Those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb are blessed in 19:9.
- Those who share in the first resurrection are blessed in 20:6.
- Those who keep the words of this book are blessed in 22:7.

- Those who do what God commands are blessed in 22:14.

There are a remarkable number of “hidden sevens” in this book. By one count there are 29 different words that occur precisely seven times in this book. The word “signified” in verse 1 is one such word, and it is also a clear link to the gospel of John, which uses the same word repeatedly to describe the miracles of Christ.

Notice that John refers to “he” who reads and “they” who hear. Typically, a public reader would have read the revelation in front of an assembly, and in doing so, both were blessed.

It is a great privilege to hear God’s word read in our own language. Not everyone enjoys this privilege. The scripture reading is one of the most important parts of our worship service. The secret to spiritual renewal is time with God’s word.

Revelation 1:4-5a

4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; 5a And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth.

The seven churches addressed here and in Chapters 2-3 were not the only churches in Asia. In particular, Colossae (Colossians 1:2), Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13), Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12; Acts 20:5), and Miletus (Acts 20:17) also had congregations. Why then single out these seven?

Some suggest that these seven churches were the centers of seven postal districts. Others feel that John must have had some special relationship with these seven churches. Still others feel that since the number seven is used 54 times in this book in a manner that often depicts perfection or completeness, this may have been John’s way of addressing the book to all churches. I think the latter is most likely.

And as we said in the introduction, if this book is all about Jerusalem (as some people suggest), then why does the book begin with letters to the churches of Asia Minor — the very area where Caesar worship was most popular and the persecution that it caused was most severe? What did these congregations have to do with Jerusalem? Nothing, but they had everything to do with Rome.

The phrase “from him which is, and which was, and which is to come” in verse 4 is similar to other descriptions and titles for God. For example, in Exodus 3:14 God says “I am that I am,” and in John 8:58, Jesus says “Before Abraham was, I am.” In Hebrews 13:8, Jesus is described as being the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The Greek in verse 4 is quite unusual. A literal translation might be “The Being, the Was, the Coming,” or “The Being One and the Was One and the Coming One.” The definite article precedes each of the nouns in the Greek: “the was, the is, the is to come.”

Barclay tells us that John bursts the bonds of grammar to show his reverence for God. Where we have “from him who is,” John retains the nominative case and in effect has “from he who is.” John’s reverence for God will not allow him to alter the form of his name even when the grammar demands it.

Further, where we have “from him who was,” John has “from the ‘he was.’” John uses a grammatically impossible construction to avoid using a form of “to become” that might imply that God could change. Those suffering persecution were particularly concerned with the changelessness of God. He had saved his people in the past—he would save them now.

There is a very unusual form of the Trinity in these verses in that we have the Father, the Son, and the *Seven Spirits* who are before God’s throne. The figure of the seven spirits is used elsewhere in this book.

Revelation 3:1 — *And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath **the seven Spirits of God**, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.*

Revelation 4:5 — *And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are **the seven Spirits of God**.*

Revelation 5:6 — *And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are **the seven Spirits of God** sent forth into all the earth.*

Some suggest that the Spirit is **one** in name but **sevenfold** in virtue, and they point to Isaiah 11, where we read:

Isaiah 11:2 — *And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.*

But there are only six virtues listed there! The seventh is the spirit of godliness and is found in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Others suggests that the seven spirits may correspond to the seven churches.

I think the best explanation is to view the number seven figuratively. Seven denotes divine perfection, and so the number seven is used here to describe the Holy Spirit. And for those who say they take all of the numbers in this book literally, they have an immediate problem here in verse 4. Do we see here the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost — or do we see seven Holy Ghosts? I think we are seeing the one Holy Ghost described figuratively using the number seven.

One last point on this — note what Revelation 5:6 (which we read a moment ago) said: the Lamb has “seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.” We saw a similar image when we studied Zechariah 3:9. There we noted that eyes depict knowledge, so the seven eyes depict the perfect knowledge of God — he knows everything that can be known.

This passage contains several descriptions of Christ. Jesus is called a witness because he has first hand knowledge of God. He is the perfect witness.

John 18:37 — *Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.*

Jesus is the first-born of the dead. This description points to the resurrection of Christ. Paul used the phrase “first-born of the dead” in Colossians 1:18 and the phrase “firstfruits of them that sleep” in 1 Corinthians 15:20.

The term “first-born” also points to preeminence. Jesus is the one with power and honor, the one in first place. In Psalm 89:27, God said of David that “I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.” David was not the first-born son of his father Jesse but he was certainly the preeminent son of Jesse.

Colossians 1:15,18 — Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: ... And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Jesus is the prince or ruler of kings. This may refer again to Psalm 89:27, this time as a reference to the Messiah rather than just to David. Nero and Domitian thought they were all powerful and answerable to no one, and yet Jesus was their king. That Jesus is the King of kings means that Jesus is the King over everyone and everything. We do not make Jesus king when we obey him — we obey Jesus because he is already king!

Hal Lindsey claims that Jesus is **not** ruling now. **But what does the Bible say?** In 1 Peter 3:22, we see that all powers have been made subject to him. In Ephesians 1:22, we read that all things are in subjection under him. In Revelation 2:27, we see that Jesus has power over nations. Finally, in Matthew 28:18, we see that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus is king!

Revelation 1:5b-6

5b Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, 6 And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

This is a wonderful description of what Jesus has done for man. What did he do? He loved us. He washed us from our sins. He made us a kingdom of priests.

The phrase “*washed us from our sins in his own blood*” in the King James Version should probably read “*set us free from our sins at the price of his blood*” (although both are true). The best Greek manuscripts have ‘*lusanti*’ (freed) and not ‘*lousanti*’ (washed). As Israel was freed from Egyptian bondage to become a new kingdom, so we have been freed from the bondage of sin and death to become a new kingdom.

Note the verb tenses used here. He loves (present tense) us and set (past tense) us free. We were set free by the death of Christ, and that death was a singular past event, but it is a continuous present day expression of God’s love.

Further, Jesus made us “kings and priests” (KJV) or, likely a better translation, a kingdom of priests to God. In Exodus 19:6, God said, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” Under the old law only the priests had access to God. Through Jesus Christ everyone can now enjoy this access. Under the Old Law, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and he could do so only once a year, and even then he had a cord tied around his foot so that he could be dragged out in case he died. Now we all may **boldly** approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16; 10:19–22).

In Exodus 25:8, God said, “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” In many ways the entire Bible is a variation on that theme of God’s desire to dwell with his people. That blessing was (past tense) fulfilled perfectly in Jesus Christ. We all have access to God through Jesus. We are all priests.

The church of Christ is a kingdom of priests. Isaiah told us about it long ago.

Isaiah 61:6 — *But ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord: men shall call you the Ministers of our God.*

And Peter described the church in very similar terms.

1 Peter 2:9 — *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*

Part of our challenge in this book will be to look at things through other’s eyes. To understand the book we need to look at it through the eyes of its first century readers, but we also need to try to see things through God’s eyes. We need to see the church as God sees the church, and this book (perhaps more than any other) will help us do that — the beautiful bride of his son, the eternal kingdom, the royal priesthood.

Revelation 1:7

7 Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.

Verse 7 is John's motto: Jesus is coming to set things right! No matter how hopeless the situation may seem at the moment, Jesus is coming, and he will set things right. That's not a bad motto for us as well!

But *when* is Jesus coming? Or rather, to which coming of Christ does this verse refer? Does verse 7 refer to the final coming of Christ at the end of the world, what we often call the **second** coming of Christ?

Some would read verse 7 and say that it must be describing the final coming of Christ at the end of the world. But there are two immediate problems with that view: first, that view violates the time frame that was given to us twice just a few verses ago, and second, that view is logically flawed. Let's look first at the second of those problems.

Why do I say that it is logically incorrect to argue that the language of verse 7 can only apply to the end of the world? Because the same language is used elsewhere to describe a past event. What that means is that logically we can't look at language used elsewhere to describe a past event and say that it can only be describing a future event here. Where is it used to describe a past event?

Matthew 24:30 — And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

That verse cannot possibly refer to the end of the world because of what Jesus said just a few verses later:

Matthew 24:34 — Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:30 is describing Christ coming in judgment against Jerusalem, a first century event. Likewise, I think the similar language here in verse 7 is describing Christ coming in judgment against first century Rome.

That view solves both of the problems we mentioned earlier. It avoids the logical fallacy of arguing that the language used here can only apply to the end of the world, and it is in perfect accord with the time frame in verses 1 and 3.

There is a third reason why verse 7 is better viewed as a first century event — it is an allusion back to Zechariah 12:10, which (as we studied earlier) is confirmed by John 19:33-37 to be describing a first century event. This judgment of Rome is a different event, but the two are certainly connected: “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). Those wicked hands were *Roman* hands. (John’s gospel account is the only one that points to that prophecy from Zechariah. That is yet another link between the gospel of John and the book of Revelation.)

But, and this is an issue we will see later as well, verse 7 is a hard verse to give up! It has certainly been quoted a lot in sermons about the end of time! But have verses 1 and 3 been quoted when verse 7 is quoted? No. Instead, verse 7 has often been lifted right out of its context here in Chapter 1. And the same can be said about Matthew 24:30. Both have an express time frame, and neither time frame points to the end of the world.

But if verse 7 doesn’t apply to the end of the world, does that mean Jesus won’t come with the clouds? That not every eye will see him? That no one will wail because of him? No, no, and no. It just means we can’t use verse 7 to establish those things. Each can be established with other verses that do refer to the end of the world, but we shouldn’t use verse 7 or Matthew 24:30 for that purpose.

We may find ourselves violating our time frame in this book, but let’s not do it the first thing out of the chute! If we throw the time frame of verses 1 and 3 out the window for verse 7, then to what can we possibly say that time frame applies?

A better interpretation of verse 7 in view of the time frame is that this verse applies to the figurative coming of Christ to judge Rome just as the similar language in Matthew 24 referred to the figurative coming of Christ to judge Jerusalem. Yes, Jesus will one day literally come again, but I don’t think this verse is describing that second literal coming of Christ. We need to look elsewhere to see what will happen on that last great day.

And, by the way, Matthew 24 is not the only place where language like this is used to describe a past event.

Isaiah 19:1 — *Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it.*

God came in judgment against Egypt. God came in judgment against Jerusalem. God came in judgment against Rome. God will come in judgment against the entire world. Those are separate events, but similar language is used to describe each of them. Remember our rule — similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. (The same image can be used to depict different subjects.)

Notice that verse 7 tells us that not everyone would welcome this coming of Christ in judgment against Rome. The tribes of the earth would wail on account of him. In this book, we will find that the wicked are described as those who dwell on earth. To God's people, Christ's coming is a promise of hope, but to the enemies of Christ his coming is a threat. That is something that is true about every coming of Christ, including the one still yet to occur.