

Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

Study #1: The Reason for the Revelation

Most people are like the young woman engaged to Mozart before his rise to fame. Pursued by wealthier and more handsome suitors, she became disenchanted with the musician and broke her engagement, marrying a taller, more successful, and better-looking man. Then the world began to praise Mozart for his talents and the women regretted her decision. She admitted, “I knew nothing of the greatness of Mozart’s genius. I only saw him as a little man.”

We do that, don’t we? We make superficial judgments based on surface factors, when in fact, our first impressions are often wrong. That was true of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It was true of a boy named David before he killed the giant. And it is even truer of the One that I and many of you worship today. For 20 centuries, the world at large has glanced at Jesus, often without reading what the Bible says about Him, and concluded that He was a good man, a great teacher, and a wonderful example. Many who have attended church also include phrases like Lamb of God, Messiah, and Savior without grasping with their hearts what those titles actually mean. Because all they see on the surface is the meekness and weakness of a dying Savior.

But one day soon that perception will change! The meek and mild Lamb of God is about to part the clouds and reveal Himself as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, taking His rightful place as King of the world, every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. But it will be too late to worship Him then. When He returns, the time for judgment will have come. The time to worship Him is now! For that reason, there are four facts I want to make clear in this opening study of the Book of Revelation.

1. Its Title

When people refer to this book, they often call it the Book of Revelations, because of the many visions in it. But John makes it clear from the opening line. Its title is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants.” The word “Revelation” is singular because there is only one revelation given in this book. Nor is it the revelation of John, as some Bibles entitle it, because it isn’t about John. Its theme and chief character is Jesus, but not in the meek and mild form He once appeared upon earth. This is the revelation of Jesus Christ in His eternal glory. In other words, it’s all about Jesus, just as everything

else in life ought to be. And when we witness this Jesus together, there won't be any doubt as to what we should do. We should bow down, worship and obey Him, and give Him center place in our lives.

2. Its Timeliness

Many neglect the study of this book because it seems unconnected to our modern lives. After all, what could a book written two thousand years ago have to do with my life today? The Lord Jesus quickly answers His skeptics. He continues, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near."

Verse 1 warns of "things which must shortly take place." The word means "shortly" means speedily emphasizing the acceleration of God's judgment. In other words, when these events begin to unfold, they'll happen quickly, in rapid succession, leaving no opportunity for escape. Many believe they see an increase of evil in our day—the rise of Islamic terrorism, gun violence, the loss of individual rights, and the decay of morality and shame. But this is just a foreshadowing of God's judgment, when He withdraws His hand of protection and lets evil have its way upon the earth. Revelation 6:15 describes the first part of the Tribulation: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"

Verse 3 adds, "The time is near," emphasizing the imminence of Christ's return, that nothing remains to be fulfilled before it happens. Sometimes you'll hear prophecy speakers talk about "signs of the times" and things that have to happen before Jesus returns for His church. But that is a misunderstanding of Scripture. The fact of the matter is, there are no signs of Jesus' return for His church. The Lord's return for His church is a sign-less event and the spark which sets all other prophetic events in motion. Famines, earthquakes, pestilences, and all other signs we hear so much about are not signs of Christ's return for His church. They are signs of judgment which will happen during the Great

Tribulation after the church is removed from the world. We will see that in detail when we come to chapter 6.

By the way, verse 1 explains why it takes effort to study this book. Jesus says, “He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.” This means it is full of signs and symbols that must be studied in order to understand them. But don’t let that discourage you. It takes work to obtain anything truly valuable. Think back to the parables of Jesus which hid the truth from those who did not love Him, but reveal great treasures to those of us who invest the time and prayer to study them. Furthermore, we will find that like most Scriptures, the meaning of the signs and symbols are found in the very context we are studying and often take us back to earlier passages of the Bible. For example, who do you suppose “the dragon” is who appears in Revelation 20:2? We do not need to guess, for John tells us, “He is the serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan.” That takes us all the way back to the Garden of Eden, of course, but it also helps us interpret several earlier passages in Revelation where the dragon is mentioned.

So why read and study the things written in this book? Because the events it describes could happen much sooner than we think, and we want to escape them. The third reason it’s important to read and understand is because of...

3. Its Blessing

Every book of the Bible contains a blessing for those who read it and obey it. But this book offers a “money-back” guarantee. In fact, it both opens and closes with a blessing. Verse 3 promises, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.” Revelation 22:7 adds, “And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.”

Part of the blessing comes from knowing that we’re on the winning side. All around us today people are worrying, “Where is the world headed, and what will the future hold for me?” But when we who love Jesus read this book, the worry subsides. Why? Because we know how the story ends, and this book tells us how to prepare for it. In addition to that, because of the promises given, I believe there is a special sense in which the Holy Spirit comforts our hearts as we read this book. Consequently, anyone would be a fool not to study it.

But what triples the blessing is the source of this prophecy. It is blessed by all Three Persons of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Verse 4

continues, “John, to the seven churches which 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

God the Father is “Him who is and who was and who is to come.” “The seven Spirits before His throne” is the Holy Spirit. Why is He said to be seven Spirits? The key that unlocks this symbol is in Isaiah 11:2 where he made this prophecy about the Messiah. He said seven Spirits would rest upon the Messiah: “The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.” Does this mean Jesus was filled with seven different spirits? No! Seven is the number of perfection in the Bible. Therefore, what we are seeing here is the One Holy Spirit in the seven-fold fullness of His power. But the description I love most is of Jesus. He is the One “who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father.” Oh, what a Savior! Not only has He freed us from our sins by washing them in His own blood; He has also made us princes and princesses of the Most High God! How can we help but agree with John? “To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

4. Its Purpose

The first purpose it was written was **to glory Jesus Christ**. But someone may wonder, If Jesus Christ is “ruler over the kings of the earth (v. 5),” how can the things on earth be glorifying Him today? Culture and civilization seem like they’re about to collapse. The truth is Jesus has allowed men to have their own way for a time, but do not fear. He has them on a short leash. Napoleon met his Waterloo. Hitler faced his D-Day. The wall fell down in Eastern Europe. And the same will be true of every tyrant and evildoer when He returns in glory. This is the promise of verse 7: “Behold, He is coming with the clouds.” Thirty times John uses the word “behold” urging us to strain all our powers of observation to see something of eternal significance. What is that? The Second Coming of Jesus Christ. You will recall that in Acts 1:9 the disappointed disciples stood gazing into heaven wishing Jesus had not gone away. So what did the angels say to them? “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who

was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” So, yes, He is coming again, and yes, it will be with clouds!

But then John adds something interesting. He says, “And every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen.” When I read that, I wondered, “How can that be true?” Some say it will because of satellite television. We will all watch His return on our TV sets. But John had something much more miraculous in mind. “Every eye” means not just everyone living on earth at the time, but every eye. As Jesus said to Caiaphas the high priest at his kangaroo trial, “I say to you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt. 26:64) That seems odd, doesn’t it? After all, Caiaphas died two thousand years ago and has been suffering in Hades ever since. But still the Bible promises, “Every eye shall see Him, even those who pierced Him (Caiaphas, Pilate, the Roman soldier with his spear), and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen.” For God “has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:9-11)

A second reason for the Revelation was to **encourage those suffering persecution**. The situation in Asia was dangerous for Christians at this time. Nero committed suicide in 68 AD, leading to civil war between the army and senate, and three short-lived emperors—Vespasian and his two sons, Titus (the general who destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple), and Domitian, who tried to raise the moral level of Roman society by banning all new religious (such as Christianity) and declaring himself Dominus et Deus (“Lord and God”). Billy Graham describes the situation like this in his book, “Approaching Hoofbeats.” “Imagine a village in the suburbs of Ephesus or Laodicea. Christians are working at tanning leather, dying cloth, harvesting crops, raising families, studying math—at worship, at work, or at play. Then, suddenly, hoofbeats are heard clattering up the nearby cobbled streets. The horses are reined in by a Roman centurion and his honor guard. A leather camp table is unfolded. An incense burner is placed upon the table. A flame is lit. Heralds sound the trumpets. There is no place to hide, no time to decide. Believers must join their neighbors in that line.” “Just ahead the village mayor tosses his incense into the flames and exclaims proudly, ‘Caesar is Lord!’ Others follow. The line grows shorter. The moment of decision draws near. Will you

avoid the conflict and protect your life by muttering, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ and then sneak back to the safety of your home? Or will you recognize that act as a symbol of a wider disobedience, refuse the incense, proclaim ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and pay the price for your disloyalty to the state?”

That was the decision John faced? What did he decide? Church history tells us that while serving at Ephesus, he refused to worship the emperor, insisting that Jesus is Lord. For that “crime,” he was sent bound to Rome where Domitian cast him into a pot of boiling oil. And yet, John came out without a burn. So Domitian then exiled him to the Isle of Patmos where we now find him at the age of 90, sentenced to hard labor in the mines. Yet notice what he calls himself in verse 9, “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” John could have called himself an apostle, for that is what he was. Instead, he shows his solidarity with those who are being persecuted by calling himself a brother and fellow-sufferer for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Then he adds, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” The Lord’s day, of course, is Sunday. From the very beginning, the church began to worship on the first day of the week rather than the Sabbath, as a testimony to their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. But what is inspiring is John’s mood. Like many of you, I don’t like to suffer and it often affects my attitude. But here John, doomed to breaking up rocks in an island quarry, says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” Can you say that when you’re suffering? Or are you more apt to say, “Lord, you’ve really let me down this time!” John didn’t do that. He trusted that God still had a plan for his life and rejoiced that he could serve the Lord in difficult circumstances. What happened as a result? God honored his faith by calling him to use his time in exile to write the final revelation of His Son, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, once he finished that assignment, Domitian was dead and John was released from exile, continuing to serve our Lord until the ripe old age of 100.

Finally, a third reason this book was written was **to complete God’s revelation**. Since we know that God is a perfect Redeemer and God of order, planning the end from the beginning, it shouldn’t surprise us to find that this last book of the Bible pulls together all the loose ends of His work with mankind! For example, all sad themes begun in the book of Genesis and the other books of the Bible now find their perfect fulfillment in the book of Revelation.

GENESIS

1. Devil murders man by sin (3:1-6)
2. Rebellion of mankind begins (3:6)
3. The earth is cursed (3:17)
4. Paradise is lost (3:22-24)
5. Tears are shed (27:34)

REVELATION

1. Devil is judged and condemned (20:10)
2. Rebellion of mankind ends (21:27)
3. The curse is removed (22:3)
4. Paradise is regained (22:2)
5. Tears are wiped away (21:4)

Get ready, then, for an inspiring study. For you are about to witness what the Church has been waiting two thousand years to see—Jesus Christ adored by angels, worshiped by the saints, and honored by those who have rejected Him. But more important than getting ready for this study, I remind you to get ready for that day. Because He is coming again very soon.

The story is told of Ernest Shackleton, the great explorer who, while on expedition in Antarctica, was forced to leave some of his men behind on Elephant Island with the promise that he would return for them soon. But unexpected matters delayed him, so that by the time he tried to return, the sea had frozen over, cutting him off from his men. Three times he tried to reach them and failed. Finally, in his last attempt, he discovered a narrow channel in the ice. Guiding his ship through it, he was delighted to find his men not only alive, but instantly ready to board ship. When the excitement died down, Shackleton asked them why they were so prepared to load their gear. They told him that every morning their leader had rolled up his sleeping bag with this reminder, “Get your things ready, boys, the boss may come today!”

Friends, the return of our Master is far more certain than that of Lord Shackleton to Elephant Island. So get ready. Who knows? He may come today!