

© Into Thy Word Ministries Bible Study, www.intothyword.org

Revelation Part I

"The revelation from 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, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." Revelation 1:1-2

Key verses: Revelation: 1:1-3, 7-8, 19, 17:14; 22:12-13

Key personalities: Jesus, the Apostle John and early Christians in Persecution

Timeline: 69-100 A.D. The Church is at a crossroads of struggle, nearly a generation has passed since the Resurrection. The Romans destroy Jerusalem and the Jewish people and Christians flee to what is now modern Turkey. So, what is next?

The Epistle of Revelation, 69-95 A.D. The last and most misunderstood Book of the Bible, yet it refers as *"the revelation of Jesus Christ."* His *"his servant John"* chosen as the biographer to reveal what is now and what will come. Revelation was written to warn against spiritual decay and encourage Christians to stay loyal and faithful even under persecution. The main theme is the ultimate victory of Christ as Lord over ALL. He will return and set things right in His timing. Nothing needs to take place and no sequence of events are being laid out. What is important is that Christ demonstrates His glory, wisdom and power and we respond (Rev. 1:1-20). This shows His authority over the Church (Rev. 2:1-3:21) and His power and right to judge the world (Rev. 5:1-19:21).

The writer is clearly identified as John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee (Matt. 10:2), a prophetic witness and disciple of Jesus, and the writer of the Gospel of John as well as three more letters (John 1:1; Rev. 1:1, 3-4, 9; 22:6-10, 18-19).

John was exiled to the Island of Patmos around 69 A.D. or 95 A.D. during the writing of this Epistle. The Church was undergoing the beginnings of more severe persecution than what they initially went through in James' and Peter's time when the Roman Emperor Nero was blaming the Christians for the burning of Rome, (which Nero himself had caused) making them the scapegoat (54-68 A.D). At a later date, the Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.) had stepped up the persecutions severely, perhaps being the worst ever seen in Church history (Rev. 1:9; 2:9-13; 13:7-10).

Key Happenings: Jesus Christ is greater than anything and everything!

Revelation was written to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, which is now modern Turkey (Rev. 1:4, 11).

John is proclaiming the Divine Authority, Sovereignty, and Lordship of Christ as well as the important relevance of Christ in us, so that we can have peace and anticipation in Him. Christ is Lord. This is reality for us, both now and when He comes back for us. Even when all seems lost and hopeless, He is in command and His plan is in commission. Although it is John who pens the words of this book of Revelation and an angel delivers it, it is witnessed to as truth by Christ Himself who is faithful to us. We are exhorted to praise and worship Him Who is worthy of our praise because He has freed us from our sins and separation from God by the shedding of His own blood. He has made us a home, a kingdom, and a dwelling for eternity.

The first four chapters' principle purpose of the writing is to encourage their perseverance in faith and chastise them for how they were running their churches (Rev. 2:1-3:22). John was fully convinced that Christ would triumph over the forces of Satan and his work in the world. He then exhorted them to be faithful and discerning between what is false and what is truth, and he warned them not to worship the Emperor or to comply with evil, apathy, or compromise. He restated the importance of discipleship and Christian formation so they (we) could be authentic Christians of excellence and distinction, bringing no disrepute to Christ or His Church. (We will take a look at the rest in Part 2.)

The Seven Churches

Revelation 2: 1-7: The Church of Ephesus was both good and bad. They were doing some good because of their endurance in persecution. They did not tolerate false teaching or those with bad agendas that were contrary to God's precepts. They were doing so well, most people in their busy-ness who would go to a church like this might not have noticed anything was missing. Or, perhaps they would be the victim of the ugly that happens when a key component of doing Church is left out. They had discernment, but had trouble with loving. They lost the most important thing about being in Christ--the Fruit of His Love flowing through us so it touches others.

Revelation 2: 8-11: The Church of Smyrna was praised, but they were treading on dangerous ground. They were starting to be bitter as their name applies. After facing much persecution, they became belligerent against Christ and turned against one another, forsaking their call and duty. They had the opportunity to learn and grow from their situation; instead, they chose bitterness and strife. They embraced fearfulness instead of faithfulness.

Revelation 2: 12-17: The Church of Pergamum were willing to die for the faith, but they were not willing to live for the faith. They were on a teeter-totter of loyalty, holding on to the faith through persecution on one side, while allowing those who were treating others with deception, compromise, and manipulation continue on the other. We walk on dangerous ground when we say "faith" with our mouths yet do dastardly deeds with our hands. Even to tolerate those who are being deceptive and scheming to others is sin, and will cause extreme dysfunction in our churches. Twisting God's truths to fit our whims and rationalizing our sin is blatantly evil. Do not allow this in your church!

Revelation 2: 18-29: The Church of Thyatira was struggling to improve and seeking to be better in how they ran His Church. They were seeking to be faithful and diligent, yet, this church had a faction that was defying Christ in a big way by allowing debauchery and heinous sin in the midst of His Bride, His Church! On one hand, they were being faithful in their faith. On the other, they were sinning by committing adultery with one another and with God. Jesus is warning them and us to come around to Him and His ways or suffer the consequences!

Revelation 3: 1-6: The Church of Sardis was being told that Jesus knew about their wayward ways, but He wanted them to become strong in Him again as they were before. However, if they refused, they would continue their downspin into sin and darkness. Their own deeds and refusal to repent was the evidence of the judgment that was at their front door. Faith must be developed and used. If we try to "fake it," there will be nothing there other than a church with no reason to exist and no One to lead it. Only pride and strife will fill its pews.

Revelation 3: 7-13: The Church of Philadelphia, the church of brotherly love. Jesus had a special provision in His heart for this church, even though they were weak in their standing and resources, and tried by persecutions from a demented culture and the apostate Jews that surrounded them. Jesus encouraged them to persevere, and told them that they could do it. Christ plainly tells us that when He gives us opportunities, He also gives us the empowerment to pursue them; therefore, He wants us to take advantage of them. What Jesus does not want from us is apathy or complacency, laziness caused by burnout, or anxiety caused by our failures. We are not to allow suffering or past experiences rule us.

Revelation 3: 14-22: The Church of Laodicea was the church of indifference and foolishness, as they thought they did not need Christ. They thought they were good when they were really bad, and they were sad, as they had no enthusiasm for Christ. Jesus was just a nametag--an idol they pandered to but were neither "hot" (worshipful) nor "apostate" (hateful or misleading others). Jesus is LORD; He is faithful and is in control. He was there in the beginning creating and sustaining (John 1), yet these Laodiceans thought they were above Christ, that He was just a stepping-stone. They thought they had *graduated* and no longer needed a Lord or Savior.

Why is Revelation so hard to understand? It is difficult because of the type of genre it is written in, *Apocalyptic Literature*.

Revelation has often been identified as an ominous apocalypse of chaos and catastrophe. But, this is not necessarily the point. Revelation opens with an elaborate greeting so we can more firmly connect our relationship with Christ and receive hope and encouragement. John calls us to the privilege and necessity of reading and hearing His Word (most people could not read and needed it to be read to them), because the authority is Christ Himself.

Revelation is apocalyptic literature, written in symbolism, poetry, and imageries, as well as Old Testament Prophecy style (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21; Rev. 1:2-3; 19:9; 22:7-19), all woven as a tapestry describing literal events (Rev. 1:1-4). John also uses the language in his current Greco-Roman figures of speech.

Revelation has three main sections: A greeting, a theme (Rev.1:1-4), and the main body (Rev. 1:4-22:21) which contains the succession of visions of spiritual warfare, warnings, and judgments, climaxing with the Second Coming of Christ, and finally a farewell (Rev. 22:21). Yet, the figurative speech and images, although borrowed from the Old Testament, would have been clear to an educated First Century Jew. It may not be a style we are familiar with in our contemporary culture, but it was very popular from 200 BC to 200 A.D. So, they know what it meant. How do we know? Simply by seeking what that term meant in the Old Testament.

Popular Apocalyptic Images

The *Beast!* The first thing that comes to mind that people love to speculate about is the *beast*, which was a *maxim*, meaning a persecuting power and/or a people who are demonic and evil. The *beast* in the original Greek refers to a "bestial" man, one who is brutal, savage, and ferocious. In context, this infers that the sea is a dwelling place for monsters, suggesting terrifying, repulsive, and evil things that seek to lead the world and the Church astray. This also gives comfort and hope because it depicts how God is still in control—even over the beast, and even in times of insurmountable chaos and suffering (Job 7:12; 41:1; Psalm 74:13; 89:9-10; Is. 27:1). Whenever the "beast" makes his "appearance," it may not be the same person all of the time such as the antichrist; rather, it is a metaphor or a theme of intent rather than a specific personality. In Revelation, the *beast* denotes someone of power and influence who is doing the persecuting (Psalm 87:4; 89:10; Is. 51:9; Dan. 7:3-8, 16-25). Thus, any dictator, or gossip for that matter (Rom. 1), can be a *beast*. Some say this indicates that the antichrist will take over the Temple and John is seeking to prevent or at least slow it down; however, this is not shown in the text or context (2 Thess. 2:3-4).

This term, the *beast*, from a literary, historical, or theological perspective does not denote a singular person being an *antichrist*, although the theme as John uses in First John does apply as opposing Christ. These two metaphors, *beast* and *sea* put together in Revelation 13 in this literature type, refers to the tenacity, fierceness, and repulsiveness of evil and evil motives (Dan. 7:3; Rev. 11:7; 13; apocryphal book 4 Ezra 11). Thus the term *beast* has more to do with *who are the beasts in your life?*

The *Antichrist!* Actually, this is not found in Revelation; rather only in 1 John 2:18-22; 4:3, 2 John 1:7 and as a plural. Once in a sermon, Augustine asked his people if any of them were *the antichrist*, as in opposing Christ in character or unfaithfulness. *Antichrist*, simply means anyone who opposes Christ. It isn't about an ominous, opposing personality rising up and tricking us; rather, it is about our willingness to be tricked. God gives us a mind and the incredible resources of His Spirit and Word; we have no excuse to be disloyal to our Lord. The call here is to heed the warning. We are not to engage in vain speculation; rather, we are to make sure we are lined up to Him, loyal to our LORD! If so, guess what? The antichrist is not a political figure; it is us... you! We are the ones who are opposing Christ!

666! Another popular image is *six hundred and sixty-six*. This was a symbol typical of first-century Jewish apocalyptic riddles usually known to the audience for which it was written; John's readers knew who he was talking about. It perhaps referred to Nero, and was a warning about making loyalty-oaths to Caesar. It was not a secret code to the hearers, only to those outside of the Church such as Roman officials. This was also a common way to express or warn about godlessness or those opposing Christ (could be attributed to a specific person such as Nero, or to any person in opposition to right and God) while avoiding unnecessary reprisals. This was not secret but common Jewish thinking; Jesus, in the Greek (IhsouV), has a numerical correspondent for 888. In addition, 666, as a number, is diametrically opposed to the perfection of the number *seven* which means fullness and completeness.

Thus, the theory of the numerical value is that a future antichrist may have a name equal in numerical value to 666 when it is written in Greek. "Nero Caesar" is 666 in the Greek when transliterated from the Hebrew (Matt. 24:15, 36-51). There is no reason or call to seek to decode this, or whatever the theory of the day is. In this way, a first century Christian can avoid unnecessary reprisals. The various theories of 666 do not always take into account what it meant then, which is crucial for our understanding and application of His Word. Sometimes, the plain meaning is far more important to us than what speculators have come up with. We are to be watchful for those who oppose Christ and make sure we are not opposing Christ in thought, word, or deed, taking oaths, or making promises that counter Christ's principals!

Apocalyptic writing can also be cryptic as representing something else and symbolic such as "IXIOUS," the "fish" which was a secret greeting in the early Church, which was under persecution from Jewish leadership, Rome, family clans, and peer pressure. Thus, this was a greeting (not in Scripture) to see if another person was a Christian, too. IXIOUS was an acronym and is not directly in Scripture in this form, but the meaning and the words spelling the acronym are. In the early church Christians evading persecution would write out the Greek word for fish, "IXIOUS", or the symbol <>< which stood for Jesus, Christ, God, Son, and Savior. This acronym stood for who Jesus was--the Savior; not a man or a half-god/man hybrid like Hercules, but the Mighty One of the Universe, humanity's God and Savior (just as the name Jesus meant).

The Four Main Views of Revelation

The Preterist view sees this passage as meaning what will come about soon in their generation (as by 70A.D.) and has been fulfilled by the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, or the fall of Domitian, or the Roman Empire. Some believe Christ already came back with vengeance by destroying the Temple through the Romans. Most are *Partial* Preterits and believe Jesus is still coming.

The Futurist view believes that John was literally carried into the future to see these events. They see this passage as being fulfilled at the end of the age, in the future just before the Second Coming.

The Idealist view sees Revelation as symbolic with no specific reference to place or time, rather giving hope to the suffering and portraying that God is sovereign. They believe Christ is coming back continually and figuratively in judgment over history.

The Historicist view sees this passage as an enfolding fulfillment, as a template to the entire church age and many events to come that will be repeated until the Second Coming.

Each of the main four views has both merit and deficiencies, all based on human logical reasoning and reading into the Bible a view that may not be there. All of these views can be found in Revelation, if you ignore the context and key word meanings, but all have significant holes that other parts of Revelation, as well as the other Scriptures, contradict.

We must come to Revelation with patience and humility, seeking dialog and cooperation, not disagreements and strife, for that is what is clearly in err. We are to interpret in light of the historical context and what it meant then because John's readers did not have a modern newspaper or CNN. And, for us to think that Revelation meant nothing for 2000 years until our generation came is extremely arrogant and dismissive to the countless Christians who came before us, upon whose shoulders we stand. Revelation is for all generations, not just theirs or ours or one to come!

Key Takeaway: The main precepts most people ignore in Revelation, it that it is not a Book of End Times as Matthew 24 and 2 Peter are. Rather, it is a Book about Hope and a call to be loyal to God over all else and that He wins no matter what. Revelation has more to do with how we live than what will come. Thus, having a specific view or even something else is not as important as what the *beasts* in our lives are, as well as in whom and where our hope is put upon.

Revelation is and has been the most controversial and difficult to understand book of the Bible. It has met its readers and redactors with suspensions, fears, and apprehension, as well as with excitement that

fascinates and at the same time both confounds and awes us. Why is this so? Revelation is unique. It is not Gospel, nor is it instruction and doctrine, although it contains all of these. It is poetic with seemingly vague and elusive imagery that has sustained suffering Christians in all generations with consolation, encouragement, and hope as well as warnings of how things are and of things that are to come. Revelation and its truth are as precious and timeless as the rest of Scripture, if not even more so (Rev.1:9; 22:16).

The Call to the Church? Christ is Supreme and is to be Glorified! Revelation shows us a future hope by Christ's finished work and sovereignty, the unity of the Church, and our eternal glory. We are given an eternal perspective to life and our purpose. Thus, we need not fear our circumstances or the future. The people need our care, they need to see Hope!

Questions to Ponder

1. How can the opening greeting of Revelation more firmly connect our relationship with Christ and receive His hope and encouragement?
2. Why do you suppose most people see Revelation as an ominous apocalypse of chaos and catastrophe? How do you see it?
3. Why do you think many find Revelation hard to understand? How does the type of 'genre' it is written in, *Apocalyptic Literature* help us?
4. What is your takeaway of the Seven Churches? Did you know they describe every church that has ever been?
5. Why is hope so important? How is Revelation about Hope? What can you do to make sure you do not bow to meaningless speculations and false teaching about Revelation? How do these lead people away and take away their hope?
6. Most people see Revelation as only about future events. What does it mean to you that it is actually more about how we should conduct ourselves at times of distress and the strength of faith to endure and learn from those times?
7. What is your take on some of these wild words and themes? This has been the crux of the debate for theologians since the 1840's. How would this affect how you view Revelation?
8. What can you do to instill hope in your life and in your congregation?
9. How does Revelation proclaim the Divine Authority, Sovereignty, and Lordship of Christ?
10. What do we need to do as a Church to surrender to the important relevance of Christ, so that we can have peace and anticipation in Him?
11. Christ is Lord. This is reality for us, both now and when He comes back for us. How does this give you comfort even when all seems lost and hopeless? Know that, He is in command and His plan is in commission.
12. Take a look at the Seven Churches, which one best describes yours and why? What did you learn? What can you do now to build a better church for God's glory?