



## REVELATION 1: SURROUNDED BY JESUS

### HOME GROUP NOTES

At St. Philip's we've begun a seven-week series through the whole of Revelation. For many, such an enterprise is a daunting prospect because this book, containing the Four Horseman, 666, The Beast, Armageddon, and Judgment Day, triggers people.

It would be fair to say that, seemingly as a minefield, Revelation has set off dramatic interpretations and reactions in people throughout history — ranging from disgust, through to trepidation, all the way to militant obsession.

Because at one extreme end, as Friedrich Nietzsche considered, Revelation is “the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history” (disgust). A more common and understandable response is that, because of its ferocious imagery, Revelation is not a book we dare to read (trepidation). And at the other extreme, we meet those who passionately claim to know from this book the exact time of Jesus' return (obsession).

#### **Q: Is our own perspective of Revelation like these? If so, why?**

I want to suggest that there is a better way to approach Revelation by reading it in two ways:

#### *1) We “read Revelation responsibly”<sup>1</sup>*

We're to put aside distracting preoccupations with have with this book, in favour of a clear mind and tender heart, to perceive Revelation not as a minefield, but a gold mine.

#### **Q: Do we feel we can lay aside our belief of Revelation as a minefield and be open to seeing it in a new light?**

#### **Q: What would need to happen to see Revelation as a gold mine?**

If we do so, as one writer states, we come to see:

- that ‘no other book helps us see Jesus in a way that overcomes our fears and frees us for radical faith!’

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011).

- ‘no other book of the Bible, in the face of all that threatens to undo us, proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ the way the last book does!’
- ‘no other book of the Bible reveals Jesus as he is right now as the last book of the Bible!’<sup>2</sup>

Thus, we welcome this book for what it is: access to the perfect treasure of Heaven, **Jesus Christ**.

## 2) *We read Revelation prayerfully.*

This disposition is exemplified by John who receives this revelation when he is ‘in the Spirit’, entranced in prayer and worship, on the Lord’s day.

What was normally the yearly Roman celebration that required swearing allegiance to Caesar, John and fellow Christians appropriated it as a weekly gathering on a Sunday to hail the resurrected Christ as King.

Here, during John’s personal church service, his opening and an ongoing attentiveness to God’s Spirit with subsequent visions then culminates in praying for Christ’s return. John’s prayerful devotion from beginning to end encourages us with Revelation to be continually receptive to God’s Spirit throughout so that we can encounter Jesus ourselves.

**Q: How can we foster this receptive approach to Jesus as we read Revelation?**

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## READ REVELATION 1

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John’s world is in disarray.

In his recent memory, John can recall how Paul was beheaded by Emperor Nero, Peter crucified, Christians set alight as torches in Nero’s garden, the Jerusalem temple has been destroyed, Mount Vesuvius has erupted raining down fire from the heavens, entombing a whole city, and right now in John’s time, the whole Empire is similarly consigned by the looming power of Emperor Domitian to honour him as Lord and God, in almost every aspect of their common life.

Understandably, the seven churches in modern day Turkey whom John loves and serves are staggering under the perception and propaganda of Rome. Some churches question whether to compromise and worship Caesar, maintaining civil obedience, especially following the

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<sup>2</sup> Darrel W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 13.

execution of their Christian brother, Antipas. Whereas some of the other churches have compromised to enjoy the bounty of Roman life. It's mess.

John has resisted, however, holding firm to his confession to Jesus and so he is deemed an 'athiest' because he refuses to worship Caesar as Lord. The result: he finds himself quarantined on an island.

It raises the question: how does John and the seven churches, and us for that matter, make any head way when life is chaos?

We need a revelation!

**Q: Are we feeling overwhelmed at all regarding certain aspects of our lives or our world?**

Well, this final book of the Bible can become the first book we open when we feel surrounded by our own nagging questions, doubts, anger, lusts, and any dominating power to encourage us toward faithful witness by centering our lives around Him.

But if we're to be blessed by reading, listening, and taking to heart this profound word, we need to ask: **what are we engaging with here?** Because, as I've mentioned, if don't grasp what we're reading here, our reading of Revelation also becomes a mess.

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## What is Revelation?

Jesus tells all who access his Revelation, that this is a hybrid form of a letter, a prophecy, and an apocalypse.

### **A Letter**

John's letter is the whole of Revelation, with all its visions, not just chapters 2 and 3, and is delivered and read aloud to one church and then taken consecutively to the remaining churches.

Importantly, like all the other letters we have in the New Testament, Revelation was understandable for the churches with its varied images drawn from Scripture and their culture.

**Q: Does this surprise us? Do we believe Revelation can be understood?**

### **A Prophecy**

But we learn from Jesus in verse 3 that this letter is also a prophecy. Prophetic literature in the Old Testament, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, is not primarily concerned with *foretelling*, by predicting the future, but with Christ's *forthtelling*, where he rouses His people toward faithful witness right now!

Jesus doesn't give John a linear and literal script of how history progresses, yet he does give John symbolic glimpses of the future, from different angles, and in repeating and intensifying sequences, even playing out possible futures resulting from particular choices, to challenge how the churches see their day.

This prophecy uses not only the future to affect how these churches live in the here and now, Christ also gathers key material from all the prophetic writings in the Scripture, with 676 Old Testament allusions, and composes it as the climactic prophecy of the entire the Bible for John to convey.

It means all prophecy in Scripture culminates in the book of Revelation, with startling glimpses of the End, as Christ's final word we must listen to!

***Q: Does this surprise us to hear that Revelation as prophecy is more interested in the present than the future? Do we agree?***

***Q: What effect might glimpsing the future have for the seven churches in their present experience?***

***Q: Revelation is the conclusion of all prophecy in Scripture. Does this affect how seriously we see this book?***

### **An Apocalypse**

Lastly, as verse 1 states, 'this is a revelation, literally, an apocalypse of Jesus Christ.' When we hear the words apocalypse or apocalyptic we might think of nuclear holocausts, zombies, and the end of the world.

But 'apocalypse' doesn't mean this at all. It refers to specific literature, seen in Ezekiel and Daniel, and common in John's day, that uses bracing imagery, ear-splitting sounds, symbolic numbers, colours, creatures, and shocking reversals of supposedly undeniable truths of contemporary life to shift human hearts and minds.

Revelation does so, principally with John given heaven's perspective of things on earth to show that things in the Empire aren't as they seem.

As we read the 'apocalypse of Jesus Christ', we join the churches in having our perception of the world utterly changed.

***Q: How have we understood the word 'apocalypse'?***

***Q: In difficult times, where do we gain perspective from?***

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### ***What is Revelation about?***

John discovers this when suddenly rocked by the revelation of the brilliance of Christ.

John's imagination is purged with a vivid reworking of previous Scriptures and contemporary scenes to create a symbolic collage of Christ's magnificence:

*(Have a read of Daniel 7:9-10, v.13-14 & Daniel 10:2-9 – it looks very similar to this passage in Revelation!)*

- First, Jesus is seen wearing the Emperor's clothes! This clothing also matches that of the Son of Man, in Daniel 10, the true Lord who receives worship from all nations and a kingdom that never ends. Jesus also resembles a High Priest who provides access to God.
- Jesus' white hair and blazing eyes match the depiction of God, the Ancient of Days, in Daniel 7 and 10 to show that Jesus shares God's nature as the eternal, pure, and holy One.
- Jesus' burning feet also recall Ezekiel's vision of God's glorious reign of His exiled people in Babylon. Christ is similarly the ruling King of His people amongst this new beast of Rome.
- Jesus' voice is powerful, like the surging roar of many waterfalls, which again match the same quality Ezekiel 43 says for the God of Israel.
- We witness a sword that projects from his mouth which we read in Hebrews and later in Revelation 19 as His word, that is living and active and cuts deep into our hearts and overthrows strongholds in our lives.
- In Jesus' hands are seven stars, challenging the inscription on everyday coins of the Emperor's son, the supposed son of god, doing the same. Here, however, the heavenly host, the angels, do the bidding of the true Son of God.
- And Christ's face shines like the Sun in dazzling beauty, like the Son of Man's face of lightning in Daniel 10 and in Hebrews 1 as the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of his being.

**Q: Wow! What are your impressions of this vision of Jesus?**

The turmoil that surrounds John and the seven churches is seen to instantly lose its potency when gazing at the overwhelming glory of Jesus, co-equal with the Father— Jesus who surrounds them, symbolised with Him encompassing the seven golden lampstands.

This care of Christ for His beloved is expressed particularly to a wearied and trembling John, as Jesus places his right hand of strength on him and declares:

*'Do not be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys to death and hades.'*

The Risen Jesus assures John that he has the authority to impede and invade the darkest of realms, for He holds the key to our freedom.

John is still contained on the island when he receives this vision, but as it were his confines are blasted wide open with seeing, hearing, feeling Jesus' presence.

The same experience occurs as the seven churches hear of John's experience of Jesus, as it does for us.

For whatever we are facing, whatever we are fearing that fences us in, and convinces us that we are captive – this glorious revelation of Jesus dispels the darkness:

'Do not be afraid...I'm alive for ever and ever!

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## Prayer Time

Revelation is given by Jesus so we experience Him afresh and alter how we see and live our lives.

Like John, let's lay ourselves before Jesus and have him speak into our circumstances.

This is an opportunity to pray for one another as home group, to prophesy over one another, and even worship together to discover again that if we feel surrounded, we are in fact surrounded by Jesus!

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## Extra Resources

If you would like to continue your own exploration of Revelation through these weeks or in the future, here are some helpful resources worth looking into.

For an overview of the whole of Revelation check out these fantastic videos from the Bible Project.

Part 1: <https://youtu.be/5nvVVcYD-0w?feature=shared>

Part 2: <https://youtu.be/Qpnlrq2bKo?feature=shared>

The Bible Project have also released a creative video on how to read Apocalyptic Literature: <https://youtu.be/UNDX4tUdjIY?feature=shared>

If you want to go in a bit deeper, a good place to start is NT Wright's commentary, *Revelation for Everyone*, which explains the meaning of each chapter of Revelation in bite-size portions. A more devotional book, beautifully written, is from a hero of mine, Eugene Peterson, called *Reversed Thunder*.

A little more complex but great nonetheless are the books, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* by Michael J. Gorman which debunks a lot of unhelpful stuff we bring to this book and draws

into sharper focus what the book is about. Then *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham is possibly the best book on Revelation I have read. It's a small book covering the major themes of Revelation, it may keep you on your toes as it is quite academic, but it led me to worship more than any other book on the topic I have read! There is also a commentary called *Revelation and the End of All Things* by Craig Koester which is very helpful in exploring the meaning of each chapter in greater depth than say NT Wright's book.

Lastly, if you want to explore the book word-by-word check out *Revelation (Anchor Yale Bible)* by Craig Koester or Ian Paul's *Revelation (TNTC)*.

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### **Revelation 1:3**

*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...*