

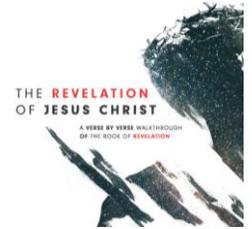
Title: Revelation, Part 1: Introduction

Speaker: Charles Stone

Big idea: To best understand Revelation, first step back to see the big picture.

Memory verse of the month: Blessed is the one who reads 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.

(Rev. 1.3)



I enjoy a good TV show or a good movie. I like action, police TV shows, and sci-fi. I do not like Hallmark kissy-kissy movies as I call them. I know some of you do and I don't mean to offend you by my not liking them.

One of the shows Sherryl and I enjoy together is a true reality show called Alone. The storyline is this: they plop 10 people down in some remote area of the world, several times it's been remote areas on Vancouver Island. They are placed by themselves several miles apart and must survive alone as long as they can. They are allowed to bring 10 items and with those 10 items so they have to build their shelter, catch and cook food, deal with the loneliness, and survive the cold and wildlife threats all they while they are videotaping their experiences. The one who lasts the longest, wins a bunch of money. And they are provided with video equipment for them to tape their experience. Their experiences are then crafted into this TV show. Fascinating. We are hooked.

This show transports you into a virtual reality on-screen for 40 minutes per show, after you take our commercials. You mentally step out of real reality for a bit, and enter this new reality. That's what a good TV show or movie does.

There is a book in the Bible that is packed full of intense action and fantastic, colorful images that takes us into a new reality, so to speak, or actually real spiritual reality. This book in the Bible describes these hard to picture images about historical events and the future that have been understood in various ways throughout history. It's the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible that we begin our study on today.

The book was originally read to people as they listened, and not read by the masses. When it was read to them it would do somewhat like what a good movie in the theater does to us. You know the experience. The lights go down, the screen lights up and our perception of the current world fades as the movie shifts our attention and experience into this new, on-screen, reality. For those 2 hours, if it's a good movie, our world is that movie and we are not so aware of the reality around us. Our perception, for a while, has been shifted.

For those early Christians, Christ had come. People had believed. They were still a tiny group relative to the population. The Roman world was wicked. Oppression and idol worship abounded. The emperor cult flourished. They were persecuted. Some began to wonder *where is God in all this?* Had they done the right thing by coming to Christ? Where was real power anyway... in the state or in Jesus?

Then comes the work of the Spirit in John's life to write this book through a vision but not as a book of riddles. Rather, Leon Morris writes, "[It was sent to a little, persecuted, frustrated church, one which did not know what to make of the situation in which it found itself. John writes to meet the need of that church.](#)"¹ John changes their perception of reality by giving them, and us, a glimpse behind the curtain of visible history so that we can see what is really going on from a heavenly perspective, what the future holds, and be comforted about who is really in charge.

God is. The Christ. The Lion of Judah.

That's what the book of revelation does for us.

¹ Morris, L. (1987). [Revelation: an introduction and commentary](#) (Vol. 20, p. 22). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Yet, it is one of the most mysterious, confusing, and controversial books in all the Bible. Christians throughout the ages have used it to predict the exact date of Jesus' second coming or the end of the world. After those dates passed without His return or the end of the world, it required those who made the original prediction to revise their predictions.

To be candid, I have never taught a full series of messages on Revelation. Partly out of fear that I might offend some if I present a different view from theirs ...partly out of concern for the extra time it would take to prepare messages on the book...partly out of my concern that some people I've known in the past have fixated on Revelation the end times, and by bringing such a series I didn't want to feed unhealthy fixations...and partly out of the difficulty in understanding it.

But I am setting those fears aside and today we begin this series of messages on this difficult book.

Why now you may wonder?

Recent world events and rapid cultural changes have prompted me. With the escalation of racial violence in the US prior to the election (and even now), the deepening oppression and control of people by the communist government in China, the covid crisis and the possibility of government overreach into our lives unrelated to covid, the fall of many big name Christian celebrities, the cancel culture movement on fire in the US which shames and punishes those with Biblical counter-cultural opinions, and the growing restrictions by big Tech on freedom of speech, I believe that a real prospect of persecution of Christians in Canada and the US looms greater now than at any other time in my life. Christianity will face cultural headwinds it has never faced before in the west.

You see Revelation challenges Christ followers to not compromise but to stand strong against the headwinds of culture contrary to a Christian worldview.

Those are the reasons I'm bringing this series now.

And, assuming God gives me the energy over the next 3-4 years to do the full time role as lead pastor at WP, I want to give myself to building up the body of Christ here so that you will be able to stand strong against those headwinds and as Paul says in Eph 6, after you have done everything, to stand. So, discipleship, without losing our evangelism and outreach edge, will be a primary focus the next few years.

So here's today's big idea

[Big idea: To best understand Revelation, first step back to see the big picture.](#)

Today I want to give you the big picture or the bird's eye look at the book, the step back look. This high level look will include 4 components.

1. I will explain the common approaches that have been used to interpret Revelation.
2. I will suggest some wise principles to keep in mind as your read, study, and understand it for yourself.
3. I will give some steps you can take to get the most out of this series.
4. I will bring us up to the "starting line" with 4 questions to ponder this week and an assignment.

That's what we'll do today.

[The overall theme of Revelation:](#)

1. [The victory of Christ and His church.](#)
2. [Things are not always as they seem.](#)

John the Apostle wrote Revelation around 90-95 AD during Emperor Domitian's reign. He regarded himself as a god and you proved your loyalty to him by worshipping him. If you didn't, which many Christians didn't, you were excluded from certain jobs or socially ostracized or imprisoned and some were even killed for their faith.

Revelation is fundamentally God's revealing through visions a glimpse of His past, present, and future work in redemptive history and "how the nature and operation of heaven, [the spiritual realm] relates to this."² God reveals these visions to the Apostle John who in turn communicates them to seven churches in Asia through this circular letter, a letter meant to be circulated among several churches. Although most current scholars believe that the Apostle John authored the book, a few believe it could be another person named John.

The book combines parts of [three different kinds of writing](#)

1. [apocalyptic](#) (deals with end times),
2. [prophecy](#), (deals with future things)
3. and [letter](#) or epistle.

An apocalyptic writing would be an intensification of prophecy. A letter carried a pastoral focus to challenge believers to walk with God. Revelation includes all three of these kinds.

So, Revelation is both foretelling the future and forthtelling exhortations to Christians on how to live for Jesus in difficult times.

"It was written in a particular time and place to particular people. But it's also saturated with symbolism and prophecy, which has led to several methods of interpretation. Traditionally, interpreters have approached Revelation in four primary ways."

5 Interpretation Approaches

- [Approach 1: Revelation is only a chronological map of church history from Jesus' first to His second coming \(Historicist\).](#)
- [Approach 2: Revelation relates only to what happened to the Christians in the first century \(Preterist\).](#)
- [Approach 3: Revelation primarily gives the chronological events immediately preceding the end of \(Futurist, dispensationalism, premillennialism\).](#)
- [Approach 4: Revelation deals only with spiritual truths \(good vs evil\) with no reference to time or events \(Idealist\).](#)
- [Approach 5: One that incorporates the strengths of the other views \(Eclectic\) my approach.](#)

This is the approach I'm taking and this formula illustrates it.

[Interpreting revelation = 1st century context + insight about the ongoing struggle between good and evil + future events yet to come](#)

Some of you know so much more than I do about Revelation. You may have scores of books you've read and watched many videos on Revelation. It might be helpful to know how I am preparing these messages. I picked 7 highly regarded books and commentaries, almost 1500 pages, that I will be reading as I study and prepare. They reflect several of these views and all are solidly biblical.

I share this because I don't have the bandwidth to read more books or view more videos. But, here's how you can help if you want to recommend a resource to me. If you read a great book or saw a great video on Revelation, write out a 100 word or less summary, about a half page, and send that to me and I will definitely read it. But, to set expectations, I can't add to my study schedule reading more books or watching time intensive videos. I hope you understand. And I think I have a good blend of some of the best resources that represent divergent views.

Let's consider some wise principles to keep in mind as you read and study this book.

² Beale, G. K., & Campbell, D. H. (2015). [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (p. 5). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Wise Principles

Wise principle 1. Keep context in mind.

Imagine 4 concentric circles.

The outer circle represents **God's eternal plan** for all for the universe from before time began until His plan is complete. So we must see the book of Revelation and its message as set within God's grand story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

The second circle is **Scripture**. We understand Scripture from Scripture. That is, the Bible informs other parts of the Bible to help us understand what it means. Although there are no direct quotations from the OT, Revelation contains more allusions and references to the OT than all the NT books together, over 500. So Revelation is not just a springboard for looking forward, but one that also looks back.

The third circle is the **cultural context** of the time in which Revelation was written and when those early Christians faced persecution. I already touched on this.

And finally, the final smaller circle, is what prophetically it may say (**prophecy**) and there are many differing opinions. Revelation speaks about the future and about the times we currently live in. It is not just a book of history nor a book of prophecy, but a book about living the Christian life well.

Those early Christians didn't know the terms pre-tribulation, Post-trib, or amillennialism (these are all terms associated with interpreting Revelation). It's unwise to try to force fit ideas that came a long time after the Scriptures were written... to supersede the intended message for those early Christians, which is also the message for us, one of hope in persecution and that Jesus ultimately wins. Neither can we use today's news as the key to interpreting Revelation. **"If our interpretation doesn't make sense for the original readers, we've probably missed the meaning of the passage."**
New slide <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/how-read-revelation>

Wise 2. Read with humility.

Unless you are an expert in the book of Revelation, and I am not, we probably all have a hodgepodge of ideas about what we think it means. Nobody has a corner on everything Revelation has to say. I don't have all the answers. Sometimes I will say, I'm not sure what this means. Some believe it means this and some believe it means that. There are many views held by Godly Christians and good biblical scholars that may differ from our views. I am going to do my best to approach this book with an open mind to learn and grow myself. My conclusions may differ from yours. That doesn't make mine right nor yours wrong.

However, beware of those who propose a Revelation-made-easy approach, those that imply they have all the answers to even the most minute details about the book and claim absolute knowledge. Be wary. You can go online and see these elaborate **charts** about Revelation that make your head swim.

Wise 3. Avoid forcing meanings.

This relates to reading with humility. We must not be dogmatic and we must hold loosely our pre-conceptions. It's important to know what I am dogmatic about. I approach Revelation with these pre-conceptions summarized in these 4 statements.

Jesus is coming again.

We don't know when.

He's coming sooner than later.

So we better be ready.

We can all agree on these because they are clear first order truths. And on these four I am dogmatic. However, there are second order realities such as chronologies of future events, exact meanings of images, what exactly happens in the end times, does Jesus return before or after what is called the tribulation. Those are second order realities.

Take Revelation seriously, but not always literally. John uses much imagery and symbolism. Yet symbolic language can and does convey literal truth and describe literal historical events. However, if you force literal interpretations on picture language, you can miss John's intending meaning.

One humorous example to illustrate this is in Revelation 17:9. [seven hills on which the woman sits](#). If you took that literally, you would have to conclude one of two things. What would they be? You either have to conclude that John refers to a woman the size of the Jolly Green Giant or conclude that these seven hills are teeny- tiny so that a normal sized woman could sit on them. The persecuted Christians, however, would immediately know that that phrase refers to Rome which was built on 7 hills. So much of the symbolism is rooted in knowledge of the first century.

The general rule for understanding revelation is to interpret symbolically unless the context calls for a literal meaning.

Wise 4. Don't major on the minors.

In other words, don't get lost in the details. As you read a chapter or a section, try to sum up the section with one short statement. Keep the high level view in mind first, like a funnel, before going for the details. The main thing is to make the main thing, the main thing.

Revelation is not just about future things (eschatology), but it's about how to stay faithful to Jesus now when you suffer because of your faith when you face difficulty, and when you live in a world that tempts you to compromise (ethics). It's a book that bolsters our confidence that God is in charge. He is the sovereign God in human history.

It's a book to encourage us that Jesus will return and will restore things to their original intent and bless His faithful followers. It's a book that speaks of what Jesus did for us on the cross, that He is the unique Son of God and is worthy of our worship. The word 'Lamb' is one of Jesus' major titles in the Bible and it occurs 29 times in Revelation. It's a book that speaks to the fact that righteousness will prevail. It's a book about God's deep desire to rescue those far from Him. It's a book that elevates worship of God in Christ.

Wise 5. Commit to active learning.

Take personal ownership to understand Revelation. Over the next 3 years, we are going to emphasize deeper discipleship which means I will challenge you to resist being a passive Christian learner, if you are, and to accept being an active one. I will challenge you and we will help you invest more time, energy, and effort into your personal spiritual growth.

Steps to get the most out of this series.

When we studied 1 John, I introduced the [retention triangle](#) which represents 3 ways you can retain more of the truth in this series and thus, get the most out of it.

Read Record Reflect

Read means to read from the beginning of Revelation up through the upcoming passage each week. We'll be in this series through October. If you read 5 days a week you will become an expert on what Revelation is all about and the Holy Spirit will drive truth deeper into your heart. As we get further into the book, you'll need to read in sections. Take 10 minutes a day. We also have something I've given you before called the [RIPE Reading Guide](#) which is an ancient way to read and reflect over God's word. You can download it from our website.

Record by taking notes. The research tells us that when you take notes learning gets imbedded more deeply. For those of you who don't take notes, why not try it during this series? Download the sermon notes before you view our service and then take notes.

Reflect

- You can do this as you review the notes you took, read the scriptures, review the discussion questions we provide, or review what I'm calling the memory verse of the month which will be in the final questions and in the sermon guide. Here is this month's verse.
 - **Blessed is the one who reads 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. (Rev. 1.3)**
- We will also have a page on our website with more helps.
- You can also buy one of the suggested books listed in the listening guide and go even deeper.
- Here are two books I'd recommend if you'd like to go deeper:
 - Revelation Verse by Verse by Grant R. Osborne
 - Revelation: A Shorter Commentary by G. K. Beale
- You can also join a small group and learn from others as you reflect together.
- A couple of people have recommended this online source to me as well. <https://versebyverseministry.org>

Here's what we've done today. I gave you the big idea.

Big idea: To understand Revelation, first step back for the big picture.

My goal was to give you a big picture look at the book, the step back look. This high level look included 4 components.

1. I explained the 5 common approaches that have been used to interpret Revelation.
2. I suggested some wise principles to keep in mind as you read, study, and understand it for yourself.
3. I gave you some practical steps you can take to get the most out of this series.

I also said I'd bring you up to the starting line with 4 questions to ponder and an assignment.

Starting line questions/assignment

1. **Will I do my best to regularly read through Revelation the next few months ?** 5-10 minutes 5 days a week.
2. **Will I approach this book with humility and a teachable heart?** You don't know all the answers. I don't know all the answers. We will have some questions that we can't answer until we are in heaven and talking to John about it.
3. **Will I show respect to others who hold a different view from me?** Men and women who loved and love Jesus as much as you do differ on how to interpret Revelation.
4. **Will I invest my own time and energy to learn and grow through this study?** Even though the first one relates to this one, I made this one a separate one.

Will you be an active learner or a passive spectator? In the next few months and years, you will hear this challenge more and more, get serious about Jesus which means personal investment in your growth and discipleship.

The ultimate goal of John was to encourage believers that God works out His purposes even in the midst of suffering, tragedy, and what may seem to be the triumph of evil. In the end, **Jesus wins!**

We must persevere! God will reward faithfulness!