

Introduction to Revelation (Rev. 1:1-8)

Can you believe it? Today we are starting our journey through the book of Revelation! We have long anticipated this day and are excited- and terrified- at the same time to enter into the study of this incredible book of the Bible. Today we'll be walking through the first part of chapter 1 together, that serves as an introduction, but before we begin, I'm going to attempt to give my own introduction and lay down some of the groundwork we'll need first, even before the introduction that John gives us. There are several things we need to consider before seeking to understand what God's word is telling us through this book.

The first thing we need to note is the literary genre of Revelation. While the books of the Bible fit together with one common theme revealing God's plan of redemption for mankind, there are different genres of writing that we have to consider as we interpret what is written. There's historical narrative, poetry, law, wisdom literature, letters, prophecy, and the book of Revelation could be considered as prophecy, but it actually holds a more distinct category of genre in it being *Eschatological* prophecy or *Apocalyptic* prophecy. Eschatology is the fancy Greek related term for the study of the end times. Apocalypse is actually just the Greek word for "revelation," but due to the events described in the book of Revelation, it has morphed into a word perhaps conveying catastrophic, end times events. The distinction is that the book of Revelation deals not just with future events, but future events specifically concerning the end of time. Revelation is attempting to *reveal* to us God's plan of wrapping up time here on Earth as we know it.

Now the reason I mention genres is because there are nuances to each Biblical genre- distinctions that will help in interpretation. The way we look at and interpret a poetic Psalm of David is different than how we look at, interpret, and apply the historical narrative in 1 & 2 Chronicles, which is different than how we look at, interpret, and apply the Apocalyptic literature of Revelation. For example, when we read in 1 & 2 Chronicles, the author is intending to write down an orderly, chronological account of history. When it says King David did "this," and then he did "that," then afterwards his son Solomon did "this," -the events are to be understood as a chronological re-telling of history.

In contrast, in Revelation when it says this happened, then I saw this, then I saw that, the idea is not necessarily that those things will happen in that order in the future. Rather, it's more like the author, John, is attempting to convey to us something that he experienced in what I would describe as almost a dream-like state. I don't know about you, but often when I dream, it's out of order, or one thing morphs into another, or I know I'm married, but for some reason things are happening to me like I am still in high school, or I see something that down deep inside I know is actually something else, or when I wake up I have a specific resulting feeling but I can't describe in a logical coherent way exactly what I dreamed- am I the only one, or do some of you dream like that too?

This isn't *exactly* what I mean by how to view Revelation, but the language presented lends itself more to thinking in these loose "dream like," vision, cryptic terms, rather than thinking through it as a black and white, cold hard facts, chronological news report. I think John himself is not quite understanding everything as he is seeing it, but rather there are layers to the revelation- pieces of the puzzle that he is downloading one at a time as he sees them, and then he describes them to us so that we can then attempt to put the pieces together, recognize the patterns, fit the layers upon each other, connect the dots, identify the repeated words and symbols, connect things to the rest of scripture- and thus try to paint a full picture of what things *might* look like as we approach the end of time, the return of Jesus, the full experience of the Kingdom of God, and the judgement of this world. I've been working on a study sheet for many months now, that has personally helped me, in my mind put together a lot of these pieces in a way like I've never been able to before with any other study guide, and I'm actually going to give you a copy of that next week to take home and use as a study guide over the next few months.

Another thing we have to wrestle with in the Bible in addition to genres is the idea of understanding *literal* language verses *figurative* language. It might sound really good and spiritually mature to say "I take every word of the Bible literally," but the fact of the matter is that the Bible is filled with figurative, spiritual, parable type language that conveys a deeper spiritual meaning over a physical worldly meaning- and if you take those passages *literally* instead of *figuratively*, you're going to get the wrong understanding. For example, Jesus says things like "*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.*" (**John 7:53**) Ok, that's a pretty

weird statement to take literally. None of his disciples were like, ok, we want life, so come on guys, let's take a bite out of Jesus. Christianity did not become the religion of cannibalism and vampires as a result of this- why? Because Jesus used spiritual, figurative language over and over in order to convey spiritual meaning, not literal meaning. But there does exist many who take a verse like that and attempt to apply it literally and so when they partake of the Lord's Supper (Communion) they claim a miracle takes place and the bread and juice magically turn in to the flesh and blood of Jesus. I would say rather, this is just a mistake in interpretation, taking a verse literally instead of figuratively.

Another example- Jesus says of the one who believes in Him, "*from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.*" **(John 7:38)** Can you imagine all of us, as soon as we place our belief in Jesus, we start spraying water out our belly buttons? No man, that's just weird. Thankfully John clarifies in the next verse, he says Jesus said this referring to the Spirit that would be received by those who believed in Jesus.

A necessity for figurative language understanding is also present in many Old Testament prophecies. Let me give you example. The book of Luke, chapter 3, says that the 1st coming of Jesus fulfills the prophecy from Isaiah 40. Here's how Luke quotes the passage from Isaiah, he quotes: *Prepare the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight! 5 Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be lowered; The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth; 6 And all flesh will see the salvation of God!*" **(v 4-6)** Luke chapter 3 quotes this Isaiah prophecy, applying it's fulfillment specifically to when John started preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There wasn't a *literal* fulfillment of this prophecy. Bulldozers didn't magically appear and start moving dirt around to fill in ravines. Donkey powered Egyptian excavators didn't start chopping off the tops of the mountains. No, if you travel to Israel- for the most part, the same valleys and mountains that were there during Isaiah's time as well as Luke and Jesus' time are still there today. Luke is very much telling us this Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled *figuratively, spiritually*, in that the grading, excavation, land preparation work- was not *physical*, but *spiritual* in the sense that John the Baptizer was preparing the "ground" for Jesus by preaching repentance.

Now, I think in this same sense, we can look at the Old Testament prophecies and see many of them as being fulfilled *spiritually* by Jesus at His first coming, with also

many remaining to be fulfilled spiritually by His second coming and the set up of His 1000 year Earthly Kingdom. And by spiritually, I'm not implying that Jesus doesn't literally return to earth, no I think He definitely will literally appear in the clouds and will physically return, but what I mean is that many of the Old Testament prophecies remaining to be fulfilled will be fulfilled not in Earthly kingdom terms, but will rather be fulfilled by Jesus in the new, other world, Heavenly type Kingdom that He will be setting up. Now, that doesn't mean there aren't also some literal fulfillments too that will still happen- there's plenty of prophecies Jesus fulfilled in a literal sense as well- He literally was born in Bethlehem, He literally healed people, He literally was pierced for our sins- all these were Old Testament prophecies Jesus literally in a physical sense fulfilled.

The reason I say all this is because many Christians disagree over end times theology and theories due to which Old Testament prophecies they think will be fulfilled in a literal physical world sense, and which prophecies will be fulfilled in a spiritual, or Heavenly Jesus Kingdom type sense. And then beyond the Old Testament prophecies, when we get to the book of Revelation prophecies, perhaps it's even *more* important to determine if the events described are to be interpreted literally or spiritually. When it says an earthquake happens, is it talking about a literal earthquake that will shake the Earth, or is it meant to be taken somehow spiritually?

Now, this is where the understanding of Biblical literary genres will help us. If the book of Revelation is an end of time, end of the world, Apocalyptic book of eschatology, then at the very least, at some point we have to consider a literal fulfillment interpretation concerning the things that will end up causing the end of the world. If we believe this world is fading away and that Jesus' Kingdom is the thing that replaces it for all eternity, like scripture says, then we probably need to take the events described in the book of Revelation very literally. This understanding should also help us decipher which of the 4 historical views we should use in order to generally interpret what we read. These interpretations are described as Preterism, Historicism, Idealism, and Futurism.

Preterism is the idea that most, if not all of the events described in Revelation have *already* been fulfilled, primarily during the first century or at least by the fall of the Roman Empire. In language study, preterite means the past- so the idea is that what we read has already been fulfilled in some way in the past. This view doesn't make

sense concerning the end of the world, because the end of the world has not yet happened- unless I somehow missed it? Maybe the band R.E.M. saw it and knew and felt fine about it, and I just wasn't paying enough attention?

Historicism interprets Revelation as a broad overview of church history, with the symbols and events describing various time periods and empires that would happen throughout history. This viewpoint too is a wild stretch of the imagination. Often this teaching creeps in the most when looking at the 7 churches of chapters 2 and 3. Some try to explain the 7 churches as being 7 different church ages that will exist up until the end, instead of just understanding the 7 churches to be real actual churches that were written to, just like all the other New Testament letters were written to real people in real churches in real cities of the time.

Idealism sees Revelation as fully symbolic, a general description of the ongoing struggle between good and evil, as opposed to specific actual events that will take place. I would argue that there sure is a lot of specific details mentioned in Revelation for it to just be a general overview parable of good verses evil.

Lastly *Futurism*, which is the most common interpretive view amongst evangelical Christians today. It is the view that Pastor Dave and I share, that sees at least the majority of Revelation's prophecies still yet to be fulfilled. In other words we believe that the events described are in reference to literal future events. This interpretation view seems to make the most sense, if we believe that the rest of the Bible is true and that Jesus is literally coming back for His people, and that there is a final judgement from God, and that this world will end, and that there is a Heaven and a Hell.

And as we dive in further, in the weeks ahead, we'll talk a little about some of the other more detailed interpretational viewpoints: a pre-tribulation rapture, a mid-tribulation rapture, a post tribulation rapture, a 3.5 year tribulation period verses a 7 year tribulation, maybe we'll even talk a little about Dispensationalism verses Covenant Theology- but what I want to encourage you in right now is to take whatever you've learned in the past concerning the book of Revelation, try to take that out temporarily and attempt to read this book with fresh eyes. I know that sounds a little silly, and realistically that will be pretty difficult- but I want us to try. I can't tell you how many times I've had in my mind something I was told a long time ago, or

something I read, or something I just assumed- and I subconsciously inserted that interpretation in over what the book actually says. I'd be reading something for like the 10th time, and all of a sudden say to myself "Wait, it actually says *this*, and somehow I've read over it these past 9 times thinking it says *that*." So I want to caution us all in that manner.

I also want to share that most Revelation studies, even the more popular, well-known Revelation studies that are common today- I have to admit to you that I have never been very satisfied with the teaching. To me, they either haven't made much sense in light of the rest of the Bible, or in my opinion they've attempted to insert too much into what Revelation says, or they go really broad and generic and say Revelation isn't something we can really understand but here's some possibilities, or the guides and diagrams look like a jumbled mess of spaghetti, or they miss/maybe intentionally ignore a lot of the patterns and word connections present. So Pastor Dave and I are going to do our best to humbly present to you what seems to us to be the most straight forward, face value understanding of what is being presented in Revelation- nothing more, nothing less- as it ties to the rest of scripture. We don't want to forcibly insert extra ideas and interpretations into what is written, and neither do we want to take away from or ignore what is written- which is exactly the advice and warning that John gives at the end of the book, in **chapter 22 verses 18 and 19**. He writes, *"I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book."* That's a pretty strong warning, and we're going to take that very seriously.

Ok, with that being said, I can almost guarantee that there will be some times in this study in which you will immediately feel some disagreement with some particular viewpoint that we will be teaching. It might feel like a little punch to the gut. And I just want to go ahead and say right now, that that is ok. We're going to do our best to humbly present some of the different viewpoints that exist, but we're also going to present our personal convictions and how we've felt lead to attempt to teach some of the most difficult to understand passages in the Bible. And so if we happen to present a teaching that seems different than how you have heard it taught in the past or different than how you see it currently -it might even be an interpretation you find

shocking- if that happens, please don't get mad and leave the church- rather attempt to analyze your viewpoint against what we're looking at in scripture, and let's rub shoulders a little and figure this out together. We can actually greatly benefit spiritually from humbly wrestling with different viewpoints- if we do it in the right way, it will only get us closer to a better more true understanding. Pastor Dave and I's own personal understandings have been challenged as we've dug into God's word, and we've been forced to consider some different viewpoints from those that we've personally held in the past. I used to have a mindset that agreed with a lot of the popular end times theologies we find today, because that's just what I had always heard, and I had yet to take a true deep dive into it myself. But now, having put countless hours of research into looking at what the Bible actually says at plain face value, there's been quite a few personal shocking revelations -in looking at what is often taught, verses what the Bible actually says. And I'll share those revelations as we go along, but just note, I don't benefit from bucking any popular trends, I don't crave shock value, I don't become more popular or wealthy by disagreeing with any popular ideas- but Pastor Dave and I have been given the task of presenting what we honestly see God's word saying, even if that ends up making us and/or others feel uncomfortable. So we encourage you to embrace any discomfort, let any discomfort or shock cause you to dig deeper into relationship with the Lord and with His word. I encourage you to wrestle with us, stick it out with us, dialogue with us- as we study, as we aim for right, Spirit led understanding- all the while maintaining our unity under the allegiance of Jesus Christ. He is the King whose throne is in our hearts, the King who is coming back for us so that we can live with Him in His perfect Kingdom. This is God's revealing to us, this is the hope of Revelation, this is the climatic event all of Heaven and Earth is anticipating- King Jesus returning for those surrendered to Him and Him setting all things right. **Revelation 1:1-8...**

So John here is introducing in, epic fashion, what he is about to share- it seems to me that he probably actually started writing this letter in verse 4- there's where we find the traditional letter introduction stating the author and who it is written to, along with a greeting, but after writing everything it seems like John perhaps went back and added what's contained in verses 1-3, he says this is a revelation, a revealing from Jesus Christ, not just to reveal to John for John's own personal benefit, but to reveal to (verse 1) the bond-servants (plural) of Jesus. John then says this revelation of Jesus was brought to him by an angel, and that in this letter (verse 2) he has testified to the

word of God and to the testimony of Jesus, everything that he saw. He then says in verse 3 that those who read this letter, who hear these words, and who keep the things written in it- are blessed. How many of you want to be blessed? Yes, Lord bless us as we read and attempt to hear and understand and live by what is contained in this book.

Ok, verse 4, again, this is probably what was the original start of the letter, John is writing to the seven churches in Asia. Most likely, John is writing this somewhere around the years 85-95. Just for some context, the events surrounding Jesus' life, described in the Gospel books, took place around the years 1-33. Paul's letters and most of the other books of the New Testament take place after that, years 33-70, a time period in which the Roman occupation as well as Jewish leaders of Israel were becoming more and more oppressive against followers of Jesus. During these years, most all Christians left Israel and moved to cities in what biblically is known as "Asia," specifically the area we now know as modern day Turkey. Then in the year 70, the Roman government tore down the temple, every single stone, as Jesus foretold. The stones of the "temple wall" that you see people praying at- those are actually remains of a Roman fortress, not the Temple. The Roman government completely leveled the temple and burned Jerusalem to the ground. By that year 70, all Christian presence in Israel, as well as *Jewish* presence in Israel, had been completely wiped out or exiled to other countries. So this letter is most likely written several years after that event, meaning the original readers of this letter would be 2nd generation Christians, real people who had never lived in Israel, people who fully identified as "Christian" rather than Jewish, Roman, Asian, or whatever ethnicity. These 7 churches were the churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

To these real life believers, in these real life historical churches- John greets them in verse 4 with a typical Christian letter greeting as we see in other letters of the New Testament: he speaks grace and peace to them from God, the One who is present, who always has been present, and who is to still to come. Make a mental note here, because latter we'll attempt to identify a *different* entity- one who is *not*, who was, but who is to come. Not only does John give grace and peace from God, but grace and peace from the 7 spirits who are before the throne, and from Jesus. Ok, so what, or who are the 7 spirits mentioned here? Well in Zechariah 4 we have mentioned 7

lamps, and then 7 eyes of the LORD that roam throughout the earth, and actually later on in Revelation chapter 4 we are told that there are 7 lamps of fire burning before the throne of God, which are the 7 spirits of God. Then in chapter 5 we are also described a slaughtered Lamb (representing Jesus), that has 7 horns and 7 eyes, which are the 7 spirits of God. So Revelation agrees with Zechariah 4, describing 7 lamps, 7 eyes, 7 horns, all as being symbolic images that represent 7 Spirits of God. I did tell you previously that we are to take the events of Revelation very literally, but there is still a lot of figurative/spiritual/symbolic cryptic language contained throughout the book as well, and we'll do our best using context and cross referencing with other scriptures to identify when to take something literally or figuratively.

In addition to Zechariah 4, another cross reference concerning the 7 spirits is Isaiah chapter 11, where it describes the coming Messiah as a "Branch of Jesse," Jesse being King David's father, and it says of this "Branch" that *"the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of Knowledge and the fear of the LORD."* (**Isaiah 11:2**) I don't know if you counted or not, but there's actually 7 different spirits mentioned here, the Spirit of the LORD, wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, and fear of the LORD. There's a lot of 7s going on here. The Biblical number 7 often represents a fullness, a completion, a "just the right amount type number." It's typically the best number to respond with when someone asks you how many cookies you want. All this to say, within the context as it is presented, the immediate context of being included in a list with God and Jesus Christ, it appears the 7 Spirits of God are what we would typically just call the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the 7 is representative of a sevenfold ministry of God's Holy Spirit as hinted at in Isaiah 11, or at the very least it's representative of the sevenfold fullness and perfection of the Holy Spirit's activity within the trinity-being of God the Father and Jesus the Son.

Ok, so God is describes as the One who is, who was, and who is to Come, the Holy Spirit is described as the 7 Spirits of God, and then starting in **verse 5** Jesus is described with the longest, most detailed, most emphasized description- He's the *faithful witness*- He is the one who gave the fullest testimony of who God is. Not only is He the faithful witness, but Jesus is the *firstborn of the dead*- Jesus wasn't the first to be raised back to life from the dead, there are at least 3 others mentioned in scripture- but in the sense of being raised from the dead, re-birthed into a fully glorious

transformed Heavenly body- yes He was the first- the prototype life pattern that all His followers will follow in after Him. Jesus is also the *ruler of the kings of the Earth*. John didn't get to see Jesus function in that role during Jesus' life on the earth, even though the Old Testament prophecies said the Messiah would rule as the ultimate king in this fashion. Yes, Jesus' disciples and followers were very much shocked by this, that He didn't become physical king there in Israel at that time- that's how they interpreted the Old Testament prophecies, but rather Jesus would actually *later* fulfill those prophecies in a more eternal kingdom/spiritual sense, end of the world type sense, rather than in a normal every day life physical worldly literal sense. That event of Jesus coming to rule is described later in Revelation 19, as Jesus returning, judging His enemies, and ruling as ultimate king on Earth for 1000 years alongside those who have chosen Him as King.

In the 2nd half of verse 5, John then describes Jesus as the One who loves us and the One who released us from our sins by His blood- His blood spilled out as He was crucified on the cross as the ultimate fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In doing so, the old system of Levitical Priests offering sacrifices for sin was stopped, and now the new system is that His followers- whether of the Jewish tribe of Levite or not, **verse 6**- His followers are now the priests serving in His Kingdom. Later on in our Revelation study, we'll probably insert a full teaching on Daniel 9 that is a chapter often used as a connection point to the book of Revelation- that chapter in Daniel is quite often used as a proof text to support the idea that in the end times, temple sacrifices will be re-instated, assumedly in a newly rebuilt Temple as described by Ezekiel, a peace treaty between the Anti-Christ and Israel will be signed, then 3.5 years into the time of peace the treaty will be broken and sacrifices stopped, and then 3.5 years of Great tribulation led by the Anti-Christ will begin- but I think rather that passage in Daniel is more so referring to Jesus ministering for 3.5 years, then Him being cut off in His death being what ends sacrifices (forever), and then 3.5 years of Great tribulation. That simpler understanding would line up a little better with how John is setting this up in saying Jesus released us from our sins by His blood and made us into a kingdom of priests. But again, we'll look at that Daniel 9 passage much closer, later on into our study.

To *this* Jesus who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, who loves us, who died for us, who makes us priests in His Kingdom-

to Him be the glory and dominion (the rule) forever and ever. And John isn't stating this as "I wish or I hope for him to have the glory and dominion forever," -no, this is *facts*, John saw firsthand into the future that Jesus does in fact have the glory and dominion forever and ever.

John in **verse 7** then loosely references a passage from the Old Testament, concerning One coming with the clouds of Heaven, contained in Daniel 7, which in it's fullness says *"...And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a son of man was coming, (son of man seemed to be one of Jesus' favorite names for Himself, most likely because He was wanting to jog the memory of this very passage in the minds of those who met Him) And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. 14 And to Him was given dominion, Honor, and a kingdom, So that all the peoples, nations, and populations of all languages Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed."* (**Dan. 7:13-14**) So John is wanting us to recognize that the Jesus of Revelation 1 is the same Jesus of Daniel 7; and notice that here in the very beginning chapter of Revelation, the anticipation, the hope, the thing we are looking forward to, the event that is the ultimate climax of the Book of Revelation, the event that is the ultimate climax of the story of all of history- is the Heavens opening up and Jesus returning for all to see. John doesn't have his sights set on a secret beforehand rapture that he's excited about, and neither did Paul if we look at his writings, but rather the event being anticipated with eagerness, the event in which the reader is meant to anticipate, is the return of Jesus.

And here in verse 8, we then have God Jesus Himself speak, saying He is the Alpha and the Omega- that's the Greek way of saying He is the A to Z -He's the beginning and the end, the first and the last, again the Almighty, all-powerful one who is, the one who was, and the one who is to come.

This epic intro to this book builds up and arrives at the main point, declaring the whole point of this book- that Jesus is returning. The whole push, all the events described, every single thing that John writes in the book of Revelation- is pointing to this event of Jesus' 2nd coming. And that's where I'm asking us to place our focus in the weeks and months ahead of us- that no matter what happens in the world between now and Jesus' return- no matter the order of what things happen, the way in which

they happen, how God fulfills all the prophecy, whether the tribulation period is right around the corner from us or not, no matter the length, no matter what wars or rumors of wars happen- may our focus be on Almighty King Jesus returning to this world to end all that is bad and to rescue and reward His followers with His goodness.