

A BOOK TO BE UNDERSTOOD
Rev 1:1-8 (20 January 2002)
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What is the name of the last book in the Bible? If you said, “Revelation,” you are right. If you said, “Revelations,” you said what many folks often say. “Revelation” or “Revelations” . . . to some degree, both answers are correct. The last book in the Bible is *the* revelation from Jesus Christ to the Apostle John. At the same time, *the* revelation is made up of several visions. So, the Book of *Revelation* is a book of *revelations*.

Ambrose Bierce, in his work entitled *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1947), gives this tongue-in-cheek definition: “REVELATION, n. A famous book in which St. John the Divine concealed all that he knew. The revealing is done by the commentators, who know nothing.” I like that. It warns me to be cautious and careful so as not to take my own words or opinions too seriously. On the other hand, it is not quite true that John “concealed all that he knew.” As we will see, the Book of Revelation is written to be understood.

The term “revelation” comes from the very first word of the book from which we get our term “apocalypse” (ἀποκάλυψις – *apokalypsis*). An “apocalypse” is an “unveiling,” a “disclosure,” a “revelation.” The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book of prophecy written in the form of a letter. This letter was authored by the Apostle John sometime during the last third of the first Christian century. It was written to seven churches in Asia Minor—modern-day western Turkey.

Although many details in Revelation are debatable, the basic direction of the letter is not. *The true and living God, who is both sovereign and savior, summons us from our preoccupation with the world to recognize, in light of His ultimate plan for history, what really matters and what really does not.* To take this summons seriously means that we must grapple with God’s judgment on a world that is in rebellion against Him.

Anyone who has studied the messages to the seven churches knows that these congregations were not unlike Christian congregations today. And this is true whether we are talking about the situations that they faced or the manner in which they faced those situations. Persecution was a possibility—although probably not yet a reality—for three of the congregations: Smyrna, Pergamum, and Philadelphia. However, divisions and false teaching *within* the church seem to have posed a more serious threat at Pergamum and Thyatira, and the worst threat of all was complacency—especially at Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea. John’s letter is a wake-up call to Christians who do not sense that they are in any particular danger.

Despite the obvious differences between John’s time and our own time, his visions may very well have been as strange to some of his first readers as they are to us. These visions are *not* a picture of the social world that John actually lived in, but rather a piercing look *through* that world to the cosmic struggle between good and evil taking place just behind and beyond his world. I have no doubt that if John experienced his visions today—although his imagery might be different—he would see through our more secular and scientific world in much the same way, issuing us a similar wake-up call.

What I am trying to say is this: *as Christians, the greatest danger that we face is to be unaware that we are in danger.*

Now, let's read together the opening eight verses of the Book of Revelation.

^{Rev 1:1}The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (NRSV).

Much of the flavor and fervor of the Book of Revelation can be traced to the firm conviction that "the time is near." The time for what?—we may ask. The time for the end of time? The time for the beginning of a long series of events that will eventually usher in the end? The time for some immediate crisis of trouble or trial or tribulation, which will be a foreshadowing of the end? The time *for what* is near? Well . . . like John, we will have to wait to hear the answer. But I will give you a hint: the time for the beginning of the end is near. I realize that this is a vague hint, but it will have to do for now. John's visions assure us that the God who holds the future in His hands is *already* at work among us. The God who will determine the end of history—that is to say, the destination and the termination of history—that God is *already* at work in the *present* to bring about the fulfillment of His plan.

If Jesus Christ is the giver of the revelation, then the content of the revelation is summed up in the phrase "what must soon take place." Now, how soon is "soon" is a hotly debated question. I must confess, I do not have a simple, satisfying solution to offer; however, I will share with you a concern that I have that we must steer clear of two extremes. On the one hand, I could become fanatical, becoming so near-sighted that I make no preparations for there to be a future. As some have done, I could climb up on the rooftop of my house and wait for the coming of Jesus. On the other hand, I could become complacent; after all, nearly two thousand years have past since John's visions. Since Jesus doesn't seem to be in any hurry, I could just live in full expectation that He is *not* coming any time soon. You see, we face today the very real threat of complacency for we tend to downplay and even disregard the force of the words "soon" and "near."

Somehow, we must strike a balance between wisely preparing for the future while at the same time living every moment as though it were our last. It is the perspective of the Book of Revelation that we must live every moment as though it were our last moment, because a last moment is coming, and it will most certainly be sooner than most of us expect. I do not agree with those who look to this book in order to decipher God's calendar and thereby to declare God's timeline for the future. But that is *not* the most dangerous threat. *The most dangerous threat is to live life as if we had unlimited time.* The fact that there is no guarantee of tomorrow is what gives urgency to today.

Years ago there was a *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy asked Charlie Brown what he was reading. He said that he was reading the Bible, the letters of Paul, and Lucy replied that she made it a habit never to read other people's mail. Revelation includes one brief section specifically aimed at each of the seven churches of Asia Minor, so that in effect John is allowing—even compelling—these churches to read each other's mail! Unlike form letters today, which look personal but are not, this form letter will turn out to be so personal that it will become uncomfortable! Of course, then you and I come along and read the letter, and when we do so, we are reading other people's mail. If we keep this in mind, it will help us to ask what the meaning of the letter was to the folks to whom it was mailed before we start asking what the letter means for us today.

In verse 3 we find the first of seven beatitudes scattered throughout the book: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near." The beatitude found here corresponds to one attributed to the risen Jesus in verse 7 of chapter 22: "Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book." Both beatitudes recall the saying of Jesus found in Luke 11:28: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" This first beatitude is John's way of saying, "Make sure you have this prophecy read in your worship assemblies! Make sure you listen and pay attention to your reader! And above all, make sure you act on what you have heard!"

Maybe, just maybe, one of the primary reasons that we find Revelation so difficult to understand is that we do not want to understand it. Our chief obstacle may not be historical and it may not be conceptual. Instead, our chief obstacle to understanding Revelation may be a matter of the heart. John, like the Hebrew prophets in whose footsteps he walks, confronts us with a vision of reality that conflicts with the natural desires of our human wills and our human wants. Maybe, just maybe, that is why the risen and reigning Jesus repeatedly urges, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9).

In the middle of verse 5 John abruptly breaks into song. There will be many songs and hymns in the Book of Revelation, including more elaborate ones that are sung later on by the angels in heaven. But this song is a song to be sung on earth, one that the public readers of John's letter can lead their congregations in singing. The focus of the song is Jesus, for it is Jesus "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood," and who "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father." All that Jesus has done is "for us," and we sing "to Him be glory and honor and power for ever and ever! Amen." And then John sees, in his mind's eye, the coming of Christ and what that coming means for the enemies of God.

Two young candidates, just beginning their Ph.D. studies in mathematics, were invited to attend the annual meeting of a learned society. As they listened to an

extremely complex and abstract lecture on some aspect of mathematical logic, one asked the other, “Do you know what she’s saying?” “Yes,” was the reply, “I understand what she’s saying. I just don’t know what she’s saying it about.” As we study together over the next few weeks the Book of Revelation, we will try to understand both what it is *saying* and what it is saying it *about*. Although many details in Revelation are debatable, the basic direction of the letter is not. *The true and living God, who is both sovereign and savior, summons us from our preoccupation with the world to recognize, in light of His ultimate plan for history, what really matters and what really does not.* Revelation . . . it is a book to be understood and to be acted upon!

The future. There is so much that we cannot know; and yet, there are some things that we can know with absolute certainty. I do *not* know *what* is coming. I *do* know *who* is coming. Or, as I often quip, “I am not on the planning committee; I am on the welcoming committee.” I do *not* know *what* is coming. I *do* know *who* is coming. And since I know who is coming—the triumphant Jesus Christ—I want to be ready to meet Him. Jesus Christ is coming again! Let there be no doubt about it! Are you—am I—ready to meet Him? “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

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