

Series: "Hope in Hard Times"
The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation 1:1-8
(4:1; 11:19; 15:5; 19:11)

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We're starting a series on the book of Revelation. Today I'll give a general introduction to the book and then deal with a particular theme in Revelation. We'll see the ever-increasing openness of how Jesus Christ is revealed throughout this book.

Why are we spending this time on Revelation? A lot of people would rather ignore it. A pastor at my home church once said that he read Revelation one time and then left it alone. The major Protestant reformers were uncomfortable with it as well. Martin Luther at first dismissed Revelation as a book that had little value for Christian faith and life. Later he tried decoding Revelation in light of the political events of his own time in the Sixteenth Century. Finally, Luther moved from decoding Revelation to addressing how it speaks to readers with a message of warning and comfort (Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* 11-12). John Calvin wrote commentaries on every New Testament book except Revelation. Later, John Wesley simply borrowed another author's insights for his *Notes on the New Testament*, but he wasn't satisfied with that handling of Revelation.

Revelation is hard to understand because of its bizarre images and symbols. One young man bought a modern Bible translation and read the New Testament for the first time. He said he found it most interesting, "But I couldn't make out that bit of science fiction at the end" (F. F. Bruce, *The Message of the New Testament* 83).

But we read and talk about and seek to understand Revelation because it is part of the canon of Scripture and therefore it's part of God's word for us. When we see it in its historical context and we work through some of the imagery, we find a message of judgment against evil and of hope and encouragement for God's people enduring hard times. That hope

and encouragement flow from the victory God wins through Jesus over all evil.

So there are those who are uncomfortable with Revelation and tend to ignore it. At the other extreme there are those who seem obsessed with it. They seem to have it all figured out and will explain it in great detail. We want to be able to evaluate what various writers and preachers say about Revelation.

A reason for exploring biblical teaching about the last things, and particularly Revelation, is the popularity of many books and videos that deal with these topics. Some of you probably read the series of "Left Behind" books. If you're not familiar with them, they're novels that tell the story of a group of people who are left behind when Jesus takes Christians out of the world. Some of these people decide now to follow Jesus and get serious about studying the Bible and helping each other as they see the world going through the "great tribulation" and sort of watch the book of Revelation unfold before their eyes.

I read the first two books in that series. I'm not trying to sell those books or debate them. I simply mention them because they were so popular and they call attention to the Bible's teaching about the future.

The writers of *Left Behind* weren't the first to make such teaching popular. The best selling book of the 1970s was *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey. You could almost say that the "Left Behind" books take *Late Great Planet Earth* and expand it. Both works approach Revelation in the same way. Tim LaHaye, one of the "Left Behind" authors, also wrote in the 70s about the Second Coming of Christ. I remember reading one of his books then. There were also other "tribulation novels." Salem Kirban wrote *666*. It was kind of a Christianized version of Orwell's *1984* set during the tribulation with the Antichrist as "Big Brother." There was another old novel, published in the early Twentieth Century, that I came across one time. I don't know its title. I just remember it was a very literal rendering of Revelation being fulfilled in the late 1800s.

There were also rapture and tribulation movies that were popular, like *A Thief in the Night* and *A Distant Thunder*. They seemed meant to scare people into repentance and being ready for the Lord's return. Larry Norman

was one of the original "Jesus People" and a pioneer in contemporary Christian music. One of his songs was sort of the anthem for all this.

Life was filled with guns and war
And everyone got trampled on the floor
I wish we'd all been ready
Children died, the days grew cold
A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold
I wish we'd all been ready
There's no time to change your mind
The Son has come and you've been left behind

http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Larry_Norman:I_Wish_We%27d_All_Been_Ready

I took all that in. I'd hardly even heard of the Second Coming when I first heard this kind of stuff, so I just assumed it was all true, that it was *the* way to interpret Revelation and other biblical teaching about the end. Then I studied the Bible for myself. Probably the most positive thing about all those books and movies and songs is when they lead people to read and study the Bible for themselves. I hope you feel that motivation. In the next few weeks, I want to give you some guidance for your study of Revelation.

There are good approaches and interpretations of the book of Revelation. There are also misunderstandings and misuses of it. We often hear it quoted out of context. Or someone will use a verse or two of Scripture without any idea of what it meant and assume it has special meaning for their situation. Or someone just makes up stuff that sounds like Scripture. That's why we need to read the Bible for ourselves and get at least somewhat acquainted with it.

The book of Revelation gets its title from the first verse: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." The word *revelation* there translates the word "apocalypse" and it means "an unveiling, to make something known." The purpose of the Revelation is not to conceal but to reveal. God wants to make known his word and his will to God's people. There were many writings before and around the time of the New Testament that are called

“apocalyptic literature.” Revelation is similar to many of those writings in its use of symbolism, numbers, fantastic images, and its view of history.

The author, John, also calls it a *prophecy* in 1:3. So it’s not only apocalyptic, it’s prophetic. Remember, in the Bible, the prophets didn’t primarily foretell the future. They told forth the word of God in particular situations. Prophecy in the Bible is bringing the word of God to bear on the current situation. It sometimes involves telling what God plans to do in the future, but even that often depends on how people respond to God’s current word. There is a future element in biblical prophecy. But prophecy doesn’t give us knowledge of the future in the same way that history gives us knowledge of the past. Prophecy is not history written in advance.

Revelation is also a *letter* written to seven specific churches in the Roman province of Asia (the western section of modern day Turkey). It was a letter that was intended to be read aloud to the churches. It had a purpose in being sent to those churches, a message for those people at that time. We need to remember a basic rule for interpreting the Bible: it had to have a meaning for the people who first read it or heard it. And that meaning guides our understanding of it. God wasn’t just using people in the first century so we could have a Bible. It was God’s word for them first. And what God said to them is the basis for what God says to us through the Bible.

Let’s look at one theme that runs through the book of Revelation. It’s called “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” That means that God gave this revelation to Jesus to give to his people. So the revelation belongs to Jesus and he shares it. It also means that the book reveals Jesus. In this book Jesus gives us knowledge of himself, he makes himself known. The book of Revelation is meant to help us know Jesus better.

Already in this first section, Jesus is named alongside God who is, who was, and who is to come, and the seven spirits before God’s throne. That could be a reference to angels, but it hints at the Holy Spirit. So we may have a glimpse of the Trinity here. Then Jesus Christ is called the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Jesus is trustworthy as he bears witness to God’s kingdom and glory. Later, one of his followers in one of the churches is called a faithful witnesses

(2:13) and all of his followers are called to be faithful. Jesus is the first to be resurrected from the dead. Those who know him, who are in relationship with him by grace through faith will share in resurrection with him someday. We'll be raised like he was. All through Revelation we see that Jesus rules. Exalted as Lord, he is ruler of all.

And Jesus is the one who loves us and set us free from our sins by his blood. He died to save us, to forgive us, to set us free. We're not only saved from sin, but we're saved to be a kingdom and priests serving God. God's original intention for humans to rule in God's name by representing God to the rest of creation is being restored in Jesus.

In the last part of chapter 1, John has a glorious, and symbolic, vision of Jesus. Jesus himself is the First and the Last, the Living One who was dead and is now alive for ever and ever.

So here at the beginning of Revelation we begin to see who Jesus is. The rest of the book will tell us more about him. The revelation is of Jesus. There are several verses throughout the book that show that this revealing is ever-increasing. In **4:1**, John sees in a vision *a door opened in heaven* and he's invited to go in and look. Jesus opens the door for John to see what's going on. But in some sense, Jesus *is* the door (see John 10:7). Jesus opens for his people insight into reality and God's purposes.

In **11:19** and **15:5** we see that *the temple in heaven is open*. In 21:22 John reports that he didn't see a temple in New Jerusalem because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb (that is, Jesus) are its temple. Jesus embodies God's glory. In John's Gospel it says that "The Word was made flesh and dwelt [tabernacled, pitched tent] with us" (1:14). Revelation 15:5 refers to the tabernacle of the testimony. In this vision of the open temple, John sees the Ark of the Covenant. In the Old Testament the ark represented the presence of God in the midst of his people. It symbolized the covenant and God's faithfulness. It also contained the tablets that had the law of God written on them. In Revelation, the ark is associated with God's faithfulness to reward his people and destroy evil. The righteousness of God's law is seen in his judgment on the unbelieving and unrepentant world.

Finally, in **19:11** John sees *heaven opened*. Not just an opening into heaven or an open temple in heaven, but heaven itself opens. And what

does the open heaven reveal? Jesus Christ coming in victory over all that's evil and that resists God's kingdom. Jesus Christ who is called "Faithful and True." Jesus Christ who has a name that only he knows. Jesus Christ who is the Word of God. Jesus Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords!

The book of Revelation reveals Jesus to us—as he is now and as he will be when he returns. The revelation of Jesus shows us who he *was* and what he *has* done for us. It shows us who he *is* and what he *does* for us. It also shows us who he *will be* and what he *will do* for us. The same Lord we see in the Gospels, the same Lord we have met and that we know now, will be the Lord who appears to complete our salvation, to judge and destroy evil, to put things right, and to bring about the fullness or consummation of God's kingdom in new creation.

How should we respond to all this? Get to know Jesus now so you'll know him and be known by him when he returns. Put your faith in him, trust him, surrender to him. Then, we need to watch—be ready, wait—be patient, and work—be faithful and diligent in what we know God wants us to do.