

## “The Time is Near”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 1*

*Texts: Revelation 1:1-3; Daniel 12:1-13*

---

No book of the Bible has captured people’s imaginations—both positively and negatively—as has the Book of Revelation. From frightening depictions of the white horse and its rider administering divine wrath upon the nations of the earth, to the image of a multi-headed dragon who persecutes the church, to an evil beast who wages war upon the saints, to the seductress who dwells in the great city of man and who has prostituted herself with the merchants of the world, to John’s description of Jesus in his post-ascension glory, the Book of Revelation stirs us like no other book of the Bible. Some find these scenes frightening. Some find them confusing. Sadly, some avoid the book altogether. Far too many have seen this book as a springboard to fanciful and wild speculation. Despite such a dubious reputation, Revelation is a comforting and pastoral book and there is much here for the people of God, especially in a time of uncertainty such as our own.

We begin a new series on the Book of Revelation. When I begin to preach through a book of the Bible, I like to jump right in and get started. But that’s not possible with a book like Revelation. There is so much confusion about the way in which this book is to be interpreted that in order to avoid adding to that confusion, we will spend a fair bit of time on background material before we tackle the first three verses of the book, known as “The Prologue.” Even John Calvin, the father of the modern science of biblical studies, is often quoted as saying that he did not write a commentary on Revelation because he did not think he understood Revelation well enough to comment in detail. Whether Calvin actually said this or not, it is a shame that more commentators did not take this advice!

That being said, this is one book of the Bible where recent studies in first century literature can give us a great deal of help in understanding the nature of this book and the meaning of the symbols found throughout. We really do know a great deal more about apocalyptic literature now than we did even thirty years ago. This explains why it is that so many outstanding commentaries and studies on Revelation have been published of late. Whereas twenty years ago, Reformed pastors had but one trustworthy commentary on Revelation (William Hendricksen’s venerable, *More Than Conquerors*) there are now at least five major commentaries or studies ranging from basic guides for the first time reader, to exhaustive studies numbering a thousand pages or more. It is my prayer that whatever uncertainty and apprehension you may have about studying this book will give way to a confident sense of understanding.

Simply put, Revelation is a book about Jesus Christ’s victory over Satan and all his allies, as John describes the redemptive drama on earth from a heavenly perspective.<sup>1</sup>

According to the best internal and external evidence, the Book of Revelation was written by John, the apostle and the author of our gospel and three epistles, during his captivity on the Island of Patmos some

---

<sup>1</sup> Bauckham, [The Theology of the Book of Revelation](#), 7.

time in the mid-nineties of the first century.<sup>2</sup> Revelation is the last book to be written included in the canon of the New Testament. In many ways, Revelation is the most practical book of the entire New Testament since it is specifically written to Christians who live in the post-apostolic age. This means that the symbols and visions we find here are meant for us. Therefore, we must make every effort to interpret them correctly and apply them to our present context.

When we worked our way through the Book of Exodus (in a previous series) and studied Israel's journey through the wilderness, it was easy to think, "well, this is interesting, but how does it impact my life?" But when John uses symbols throughout the Book of Revelation drawn directly from the Exodus account, he now applies them directly to Christ's church. As members of that church, we are the people wandering through the wilderness, sustained by the living bread from heaven, fully dependant upon the living water to quench our thirst, while always living under the constant threat of attack from God's enemies. Nevertheless, we have the certain knowledge that God will fulfill all of his covenant promises made to his people. Nothing that Satan can do will ever stay God's mighty hand. As we will soon see, the symbols and images in Revelation describe a conflict in which God calls us to participate as combatants. This is why we must attempt to understand these symbols correctly, thereby lifting the veil of mystery which continues to shroud this great book.

The Apocalypse of John, as it is known, contains a combination of literary forms. First, Revelation is a letter (an epistle), written by John and sent to the seven churches scattered throughout Asia Minor and which are mentioned by name in chapters 2-3. But this book is certainly not an ordinary letter! Even though Revelation takes the literary form of an epistle, the content of this letter is what is known as "apocalyptic," a literary genre utilizing visions and highly symbolic language to depict the cosmic struggle between God and Satan.<sup>3</sup>

In apocalyptic literature the symbols are never intended to be taken literally—a mistake that far too many interpreters of this book have made. Instead, they are to be interpreted through the lens of both the Old Testament and John's own age (the later years of the first century) and historical situation (the increasing persecution of the church in Asia Minor).

John writes against the backdrop of the Roman empire with its imperial cult (emperor worship), and with Rome's massive military and political influence upon all aspects of life always lurking in the background. The evil visage of the emperor Nero is inescapable in the Book of Revelation. Nero, who lived in the 60's of the first century, was at first ambivalent towards Christianity, but later unleashed a savage attack upon the church, burning Christians as human torches in his private garden, feeding them to lions and wild beasts in the Coliseum, as well as putting to death both Paul and Peter. For John, Nero Caesar is evil incarnate, the historical reference point for all of those enemies of Christ who come after him.

But the primary key to interpreting the symbols in Revelation correctly is the Old Testament. The Book of Revelation is very much like the prophecies of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, which also make use of similar apocalyptic symbols. Most of those who heard the Book of Revelation when it was read in the

---

<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive discussion of this can be found in; Beale, The Book of Revelation, 4-36.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussions of this in: Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy and Beale, The Book of Revelation, 50-69.

churches to whom it was addressed, were probably able to immediately connect the symbols and images John uses to those Old Testament passages from which they are drawn. But since we are two thousand years removed from the original context, and not Jews steeped in the Torah and Jewish apocalyptic writings, we will have to do some work to keep such a background in mind. This means that in many ways the Book of Revelation is a divinely-inspired commentary on those Old Testament themes which were not completely fulfilled by the first Advent of Jesus Christ. To interpret this book correctly, then, we will look to the Old Testament to find the meaning of the symbols used by John. It is John who explains to us what the Old Testament prophets meant in the greater light of the coming of Jesus Christ and the messianic age.

Therefore, as we try and interpret these symbols drawn from the Old Testament, let us not make the mistake of seeing the conflict they depict as a struggle between good and evil as though these were two equal poles fighting for supremacy. No! Satan struggles against the kingdom of God throughout the Book of Revelation as an already defeated foe (cf. Colossians 2:13-15). The final outcome is never in doubt. In fact, since Revelation was written after the first coming of Christ and the inauguration of his messianic kingdom, we must understand that John's vision presupposes that Satan's head was already crushed by Christ at Calvary and that Satan's final defeat is rendered certain by Christ's resurrection from the dead.

But make no mistake about it, the images of conflict which are depicted through the lens of apocalyptic symbols and images are that of a real conflict in which the people of God will suffer greatly at the hands of the devil. Having been defeated by Christ's cross and empty tomb, Satan is portrayed as a wounded animal, certain to die, but utterly vicious and irrational in his anger before the end finally comes. Satan wages war upon the saints, but he cannot defeat them. When he kills them, they come to life and reign with Christ. Indeed, this is a conflict in which the final outcome is never, never, in doubt. If you take nothing else from this series of sermons, take this with you: God wins decisively in the end!

The Book of Revelation is not only a letter filled with apocalyptic visions, it also contains predictive prophecy in which certain future events are foretold well in advance. Yet, while there are some elements of predictive prophecy in this great book, it is wrong to look at Revelation as though it were simply "history before it is written," as some have described it. To do this is to confuse John with Nostradamus. John is not writing this letter to tell us about the minute details of future events. Rather, John is writing to tell us about Jesus Christ's ultimate triumph over sin and death as the final chapters of redemptive history draw to a close. Therefore, we should view the prophetic elements of Revelation in service of redemptive history, and not just as sensational information given to titillate the curious.

There are four major approaches to interpreting the Book of Revelation.<sup>4</sup> The one with which most of you are familiar is the futurist view, which holds that most of what is written here remains yet to be fulfilled in the days immediately before our Lord's return. This explains why it is that people who hold this view (like Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye) spend so much of their time and energy trying to tie the symbols in the Book of Revelation to current events. As many of you know, many evangelical churches and ministries devote themselves to explaining every tragedy and political crisis directly from the pages of Revelation. But if you are expecting me to do the same you'll be very disappointed. I am not going to identify the Antichrist, predict the date of our Lord's return, or explain the roles of America and Israel in biblical prophecy. Instead, I will be talking about what John talks about—Jesus Christ's certain victory

---

<sup>4</sup> These are summarized in Beale, The Book of Revelation, 44-49.

over all of his enemies.

Another view—which is gaining acceptance among Reformed Christians—is preterism. This view holds that Revelation was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70 and that much of what we find in the Book of Revelation was fulfilled when the Roman army sacked Jerusalem in A. D. 70, destroying the temple and dispersing surviving Jews throughout the Mediterranean world. Preterists make the opposite error as do the futurists. Instead of treating this book as though it deals with future events, preterists treat Revelation as though it is largely historical and that most everything written here has already taken place, with the possible exception of Christ’s second coming and the resurrection, a view taken by so-called partial preterists like R. C. Sproul and Ken Gentry.<sup>5</sup> This is very problematic because it reduces Revelation to a mere historical record, robbing the book of its apocalyptic character and eliminating John’s stress upon Christ’s final and eschatological victory when he returns in judgment to raise the dead and make all things new on the “last day.”

A third view is one which has been widely held by historic Protestants and is known as historicism. Though few still hold it today, this view sees the book of Revelation as a kind of historical map which plots the history of Christ’s church from the apostolic age unto the time of the Reformation. Proponents of this view usually identify the Harlot of Babylon in Revelation 18 with the papacy and the Roman church, a view which has been elevated to confessional status by the Westminster Confession. Although the papacy may indeed be a part of the anti-Christian opposition to the preaching of the Gospel, this view does not comport well with the nature of apocalyptic literature, which depicts not specific events but general patterns of a re-occurring conflict between Christ and Satan which culminates in a final eschatological battle.

A fourth view is called idealism, a modified form of which I will be presenting throughout this series. This view emphasizes the apocalyptic nature of the book and understands the various visions throughout Revelation as depictions of the struggle which takes place during the entire period of time between the first and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Each vision is describing the same period of time but from a different perspective or vantage point, each vision with a different theological theme or emphasis. As Dennis Johnson from Westminster Seminary California puts it, each of these visions is like looking at the same scene from a different camera angle.<sup>6</sup> This means that we must not see Revelation as depicting strictly future or historical events. Nor does Revelation exhaustively map out the history of the church age. Instead, we must see the visions and symbols in them as pictures of the on-going struggle between Christ and Satan and his agents, the beast and the dragon, a struggle which Christ will inevitably win on behalf of his people. This is the way apocalyptic literature works.

**W**ith this background material out of the way, let us now turn to our text, Revelation chapter 1, beginning at verse 1.

The opening words of this letter contain a general summary of the whole book as well as identifying the nature of what follows: “*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.*” This declaration can

---

<sup>5</sup> See R. C. Sproul, [The Last Days According to Jesus](#) (Baker); Ken Gentry, [The Beast of Revelation](#) (ICE).

<sup>6</sup> See Johnson, [The Triumph of the Lamb](#).

be taken two ways. Either this book reveals Jesus Christ as the main character, or else Jesus Christ is the source of all that is about to be revealed to John through the angel.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, both of these are true because the revelation itself is *from* Jesus Christ as well as being *about* Jesus Christ. The Book of Revelation is certainly one of the most Christ-centered in the New Testament.

But the primary sense of this declaration is that although this revelation concerns Jesus Christ, it comes from God through the means of an angel, and is, in turn, given through the pen of John, “the servant of the Lord.” He is the one through whom Jesus Christ is revealed in the vision and symbols which follow.

Notice, too, that this revelation of Jesus Christ concerns things which “*must soon take place.*” This assertion creates a serious problem for futurists since it means that what John is about to reveal will concern the entire church age—these are things which must *soon* take place—not just events located at the end of the church age as Bible prophecy pundits often insist. That John is speaking of the entire church age in the Book of Revelation is reinforced by several other important passages in the New Testament. For one thing, in the Pentecost sermon, Peter declares that the last days were already at hand just fifty days after Christ’s resurrection because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:17). The author of Hebrews likewise states that the coming of Christ means that Christians in the first century were already living in the last days (Hebrews 1:2). This means that the entire period of time between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ—“this present evil age,” as Paul puts it in Galatians 1:4—are also the “last days.”

Therefore, the argument we hear from so many, that “the last days” are limited to a period of time immediately before the Second Coming of Jesus, is completely unfounded when we look at the teaching of the whole of the New Testament. In fact, when Jesus Christ took on human flesh, lived a perfect life, died upon a cross, rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, human history entered its final phase. While the duration of this period of time—the “last days”—is never revealed to us, it is certain that the last days began with the first coming of Jesus Christ and will end at his second (Hebrews 1:2; Matthew 13:39). Throughout his messianic ministry, Jesus warns us not to become preoccupied with the date of his return, but instead to keep watch, eagerly anticipating his coming (cf. Matthew 25:1-30). Therefore, what John is about to reveal are things which are soon to take place, things which concern the final age of human history, an age which ends when Jesus Christ returns in great glory, to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

In fact, when John speaks of the “*apocalypsis*” (Revelation) of Jesus Christ, he very likely has in mind that what is about to be revealed is directly connected to earlier revelation about the last days in the Old Testament, especially that found throughout the Book of Daniel.<sup>8</sup> In his prophecy, Daniel repeatedly speaks of “the last days” in connection to the rise of great empires and the coming of the Son of Man. When John says that the things he will reveal must soon take place, he has in mind those things Daniel foretold, which were already coming to pass when John reveals his apocalyptic vision. Indeed, there is a direct connection made throughout the New Testament between the first advent of Jesus Christ, the dawn of the messianic age, and “the last days,” because these things fulfill the expectations of Israel’s prophets regarding the end of the age. In the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, John will reveal those things Daniel could reveal only through the types and shadows of the pre-messianic era.

---

<sup>7</sup> Poythress, The Returning King, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Beale, Book of Revelation, 181 ff.

This connection between the apostle John and the prophet Daniel can be seen in our Old Testament lesson. As Daniel's prophecy came to a close, Daniel is told that his own prophecy is being sealed until a later time. In Daniel 12, we find this declaration: *"At that time,"* that is, at the end of the age, *"Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise."* Michael is the name of the valiant angelic warrior of Jesus Christ. At the end, *"there will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."*

Daniel is not only speaking of the end of the age and the bodily resurrection which accompanies the return of Jesus Christ, he also speaks of a time of unprecedented tribulation which precedes these events. This is the so-called "great tribulation" which Daniel connects to the resurrection, but which John reveals to be that entire period of time between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ (cf. Revelation 7:14). While Daniel speaks in general terms of a horrible distress, John will describe the nature of this great tribulation through a series of visions and apocalyptic symbols. As we will see, it is the dragon, the beast and the harlot who bring about the distress of which Daniel foretold. John's vision describes Satan's final struggle before he is crushed by Jesus Christ and hurled into the lake of fire on that great and glorious day when our Lord returns with the hosts of heaven to destroy all of his enemies with a final judgment. The last enemy to be destroyed is death, which explains why Daniel connects this to the resurrection.

It is what follows which connects John's vision directly to Daniel's prophecy. In Daniel 12:4, Daniel writes, *"But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."* That prophecy which Daniel was ordered to seal up until the end, is now unsealed—after what appears to be a reference to the general advance of civilization—and revealed by the angel to John. The Lord himself says to Daniel in verses 9-10 of his prophecy: *"Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand."* Not only will Daniel's prophecy be sealed until the time of the end when Christ comes to fulfill all righteousness and lay down his life for his own, but these things will be intelligible only when viewed through the eyes of faith. As Jesus said, the course of this age will be very much like the days of Noah. People will go about their business all the while scoffing at the gospel. But a sure and certain judgment will come upon the world when people least expect it (cf. Matthew 24:36-42). It was also Jesus who said that unless God grants us understanding of these things, they will remain a mystery. Daniel foretold of this but his vision was sealed. John now unveils that which was sealed.

In verses 2-3, John moves on from speaking of the content and the manner of this revelation of Jesus, to his own trustworthiness as a reporter of the things he has seen in this vision. It is John, the servant of the Lord, who *"testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ."* And it is John's reader who will be blessed by receiving this book's testimony of Jesus Christ, which is the word of God. Says John: *"Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near."*

As we have seen throughout our earlier series on redemptive history, the entire redemptive drama unfolds against the backdrop of a covenant of works, and the works-principle of blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. With the time of distress being at hand, John now pronounces a blessing upon all who

read the words of this prophecy—for these words are the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. The blessing extends to those who hear these words and who take them to heart, because the time is near. Since Revelation was a circular letter intended to be read aloud in the seven churches to which it is addressed, John may mean “hearing” here in the ordinary sense of “hearing” this letter as it is read aloud. But given the stress upon taking what is heard to heart, “hearing” is probably used in the sense of hearing not merely as listening to the words, but truly believing what was heard and taking comfort from the testimony of Jesus Christ which is being revealed. If we believe what we hear and take it to heart, there is a great blessing in this book for Christ’s church.

This is the first of seven “beatitudes,” or “blessings” found in this prophecy. Numbers used in Revelation are never accidental or coincidental. They are symbols which point to something else. Throughout the Scriptures, seven is the number of completeness or perfection.<sup>9</sup> The seven blessings in Revelation are connected to believing and hearing (chapter 1), to being faithful unto death in chapter 14, to being ready for the Lord’s coming (chapter 16), to receiving rest from our labors (chapter 14), to responding to the invitation to the marriage supper (chapter 19), to participating in the first resurrection, (chapter 20), to finally being granted the right to eat from tree of life and enter the new Jerusalem (chapter 22). Therefore, anyone who hears these words of this prophecy and responds in faith to all seven of these promised blessings of God, will have the reward of eternal life and victory over death, rest from our labors, and will dwell in the city of God. In other words, they will receive their seven-fold inheritance that is ours in Christ (completeness), and obtain every blessing that God has for his people (perfection).

As we hear John’s words in the Book of Revelation throughout this series, let us continue to respond to the Savior whose testimony they reveal to us, by taking every word to heart. For God promises us a great blessing if we do so. In this book, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, we have the sure and certain testimony of that one who gave himself for us and who conquered death and the grave so that we may ever be victorious. That same Jesus whose testimony is given in this vision, will indeed bless all those who hear these words and take them to heart.

As we read in Revelation 22:12-13, 20: *“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”*

Beloved, in the name of Jesus Christ, take these wonderful words to heart, for the time is near. Amen!

---

<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 30.