

REVEALED

UNCOVERING THE MYSTERY OF REVELATION

Revelation 1:1-17

Like a son of man: human

Long robe: dignity, high office, priestly

Sash: victorious warrior

White hair: wisdom, respect

- Daniel 7:9; Isaiah 43:13

Blazing fire: eyes of God

Bare feet/bronze: priestly/solid

Voice: God's arrival

- Ezekiel 43:2

Right hand: power/blessing

Sword: word

Brilliance: divinity

- Daniel 10:6; Matthew 17:2

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West Valley Church
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5/22/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part One: Prologue
Revelation 1:1-17

Play video #1

That was the super-dramatic introduction to a National Geographic Channel documentary on the book of Revelation. That seems like how a lot of us feel when we talk about the book of Revelation, doesn't it? Lots of drama, mystery, and plenty of Armageddon-type destruction. Or, if you've been around the church since the 1970's, the book of Revelation might make you think of this:

Play video #2

How many of you remember that? Believe it or not, that cheesy movie caused a lot of fear in people.

There was a recent attempt to create a movie from a best-selling series of books from around 20 years ago, called the "Left Behind Series." Unfortunately, not even Nicholas Cage could bring credibility to that storyline:

Play video #3

Despite having Nicholas Cage as an actor, that movie was roundly panned by critics. It was based on the first of a series of 8 books written from the mid-1990's to the early 2000's, that propagated the fear that we were in the end times. These books joined multiple other books that have been written to warn us that the end of the world was about to happen. These books have claimed the end of the World would happen in 1980, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1995, 2000, 2001 – on and on, all of which failed to predict the end and proved their falsehood – just like many other books written recently, books written about plasma-colored planetary satellites and omens, harbingers, and Indiana Jones style stories of Christian heroes in Iran.

Understanding the book of Revelation is a challenge for anyone, whether you are a casual reader or attempting to really dig into its truths. Most scholars agree that Revelation is "one of the most misunderstood"¹ of the books of the Bible. And by the way, it is titled "Revelation," not "Revelations." I don't mean to be a stickler but if you are going to use the book to predict the end of the world, at least get the title right. Revelation is much more than a "caboose" conclusion to the train that is the Bible. "The book stands on its own, and at the same time it complements and lives competently within the context of the over-arching story of God's redemption throughout the whole of (Scripture), Old and New. Read within the context of the

¹ Rotz, *Why Revelation?*

rest of Scripture, Revelation has a message (that) “The church must take...seriously.”²

In today’s popular Christianity, the original intent and messages that can be mined from within Revelation have been buried under the debris of alarmists, conspiracy theorists, self-proclaimed sooth-sayers and fiction-writing profiteers. With the proliferation and swiftness of communication and news reports in today’s culture, some are quick to see each headline-grabbing national or global crisis and catastrophe as a cataclysmic event that must be hidden within the harbingers of Revelation...When today’s reader carries that baggage into the interpretation, the result is that “Christians have lost its message of hope and encouragement, which is balanced by warning and responsibility.”³ To allow the Holy Spirit to speak through the text (means we will have to let go of) those presuppositions, and potentially misleading claims that (we’ve been told are) within, and (we’ve got to be) willing to do the hard work of understanding it’s (original) reader’s life, faith, religious and socio-political circumstances and challenges....Reading the book with an understanding of its (original) context will allow a more accurate application to (our) Christian life and to the church (today).

Revelation begins in (the style of a letter to the churches, like Paul’s, and it was) intended for circulation among the churches of its day to encourage and strengthen and correct believers facing intense evil and persecution. The narrative then swiftly moves to apocryphal and...cryptic descriptions and metaphors that are difficult to read at face value (today). However, “Revelation is not written in some secret code that only certain people can understand. *Its purpose is not to hide but to explain.*”⁴ (Here’s a key to this:) Revelation’s prophetic voice should be understood not so much as “foretelling,” or telling the future, but as “forth-telling,” or a declaration of the Word of God. That declaration gives an over-arching narrative of God’s working in humankind: (Revelation shows) the extent to which God will go to finish evil and its impairment and death against humans, and the unending (patience) and love that God expresses, through Christ, for the sake of nations and individuals – including (us today) – to repent and avoid ultimate punishment. Revelation reveals Christ Himself in great ways, accomplishing *that* far more than being any kind of mystical roadmap for predicting end-times events or their orders. “Revelation is not as concerned with the last things as with the One who is ‘the first and last’ (Rev 1:17; 2:8; 22:13).”⁵ (So if we read it) from this perspective (we allow) the Spirit to speak to (us today as Christ’s disciples).”⁶

We want Revelation to speak to us *today* – not a secret warning of some end-time events and dates, but as the living Word of God that can transform our lives to be more like Christ. So a big part of this series will be to help us learn how to read Revelation: how to find the truth in it for us today. Because despite the mysteries,

² Rotz, *Come, Lord Jesus: Thought on Interpreting Revelation*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Rotz, *Why Revelation?*

⁵ Rotz, lecture: *Come Lord Jesus: Thoughts on Interpreting Revelation*

⁶ Michael O’Neill, *Introduction to Revelation*

despite the popular propaganda about it, Revelation will challenge us, teach us, inspire us, and encourage us – just like it did for the original readers in the first century church.

So this series is going to be an adventurous overview through the book of Revelation that we hope will help us understand it, know how to read it, how to shape our church by it, and how to be more like Christ as his followers by it.

I need to explain a couple more things about it, too. Most books of the Bible are written in a particular genre or style. For instance, Psalms and Song of Solomon are *poetry*. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are called *wisdom literature*. The Gospels are *narrative* and the letters of the New Testament are called *epistles* or letters. But Revelation actually has *three* different genres or styles. One style is called apocalyptic. We get that from the word that John uses in the first chapter, which is translated as “revelation” – which is where we get the title of the book. Apocalyptic literature is usually associated with heavenly visions and messages about God, and about his ultimate plan for the church and the world. This style of writing uses strange symbols and metaphors. In the Old Testament, the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Haggai, and some of Isaiah and Zechariah are written in an apocalyptic style. Revelation is the only book in the New Testament written in that style.

Because apocalyptic literature is often connected to God’s ultimate destination for people, the word has come to mean “catastrophic end-times events,” but that’s not what the word originally meant. It originally simply meant “vision” or “revelation.” The book has mysterious metaphors that we are going to do our best to deconstruct and explain – and this is important – we will seek to explain both what the metaphors *do* mean and what they *do not* mean.

But Revelation is also an “epistle;” it was written like a letter to be circulated and read from church to church (we’ll talk about that in a bit). So it is also “pastoral,” meaning it instructs the church. So Revelation has a message for West Valley Church; there will be challenges and corrections and encouragement that we will get from it.

Finally, Revelation is also “wisdom literature.” That means it has an ethical expectation for each of us. We are expected to act in certain ways because of what we read in it. Wisdom, according to the Bible, is basically *knowing the right thing to do, and then doing it*. Wisdom is not only “knowing the right thing” – that’s not enough. Wisdom is finding out the right way to live, and then doing it – living it out. Revelation is also written in the style of wisdom literature, so it will have a message for each of our lives personally. Apocalyptic, epistle, and wisdom literatures: each week we will unpack the apocalyptic, *and* we will allow it to speak to the culture of West Valley Church – who we are and who we are to be, *and* we will use it to change our lives – how we will live as followers of Christ today. That’s why we have given you the reading plan and asked you to read each week’s passage with those three questions in mind, so the Holy Spirit can begin the work in your mind and spirit in preparation for what God wants us to hear on Sundays. It’s also important for you to read with us because we won’t have time to read through each chapter on Sunday

morning; it will help if you come already familiar with the passages. So can you agree to that part of the deal?

Great – then let’s start with chapter one. We’re going to look at some of the important parts of it and what they mean, discover what it says to us as a church, and then leave here with a call to action, whether today you are a Christian or not.

We need to start with the very first verse because this gives us some important perspective for reading Revelation:

“The revelation from Jesus Christ...” (Revelation 1:1a, niv, italics added)

See that word “from”? It can be translated “from,” “of,” or “by,” and all are correct. Here’s what it means: this book is from Jesus, by Jesus, and all about Jesus Christ. Christ is the revealer of what is in it, he is the source of what is in it, and what is in it is all about Jesus Christ. Everything we read in this is going to originate from Christ, be about Christ, and point us to Christ. You cannot read Revelation correctly without this understanding. You must always look for Christ in it.

Next it says:

“The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.” (Revelation 1:1a, niv, italics added)

We need to unpack that phrase, “must soon take place.” At first glance you read that and think, “How soon is soon?” This was written almost two thousand years ago; exactly when is “soon?”

To understand it, I need to introduce you to a word that we will use a lot: *eschatology*. This is a word that describes the theology of last things; it is a part of our theology that studies Scriptural references to the last things or end of things. Eschatology. Not to be confused with scatology; which is the study of poop. There are scientists who do that in order to learn about the source of the scat; I’m not knocking them. I just wouldn’t want to be them – as important as they are! For our conversation here, it’s important that we put the “E” in front! *Eschatology*.

So (if we can recover!) the phrase “must soon take place” is setting the stage for the eschatological drama: it’s telling us that what we are about to read is God’s ultimate will and desire and commitment to the completion of his plans for creation. (*repeat*). Here is as good a place as any to point out something really important about Revelation: when you read this book, *you cannot read it chronologically!* You can NOT read this as if it is an unfolding timeline of events that happen one after the other from start to finish. Reading things that way is a modern method. We live in western culture in a modern world, and we think, talk, and read in facts and in timelines. But people from the eastern culture of the first century didn’t think, talk and read that way. Revelation is not written as a timeline. So you can’t read it that way. There is a non-linear nature of Biblical prophecy and timing. The phrase is not starting a timeline or countdown. Chronology is secondary to timeliness. That’s important: the timeline is not as important as the timing!

Also, when you read the phrase “what must soon take place,” understand that it is a relative term compared to eternity. “Soon” to us is not “soon” to God. Okay?

Now quickly let me point out a couple of other critical things: verse three says:

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” (Revelation 1:3, niv)

This is what is called a “blessing,” or a “beatitude.” There are seven of these in Revelation. That’s important: first, because it reminds us that this letter, sent to the churches, was intended to be read during worship services. This book is extremely worshipful; and why wouldn’t it be – it’s about Jesus Christ! But it also introduces an important number in Revelation: the number “7.” Seven represents completeness or fullness. So the fact that there are seven statements of worshipful “blessings” means that when we read this, our blessing is complete; we will be thoroughly blessed. That’s quite a bit different than the idea that we are reading a frightening, condemning book about some kind of zombie apocalypse.

You’ll also see in verse four that it says:

“To the seven churches in the province of Asia” (Revelation 1:4a, niv).

I’ll talk more about this next week, but remember what the number seven means? Fullness. That means this is intended for *all* churches.

Then it says:

“Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. ‘Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! 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 1:4b-8)

I point this out because you need to see that the Trinity of God is represented here: God, Spirit, and Son. And did you notice that it described the Holy Spirit as the “seven-fold Spirit of God”? Don’t let that confuse you and don’t look for something deeper; it simply means the fullness of the Spirit of God – that God’s Spirit is completely God, just as the Father and the Son are completely God.

There are some other things in here, but I want to focus on one last thing before we get our takeaways from this, and that is John’s description of Jesus. It is powerful and mysterious and can be confusing:

“I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”
(Revelation 1:12-16, niv)

This is an amazing image and I need to explain it so we don't miss it. First of all, the lampstands represent the Church (capital "C") – the church universal. Then, John's descriptions of Jesus weave in descriptions of God from the Old Testament and applies them to Christ (Exodus 3:14; Psalm 89:27, 37; Daniel 3, 7, 10). But also in this description we have something that you don't want to miss that is also important to understanding Revelation: this image is *highly symbolic*. Like ALL of Revelation's metaphors, it should NOT be taken literally. In other words, this is not an actual description of how Jesus appears physically. The description points to a reality that is far greater than the image itself. That is true of ALL of the images and symbols in Revelation.

So let me give you quickly what the image of Jesus represents, and then let's get to our takeaways. These are important because right off the bat we are given a description of Jesus – the One who is revealed in this book, who the book is all about.

Like a son of man: human

It's interesting that we start with this; first and foremost it is important to remember that God loved us so much that he became one of us. If you are not a Christian, you need to know that the Jesus Christ we follow is a God who became one of us in order to show you how much he loves you.

Next is the...

Long robe: dignity, high office, priestly

Jesus is the King of all Kings and according to Scripture is our Great High Priest – the One who has gone before the Father on our behalf, making things right between us and God.

Next is the...

Sash: victorious warrior

This was like a belt worn across the chest – something that a great warrior would wear. This means that Jesus Christ himself goes into battle for us – and wins.

Next is the...

***White hair:* wisdom, respect**

A person with white hair was someone who lived long, had gained wisdom and deserved great respect. This also calls to mind God's name of "Ancient of Days," (Daniel 7:9; Isaiah 43:13) which also represents God's grandfatherly love and tenderness toward sinners.

Next then is...

***Blazing Fire:* eyes of God**

The mythology of the day was that the gods had eyes that were burning fire, so this is a representation of God.

Then there is...

***Bare feet/Bronze:* priestly/solid**

The bare feet show that he is in the Holiest places, like Moses had to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. Everywhere Jesus stands is holy ground. That they are bronze represents purity and stability.

Then there is...

***Voice:* God's arrival**

This is the first of three times in Revelation that Jesus' voice is described like this. Ezekiel 43:2 associates this sound as preceding the arrival of God, announcing his coming.

Next is his...

***Right hand:* power/blessing**

In that culture, the right hand was symbolic of great power (warriors usually used their sword with their right hand) and also the source of blessing. Fathers placed their right hand on their children to bless them. Remember that the seven stars in his hand brought to mind the menorah – a lampstand with seven candles – which represented the Church (of all time and all places).

Next to last is the...

Sword: word

Jesus doesn't have an actual sword coming out of his mouth; the image communicates the power of Jesus' word – that with a word he will strike down his enemies. The description is of a soldier's fighting sword.

Finally is Jesus'...

Brilliance: divinity

This represents his beauty, sanctity, his transcendence above all things, his strength – in other words, it is one final and complete reminder that Jesus is God. (Daniel 10:6; Matthew 17:2)

Does that help you understand who Jesus is? He isn't just some peace-loving person in ancient history who offended the authorities and got himself killed. Jesus Christ is the human high priest wise warrior God with eyes of fire that sees all things, the One who is stable – solid through and through there is no moving or shaking with him – his arrival is like a tidal wave and his words alone can cut his enemies in half. He has given the church all his power and all his blessing and his brilliant, holy love is blinding in its purity and power. *That*, my friends, is your God.

Now, what can we take away from all this? I think we can find it in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter:

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” (Revelation 1:5b-6,niv)

First of all, remember that this is like Paul's letters, so Revelation is going to be *pastoral*; it has something to say to West Valley Church. For this day, it is this: our church is supposed to bring Glory to Jesus Christ. In everything we do, we are to proclaim Jesus, point to Jesus, prioritize Jesus, and praise Jesus. Everything we do is about Jesus Christ! If there is ever anything we are doing that no longer proclaims and praises Jesus, we need to stop doing it *immediately* – no matter how good it is, no matter how many people are involved, and no matter how much time or money we put into it. If it doesn't praise and point people to Jesus then what we are doing is worthless. You should be able to look at anything we are doing and quickly see the priority of Jesus; it should reflect him and his heart of love and his mission for people. Folks, Revelation is going to talk about the end of all things; we don't have time to waste even a minute of what we are doing at this church if it's not about and for Jesus Christ.

So what's the word out of this for our own lives personally? Remember, Revelation is also wisdom literature; it is telling us how to live.

First of all, if you are not a Christian today, there should be some very important things you have heard about God. One is that it is a fearful thing to be confronted with this God if you are an enemy of his. And I might remind you that Jesus said, “Whoever is not with me is against me,” (Matthew 12:30), so if you cannot say that

you are “with him,” you will meet this Jesus one day at the end of your life and it will be a terrible thing for you. I can’t sugar coat it. You might want to reconsider having your God be Jesus, and becoming one of his followers. Because when you come to him, you will find him to be the God who loves you deeply, not one who scares you. As you can see in this verse, he loves you! He wants you to be his, and he even spilled his own blood and allowed himself to be killed so that you could be his follower, so that your sins could be paid for and forgiven and you could be free. In a moment, I’m going to give you a chance to talk to Jesus himself about that.

Now if you *are* a Christian, this chapter makes it clear: you and I are high priests. We are the ones who are supposed to help people see and meet the loving God. We are the ones who represent Jesus to those who don’t know him, so their sins can be forgiven. If nothing else, Revelation reminds you that there is an ultimate end to this world, and there is an ultimate purpose for your life until then: it is to help people meet the God who loves them, frees them from their sins, and has shed his blood and died for them. You do that by loving people and telling them about your God who loves them. You *know* it is the right thing to do, but wisdom is *more* than knowing it – it is *doing* it. When will you do it? Will you commit to making this your priority, Christian?

Pray: You are before this very God that Revelation described for us. You’ve seen him – Revelation has shown him to you. Will you be his follower, his child, his disciple, or will you be his enemy? Things are going to get very tough in this life – you’ll see that in the book of Revelation. Don’t you want to be on the side of the One who wins? Don’t you want the One who wins to be on your side? Pray to accept him.

Christian: time is short! We don’t have time to waste! Think of three people you are close to who are not Christians. Pray for them right now. Ask God to help you THIS WEEK to introduce them to Jesus. If it doesn’t happen this week, pray for it again next week. And the next. And the next.

Amen.