

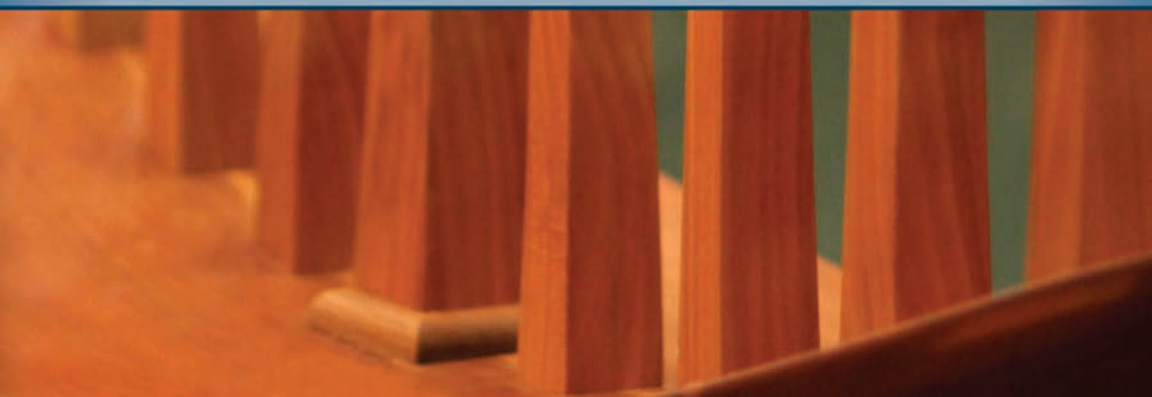


CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

SWINDOLL'S
LIVING
INSIGHTS

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

REVELATION



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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 15

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Swindoll, Charles R.

Insights on Revelation / Charles R. Swindoll.

pages cm. — (Swindoll's living insights New Testament commentary ; volume 15)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-9384-1 (hc)

1. Bible. Revelation—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2825.53.S95 2014

228'.077—dc23

2014027332

Previously published by Zondervan under ISBN 978-0-310-28434-5

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For more than sixty years I have loved the Bible. It was that love for the Scriptures, mixed with a clear call into the gospel ministry during my tour of duty in the Marine Corps, that resulted in my going to Dallas Theological Seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. During those four great years I had the privilege of studying under outstanding men of God, who also loved God's Word. They not only held the inerrant Word of God in high esteem, they taught it carefully, preached it passionately, and modeled it consistently. A week never passes without my giving thanks to God for the grand heritage that has been mine to claim! I am forever indebted to those fine theologians and mentors, who cultivated in me a strong commitment to the understanding, exposition, and application of God's truth.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in doing just that—and *how I love it!* I confess without hesitation that I am addicted to the examination and the proclamation of the Scriptures. Because of this, books have played a major role in my life for as long as I have been in ministry—especially those volumes that explain the truths and enhance my understanding of what God has written. Through these many years I have collected a large personal library, which has proven invaluable as I have sought to remain a faithful student of the Bible. To the end of my days, my major goal in life is to communicate the Word with accuracy, insight, clarity, and practicality. Without informative and reliable books to turn to, I would have “run dry” decades ago.

Among my favorite and most well-worn volumes are those that have enabled me to get a better grasp of the biblical text. Like most expositors, I am forever searching for literary tools that I can use to hone my gifts and sharpen my skills. For me, that means finding resources that make the complicated simple and easy to understand, that offer insightful comments and word pictures that enable me to see the relevance of sacred truth in light of my twenty-first-century world, and that drive those truths home to my heart in ways I do not easily forget. When I come across such books, they wind up in my hands as I devour them and then place them in my library for further reference . . . and, believe me, I often return to them. What a relief it is to have these resources to turn to when I lack fresh insight, or when I need just the right story or illustration, or when I get stuck in the tangled text and cannot find my way out. For the serious expositor, a library is essential. As a mentor of mine once said, “Where else can you have ten thousand professors at your fingertips?”

In recent years I have discovered there are not nearly enough resources like those I just described. It was such a discovery that prompted me to consider becoming a part of the answer instead of lamenting the problem. But the

solution would result in a huge undertaking. A writing project that covers all of the books and letters of the New Testament seemed overwhelming and intimidating. A rush of relief came when I realized that during the past fifty-plus years I've taught and preached through most of the New Testament. In my files were folders filled with notes from those messages that were just lying there, waiting to be brought out of hiding, given a fresh and relevant touch in light of today's needs, and applied to fit into the lives of men and women who long for a fresh word from the Lord. *That did it!* I began to work on plans to turn all of those notes into this commentary on the New Testament.

I must express my gratitude to both Mark Gaither and Mike Svelgel for their tireless and devoted efforts, serving as my hands-on, day-to-day editors. They have done superb work as we have walked our way through the verses and chapters of all twenty-seven New Testament books. It has been a pleasure to see how they have taken my original material and helped me shape it into a style that remains true to the text of the Scriptures, at the same time interestingly and creatively developed, and all the while allowing my voice to come through in a natural and easy-to-read manner.

I need to add sincere words of appreciation to the congregations I have served in various parts of these United States for more than five decades. It has been my good fortune to be the recipient of their love, support, encouragement, patience, and frequent words of affirmation as I have fulfilled my calling to stand and deliver God's message year after year. The sheep from all those flocks have endeared themselves to this shepherd in more ways than I can put into words . . . and none more than those I currently serve with delight at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Cynthia, for her understanding of my addiction to studying, to preaching, and to writing. Never has she discouraged me from staying at it. Never has she failed to urge me in the pursuit of doing my very best. On the contrary, her affectionate support personally, and her own commitment to excellence in leading *Insight for Living* for more than three and a half decades, have combined to keep me faithful to my calling "in season and out of season." Without her devotion to me and apart from our mutual partnership throughout our lifetime of ministry together, *Swindoll's Living Insights* would never have been undertaken.

I am grateful that it has now found its way into your hands and, ultimately, onto the shelves of your library. My continued hope and prayer is that you will find these volumes helpful in your own study and personal application of the Bible. May they help you come to realize, as I have over these many years, that God's Word is as timeless as it is true.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8)

Chuck Swindoll
Frisco, Texas

THE STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

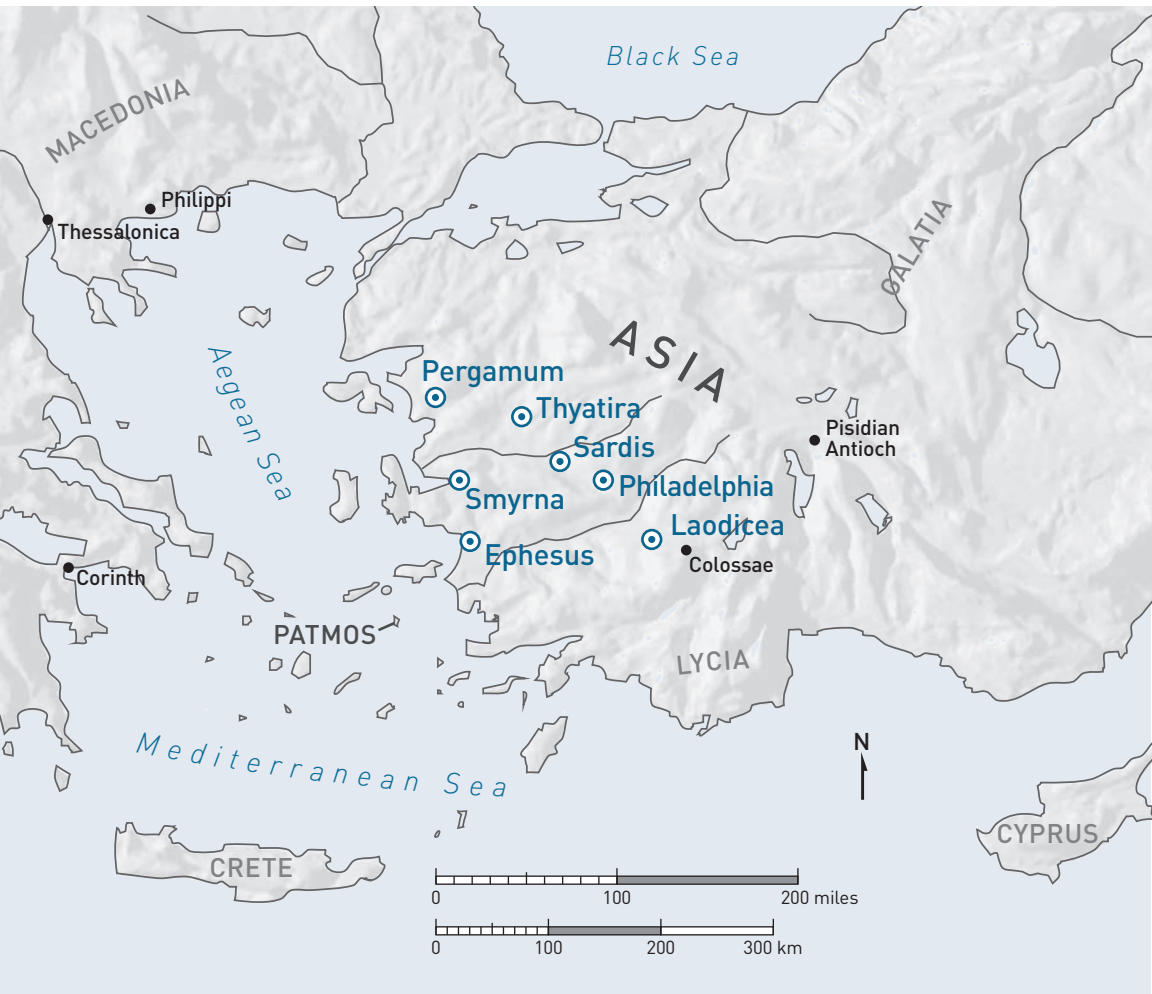
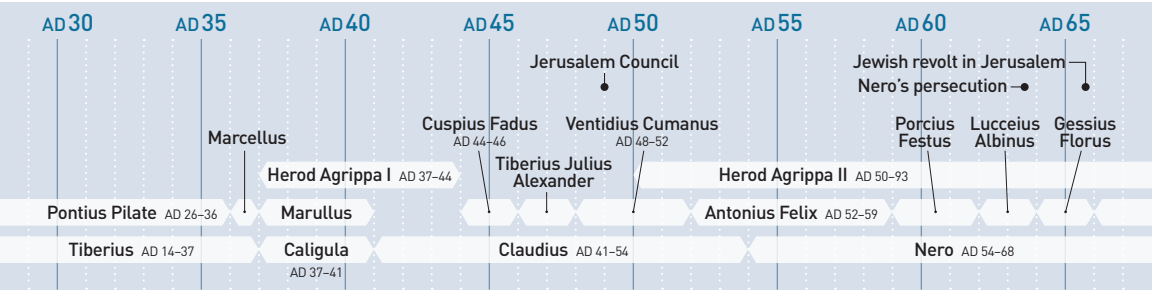
Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary uses the Strong's word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). The Strong's numbering system, made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is used with the majority of biblical Greek and Hebrew reference works. Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

When a Greek word is mentioned in the text, the Strong's number is included in square brackets after the Greek word. So in the example of the Greek word *agapē* [26], "love," the number is used with Greek tools keyed to the Strong's system.

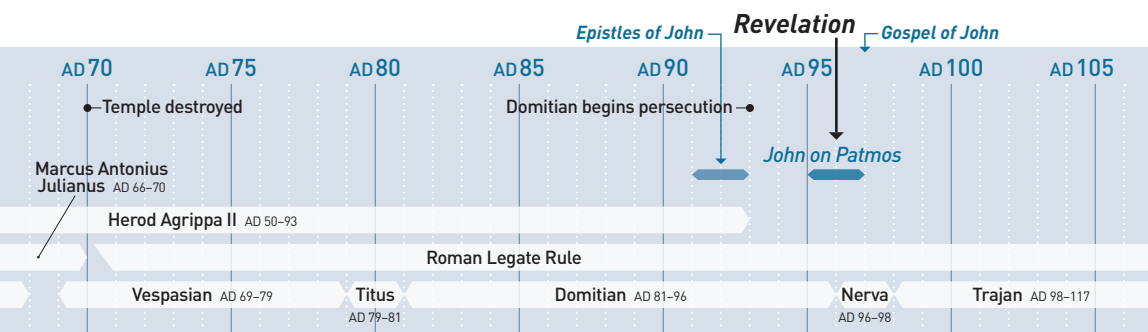
On occasion, a Hebrew word is mentioned in the text. The Strong's Hebrew numbers are completely separate from the Greek numbers, so Hebrew numbers are prefixed with a letter "H." So, for example, the Hebrew word *kapporet* [H3727], "mercy seat," comes from *kopher* [H3722], "to ransom," "to secure favor through a gift."

INSIGHTS ON REVELATION

No other book of the Bible has provoked greater fascination or led to more controversy than Revelation. Its profound mysteries, elusive symbolism, powerful predictions, and colorful language are unparalleled in the rest of Scripture. God promises great blessing to those who study the book of Revelation and heed its message (Rev. 1:3; 22:7). In the midst of the sometimes perplexing details of its visions, God's final message to humanity remains clear: In the end, good will triumph over evil, wickedness will be judged, and the righteous will receive their rewards.



The Island of Patmos and the Seven Churches of Western Asia Minor (Modern Turkey)



REVELATION

INTRODUCTION

Lights dimmed and darkness enveloped audiences around the world. Chatter faded to whispers. Whispers were drowned out by an eerie musical score. In that darkness the first syllables of Elvish filled the theater, and within minutes filmgoers around the globe were caught up in a fantasy world so intricate that whole books have been written to interpret its complex mythology of hobbits, wizards, elves, and dwarves. The film adaptation of the literary classic *The Lord of the Rings* hurled viewers into an imaginary but vivid world filled with dark towers, dark lands, and dark lords. Epic battles against seemingly unbeatable foes culminated in the ultimate triumph of good over evil and the return of the long-awaited king.

Yet for all its absorbing intrigue, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has never come close to garnering the intense fascination that continues to surround the last book of the Bible—the book of Revelation. Its fast-paced barrage of images rivals anything Hollywood magic has mustered. As the divinely inspired scene of the ultimate clash between good and evil is described, Revelation points us to the long-awaited King of kings who will defeat the world’s dark lord and his armies to usher in a new world of divine justice and eternal peace. No wonder curious Christians and serious scholars alike have marveled at Revelation’s content and been captivated by its imagery.

No other book of the Bible has provoked greater fascination or led to more controversy than Revelation. Its profound mysteries, elusive symbolism, powerful predictions, and colorful language are unparalleled in the rest of Scripture. Attempts to interpret its details have spanned the extremes from the sublime to the ridiculous. Throughout my life of ministry, I’ve seen the book of Revelation drive fanatics to set dates

THE BOOK OF REVELATION AT A GLANCE

SECTION	MESSAGES OF THE MAJESTIC SAVIOR	WORSHIP OF THE WORTHY LAMB	JUDGMENTS OF THE RIGHTEOUS REDEEMER
PASSAGE	1:1–3:22	4:1–7:17	8:1–10:11

THEMES	MESSAGES OF THE MAJESTIC SAVIOR	WORSHIP OF THE WORTHY LAMB	JUDGMENTS OF THE RIGHTEOUS REDEEMER
	Vision of the glorified Christ	Vision of the heavenly throne	Visions of the beginning of the Tribulation
	Warnings to the wicked and rewards for the righteous	Splendor of heavenly worship and salvation of earthly remnants	Demonic deception, tragic death, and wicked defiance in the midst of judgment
	Messages to the seven churches	Breaking of the seven seals	First blasts of the seven trumpets
	Jesus, our majestic Messenger	Jesus, our worthy Lamb	Jesus, our righteous Judge

KEY TERMS	<p>“The Revelation of Jesus Christ . . .</p> <p>“Blessed is he who reads . . .</p> <p>“I saw one like a son of man,</p> <p>“Fear God, and give Him glory . . . ;</p>		
	Repent Church Overcome	Worthy Seal Glory Honor	Trumpet Star Woe

RIVALS OF THE SOVEREIGN LORD	VENGEANCE OF THE GLORIOUS DELIVERER	REIGN OF THE COMING KING
11:1–13:18	14:1–19:10	19:11–22:21

<p>Visions of the middle of the Tribulation</p> <p>Trials of two witnesses, war of two armies, and reign of two beasts</p> <p>Blowing of the seventh trumpet</p> <p>Jesus, our sovereign Lord</p>	<p>Vision of the end of the Tribulation</p> <p>Deliverance, death, and destruction in the last days</p> <p>Pouring of the seven bowls</p> <p>Jesus, our great Shepherd</p>	<p>Visions of Christ's reign</p> <p>Final destination of all humanity</p> <p>End of the seventh age</p> <p>Jesus, our coming King</p>
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

the things which must **soon** take place." (1:1)
the words of the **prophecy** . . . for the time is **near**." (1:3)
clothed in a robe reaching to the feet." (1:13)
worship Him who made the heaven and the earth." (14:7)

<p>Sign Authority Testimony</p>	<p>Bowl Wrath Plague Hallelujah</p>	<p>Justice Second Death New</p>
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KEY TERMS IN REVELATION

***apokalypsis* (ἀποκάλυψις) [602] “unveiling,” “disclosure,” “revelation”**

Although the word appears only once in the book of Revelation (1:1), the Greek term *apokalypsis* functions as the title of the entire book. The word simply means “to uncover something that had been hidden.” In the New Testament the term can refer to (1) a development in God’s plan of redemption that had been kept secret in the past (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3), (2) a spiritual truth revealed in the present (1 Cor. 14:6; Eph. 1:17), or (3) future events in which God will break into human history (Rom. 2:5; 8:19; 1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thes. 1:7). Interestingly, the book of Revelation involves all three aspects of this “unveiling” as it sheds light on Old Testament prophecies, reveals vital spiritual truths, and points to the ultimate revelation of God through Christ at the end of time.

en tachei* (ἐν τάχει) [1722, 5034], “soon”**engys* (ἐγγύς) [1451] “near”**

When Revelation says Christ will come “soon” (*en tachei*) (1:1) or that his return is “near” (*engys*) (1:3), these terms express Christ’s coming as *impending*, not *immediate*. They reflect the suddenness of Christ’s coming, not a short lapse of time before His coming. If Scripture had meant to indicate that Christ’s coming would be in a short amount of time after His ascension, it would likely have used the phrase *oligon kairon* [3641, 2540] (12:12) or *oligon . . . meinai* [3641, 3306] (17:10), which John used elsewhere to indicate a “short time.” The terms *engys* and *en tachei* support the doctrine of *imminency*—that Christ’s return could come at any moment.

***homoios* (ὅμοιος) [3664] “like,” “resembling,” “similar to”**

The term *homoios* is used to draw out similarities between two things. It usually involves a symbolic correspondence—one thing *representing* or *resembling* another. Jesus repeatedly used the word in His parables when He likened the kingdom of heaven to various everyday things (e.g., Matt. 13:31-52; 20:1). The book of Revelation uses the term twenty-one times, especially in passages where the language is highly symbolic.¹ Readers of Revelation must keep this in mind. In many cases John saw symbolic representations of future events and tried to put into words things that were essentially indescribable.

***prophēteia* (προφητεία) [4394] “prophecy”**

The New Testament speaks of two types of prophecy. *Predictions* point to future events (Matt. 13:14; 1 Tim. 1:18), whereas *proclamations* announce spiritual truths often gained through special revelation (1 Cor. 13:2). Many scholars regard the book of Revelation as belonging to the ancient genre called “apocalyptic.” In that literary style, the main purpose

of the book would be to proclaim hidden spiritual truths about God, the world, Satan, and humanity—but not necessarily about future events. However, Revelation describes itself primarily as a predictive “prophesy” (Rev. 1:3; 22:18-19), that is, a revelation of “things which must soon take place” (1:1).

***proskyneō* (προσκυνέω)** [4352] “bow down before,” “show reverence to,” “worship”

Worship runs like a golden thread throughout the entire book of Revelation. *Proskyneō*, the common word for the outward manifestation of worship, occurs twenty-four times in Revelation. Those in heaven worship God (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4), but the wicked worship demons, Satan, the Antichrist, or idols (9:20; 13:4, 8, 12). The critical question for readers of Revelation is this: To whom will you bow down, show reverence, and direct your worship—God or Satan? In 14:7, an angel preaching the “eternal gospel” called all people on earth to “fear God, and give Him glory. . . . Worship Him who made the heaven and the earth.”

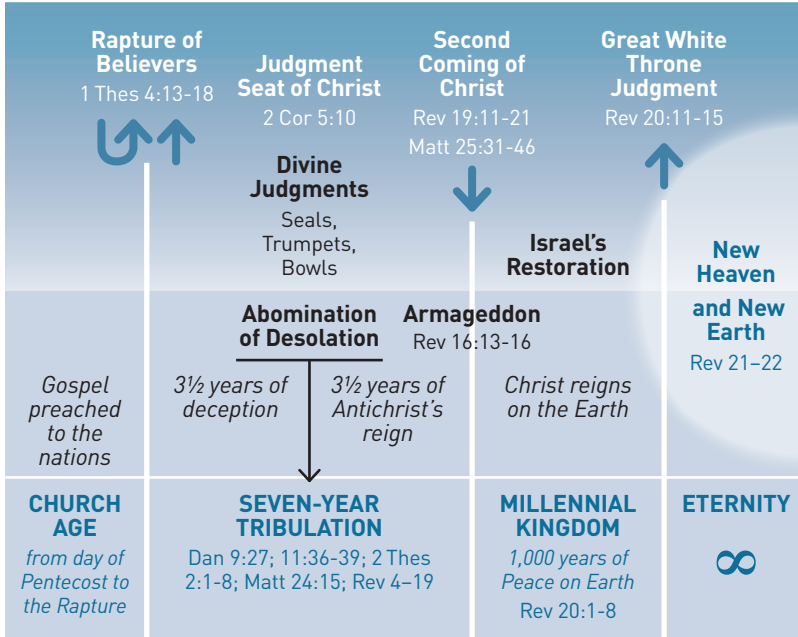
for the return of Christ, frighten believers who find themselves overwhelmed by its judgment and wrath, and turn off skeptics who already think the Bible’s filled with indecipherable nonsense.

How wrong! God promises great blessing to those who study the book of Revelation and heed its message (Rev. 1:3; 22:7). In fact, in the midst of the sometimes perplexing details of the visions, God’s final message to humanity remains clear: In the end, good will triumph over evil, wickedness will be judged, and the righteous will receive their rewards. But before we shine a spotlight on the big picture and sort out many of those complicated details, let’s take some time to cover some foundational information about the book of Revelation. We’ll also establish some necessary guidelines for understanding the book. These things will help keep us balanced during our journey. Finally, we’ll look at the book as a whole, which will help us keep an eye on our ultimate destination.

FOUNDATIONAL INFORMATION TO HELP US UNDERSTAND

Over sixty years had ticked away since the day a youthful, wide-eyed fisherman by the name of John literally dropped his nets to follow Jesus (Matt. 4:21-22). During Jesus’ three-year public ministry, John witnessed things most other disciples didn’t. With Peter and James, John had a front-row seat at the resurrection of a young girl from the dead (Mark 5:37-42). The same three men experienced the remarkable

Timeline of Future Events



transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-2). It may be this closeness with Jesus that led James and John—nicknamed the “sons of thunder”—to try presumptuously to schmooze their way into the highest places of glory within Christ’s coming kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). Yet this special relationship gave them access to teachings of Jesus that went beyond those of His normal public ministry (Mark 13:3). We should also remember that Peter, James, and John were the ones Jesus called on to keep watch and pray with Him on that night in the garden of Gethsemane when He was betrayed (Mark 14:33-34).

As this young disciple aged in years and ripened in experience, he saw further works of Christ. John witnessed the Crucifixion, where he received the unique responsibility of comforting and caring for Jesus’ mother, Mary (John 19:26-27). John and Peter were also the first to rush to the tomb after Jesus’ resurrection. Though Peter entered the tomb before him, John was the first of the twelve disciples to size up the empty tomb and believe that Jesus had been raised (John 20:8).

In his old age—after nearly sixty years of preaching and teaching primarily in Asia Minor (today known as Turkey) near the city of Ephesus—John recounted his own memories of Christ’s earthly ministry.

In his Gospel, John snuffed out a rumor spreading among the early Christians that he himself would not die before the coming of Christ (John 21:20-23). However, in a certain sense, he *would* live to “see” the return of Christ in glory from heaven. The apostle John, then in his nineties, had been exiled for his faith by the emperor Domitian to a penal colony on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, about forty miles from Ephesus. As he was worshipping the Lord one Sunday, the veil between heaven and earth was torn asunder, and John was invited into the presence of the risen, glorified Jesus once again. This time Jesus commissioned John to “write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (Rev. 1:11). What unfolded before John’s eyes was a dramatic and often frightening series of God-given visions and voices portraying “the things which must soon take place” (1:1).

The result of this encounter with the risen Lord is the book of Revelation. The title of the book comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* [602], meaning “unveiling” or “disclosure.” It means bringing something to light that was formerly hidden or kept secret. Today the term “apocalypse” conveys the idea of a cosmic cataclysm or disaster. Though the apocalypse of John includes some of these elements, the term’s meaning is much broader. It refers to any kind of unveiling. In this case, God revealed the future to John in order to inform His people what would take place (1:1).

With this unveiling comes a blessing: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (1:3). Like a second bookend bracketing John’s visions, Revelation 22:7 conveys Christ’s words: “And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.”

THE FIVE Ws OF REVELATION

Who? John, the disciple of Jesus and author of the Gospel of John as well as 1, 2, and 3 John.

What? A written record of messages, prophecies, and visions that John personally heard and saw.

Where? The tiny island of Patmos, about forty miles off the coast of Asia Minor, where John had been exiled for his faith.

When? About AD 96, making Revelation one of the last books of the Bible written—if not *the* last.

Why? To show believers the things that will take place in the end times, with a view toward exhorting them to repentance and faithfulness.

GUIDELINES TO KEEP US FROM EXTREMES

We noted that the book of Revelation promises a blessing for those who read it, hear it, and heed its lessons (1:3). However, many people can miss the blessing by reading it wrongly, hearing things it doesn't say, or failing to put its big-picture principles into practice. We all must study this book with humility, seeking to balance careful reading, restrained and reasonable interpretation, and practical application. In the spirit of balance, let's establish a few basic guidelines that can help keep us from going to extremes and missing out on the study of the book.

First, we should prepare to expect the unusual. The book of Revelation is not like any other book of the Bible. Some books in the Old Testament, such as Daniel and Zechariah, contain similar and even complementary visions and symbols, but Revelation has no equal in the New Testament. As we read John's description of what he saw and heard, we're bombarded with language, symbolism, and imagery in a style like nothing we read elsewhere. Initial confusion is normal. Failure to catch the big picture in the midst of the details is common. In fact, misunderstanding can become a chronic condition! *That's okay!* Revelation doesn't package wisdom for living into memorable verses like Proverbs or construct a logical argument like Romans. Rather, Revelation paints pictures and presents dramas that snare not only our minds but also our hearts and imaginations. All this leads us to the next guideline.

Second, we must restrain our imaginations. Because of the symbolic nature of many of the visions, some people try to wring specific, profound meaning out of every little detail. The result is often a complex scheme for the end times built more on speculation and conjecture than on the clear teachings of Scripture. To resist this overly creative approach to Revelation, we need to emphasize the things that are clearly interpreted for us—either in the book of Revelation itself or in parallel passages from the Old or New Testaments. At the same time, we need to content ourselves with tentative conclusions or suspended judgment with regard to details that are unclear. One seasoned expositor describes the situation well: "If we were to err, it would be better to err on the side of interpretive restraint than on the side of interpretive excess."²

Finally, ask four questions. A tried and true method of biblical interpretation follows this path:³

Observation: "What does it say?"

Interpretation: "What does it mean?"

Correlation: “How does it fit?”

Application: “How does it work?”

This four-step method works well for Revelation—with a few stipulations. When it comes to Revelation, sometimes we need to suppress our curiosity and settle for the results of observation. That’s because the apostle John himself didn’t fully understand everything in his God-given visions (see 7:13-14; cf. Zech. 4:5, 13). Much of the time, though, we can be confident of our interpretations based on the context, on an interpretation within the book of Revelation itself, or on parallel passages elsewhere in Scripture. For the book of Revelation, the step of *correlation*—how the passage fits with other parts of the Bible—often becomes necessary for the *interpretation*. Once we understand the meaning of a passage, vision, or prophecy in Revelation, we can move to the important step of *application*. Most of the time, our applications will be concrete and personal. Occasionally the application will be general or theological. In either case, our goal must be more than satisfying curiosities or gathering facts. The purpose of Revelation is to *change* us, not simply to *inform* us.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK TO KEEP US FOCUSED

Like an epic film, the book of Revelation takes a number of twists and turns, complete with characters, conflicts, and climaxes. It builds intensity as its plot moves toward an explosive conclusion, culminating in a stunning resolution that relieves the excruciating tensions of the story. Throughout the drama we’ll observe flashbacks and foreshadowing, repetition and contrast, zooming and panning, and enough interludes to give us the opportunity to ponder and absorb what God is revealing about His glorious plan. As a sort of preview or “teaser trailer” for this divinely inspired multimedia production, let’s walk through the major sections of the book. As we go deeper into the book, we’ll return periodically to the big picture, keeping the major sections in mind in the midst of our scene-by-scene examination.

In Revelation 1:19, we find an inspired outline of the book. Jesus tells John explicitly what to write: “Write the things which you have seen,

KNOWING WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT THE FUTURE . . .

Communicates the full CHARACTER OF GOD, balancing our theology.

Gives us HOPE for today and alleviates UNNECESSARY FEARS about the future.

Compels us to live GODLY LIVES in view of FUTURE REWARDS.

Moves us to WORSHIP GOD, who will ultimately TRIUMPH OVER EVIL.

and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.” Consider that threefold command. The *past* (“the things which you have seen”) likely refers to the startling vision of Christ that John had in 1:10-16. This reminds us that the central focus of the entire book is the majestic King Himself, Jesus. The *present* (“the things which are”) refers to the messages Jesus dictates in Revelation 2–3 for the seven churches in Asia Minor. Though these messages address specific situations in those first-century churches, Jesus Himself reminds us that they have applications for every believer—“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Taken literally, even if you have just one ear, these messages are for you—today! The *future* (“the things which will take place after these things”) refers to the events that will take place in coming years as the time grows nearer for the second coming of Christ to earth and the ushering in of His promised kingdom (4:1–22:1).

The book of Revelation can also be described by focusing on its star Actor and on major sections, or “episodes.” None other than Jesus Christ occupies center stage throughout the inspired drama. All of the episodes ultimately point to Him and His second coming as Judge and King. In a sense, Jesus Christ Himself is the One who is revealed through the series of visions, for “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (19:10). To this end, the drama of Revelation portrays Jesus performing a variety of roles. I find it helpful to describe the flow of the book with six distinct but interconnected episodes centered on Christ. Let’s briefly examine each of these in order.

Episode 1: *Messages of the Majestic Savior* (1:1–3:22). This first episode includes John’s own introduction to the book of Revelation (1:1-8), followed by a startling vision of Jesus’ glorious majesty, in which He instructs John to write down everything he sees and hears (1:9-20). Jesus then addresses the leaders of seven handpicked churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus (2:1-7), Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamum (2:12-17), Thyatira (2:18-29), Sardis (3:1-6), Philadelphia (3:7-13), and Laodicea (3:14-22). Christ functions as the exalted Head of the church who is responsible for the church’s present discipline and future reward.

Episode 2: *Worship of the Worthy Lamb* (4:1–7:17). The first scene of this episode begins when John is abruptly caught up into the spiritual realm—to the very throne room of heaven (4:1-2). There he witnesses the worship of God the Father and God the Son—the “Lamb of God,” who is worthy to break the seven-sealed scroll and reveal the events of the future (4:3–5:14). Through symbolic visions, the “scroll judgments”

begin to reveal the first stages of divine wrath upon the earth (6:1-17). In the midst of these judgments, however, John sees a vision of the redeemed from Israel and the nations, reminding us that, even in the midst of judgment, God's grace and mercy prevail (7:1-17).

Episode 3: *Judgments of the Righteous Redeemer* (8:1-10:11). After a half-hour respite at the breaking of the seventh seal, the second series of seven judgments commences—the seven trumpets (8:1-5). These trumpet blasts announce the next stage in divine wrath: a more intense display of God's righteous judgments on stubborn, unrepentant sinners (8:6-9:21). Just as the trumpet blasts approach a deafening crescendo, the sound ceases and John experiences another hiatus, during which he is recommissioned to prophesy concerning “peoples and nations and tongues and kings” (10:1-11).

Episode 4: *Rivals of the Sovereign Lord* (11:1-13:18). With John's recommissioning, the perspective of the great drama shifts from heavenly wrath to the conditions on earth, specifically events in the Promised Land. A conflict between two chosen witnesses prophesying in Jerusalem and their adversaries ends in the witnesses' martyrdom and resurrection (11:1-14). After the seventh trumpet is blown in heaven to declare the arrival of Christ's kingdom (11:15-19), John witnesses a series of visions that describe in detail the final forms of the spiritual and earthly kingdom set up in opposition to Christ and the kingdom of heaven. In this dramatic portrayal, John sees the rise of two future political and religious tyrants energized by Satan and permitted to rule the world virtually unchecked for three and a half years (12:1-13:18).

Episode 5: *Vengeance of the Glorious Deliverer* (14:1-19:10). The depictions of the blasphemous exploits of Christ's wicked opponents give way to a series of visions that proclaim the final gathering of the earth for deliverance and the harvesting of the earth for judgment (14:1-20). This in turn dissolves into a new vision of the most severe plagues of the end times—the seven bowls of wrath (15:1-16:21). On the verge of observing the final fate of the wicked armies of the earth, John sees the action pause, and a great angel appears. He takes John aside to explain some of the symbols and events in the book of Revelation. These events include the judgments on the wicked empire and the victory of God's people (17:1-19:10).

Episode 6: *Reign of the Coming King* (19:11-22:21). Following the description of the final fate of the wicked rulers, the action of Revelation resumes as John has a vision of the second coming of Christ with

His armies (19:11-21). Following His return, Christ and His resurrected saints commence their thousand-year reign of peace, which culminates in the final destruction not only of Satan but of evil, pain, and death itself (20:1-15). The great drama of redemption comes to a close after John sees an astounding portrayal of the eternal state of ultimate peace and perfection in the new heavens and new earth (21:1–22:5). Finally, like credits rolling during a closing score, the concluding words of Revelation remind us that Jesus is indeed coming again (22:6-21).

The book of Revelation wasn't written to confuse, frighten, or entertain. Rather, it was given to believers to read, understand, and apply. Through this mile-high overview of the book, we've had a chance to catch a glimpse of Christ's power and glory. In the following pages, we'll embark on a journey through Revelation that focuses on the principles we need to read, comprehend, and obey. My heartfelt prayer is that this adventure through Revelation will result in countless blessings in the life of every reader and bear fruit in the present age—and in the age to come.

APPLICATION: THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Practical Lessons before the Launch

Before we launch our vessel into the majestic waters of Revelation, let's review a few practical lessons to keep at the forefront of our minds throughout our voyage. When we're distracted by waves of uncertainty, disturbed by storms of judgment, or merely drifting through the doldrums of details, we can use these principles to enliven and enrich our journey.

First, *God's inerrant Word is a reliable map*. No matter how difficult it is to comprehend the mind-blowing visions in the book of Revelation, we can have confidence that God's Word will accomplish its purpose in our lives, whether we feel it or not. In Isaiah 55:10-11, God says:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;

So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”

This is why we can rely on the promise of God’s blessing associated with reading and heeding the book of Revelation. We don’t need to understand *everything* for God to accomplish His purpose in us through this magnificent book. If we comprehend at least the big picture of the book, that will be enough to guide us throughout life.

Second, *God’s sovereign plan replaces fear with hope*. People all over the world live in bondage to superstition, fear of the unknown, and anxiety about the future. Not only do they question their personal future, but many have an overwhelming feeling that the whole world and all of humanity are spinning out of control. Wars, famines, diseases, natural disasters—these tragedies make it look as if chaos reigns. However, the book of Revelation demonstrates that no matter how bad things appear to be, God is working out His sovereign plan. This book assures us that, in the end, God will win! Knowing this basic truth and ruminating on how that will happen will replace unnecessary fears with hope and confidence—not in ourselves or in other people, but in God Himself.

Third, *God’s glorious Son is worthy of worship*. The book of Revelation consistently and repeatedly points us to Jesus Christ as the center of prophecy; as John puts it, “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10). We praise Christ for what He *has done* for us on the cross by taking away our sins, and we praise Him for what He *is doing* for us by interceding for us in heaven. Revelation gives us another reason to praise Him—for what He *will do* for us in the future. As such, Christ remains the center of our worship, the focus of our obedience, and the source of our blessing, both now and in eternity to come.

MESSAGES OF THE MAJESTIC SAVIOR (REVELATION 1:1–3:22)

Think before answering this question: If Jesus Christ Himself were to show up in your church unannounced, evaluate your worship, and carefully investigate the interpersonal relationships in your congregation, how would He react? Be honest, now. Would He sit down with your leadership, pat them on the back, and say how proud He was of them and encourage them to keep up the good work? Or would the Lord sit across from them, stare in their eyes, and shake His head in disappointment?

It's a frightening prospect to be directly evaluated by the One who knows every dark secret, concealed fact, long-standing grudge, embarrassing mistake, and less-than-pure motive. But this is exactly what Christ did, according to the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. Much to the surprise of the apostle John, who didn't expect to see the Lord again until his own death or the Second Coming, Christ appeared in majestic glory to deliver visions of the future and dictate timely messages to seven specific churches. As we might expect if Jesus were to explore our personal lives or the lives of our churches, the diagnoses were quite varied. From unimpeachable to despicable, from praiseworthy to pathetic, Christ held back neither encouragement nor rebuke. He called all believers to examine their own lives and ministries to see if they measured up to His standards of faith, hope, and love.

The first major section of Revelation includes John's own introduction to the book (1:1-8), followed by a startling vision of Jesus' glorious majesty, in which He instructs John to write everything he sees and hears (1:9-20). Jesus then addresses the leaders of seven handpicked churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus (2:1-7), Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamum (2:12-17), Thyatira (2:18-29), Sardis (3:1-6), Philadelphia (3:7-13), and Laodicea (3:14-22). Here we see Christ functioning as the exalted Head of the church, who is responsible for the church's discipline and reward at His coming. As the veil is lifted between earth and heaven and we hear the messages of the majestic Savior, let's allow His words to pierce the veils of our own hearts, fortifying our strengths and correcting our flaws.

KEY TERMS IN REVELATION 1:1-3:22

***ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) [1577]** “assembly,” “church”

The word “church” refers to the New Testament people of God who have been saved by faith in Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It includes all living and departed believers from Pentecost (Acts 2) to the resurrection and rapture of the church (1 Thes. 4:17). Though the word *ekklēsia* occurs twenty times in the book of Revelation, nineteen of those references are in the messages to the seven churches (Rev. 1–3). The last mention comes in the final words of the book, addressing those same churches. The “church” is not mentioned at all in chapters 4–21, lending support to the view that the church will be raptured before the Tribulation.

***metanoēō* (μετανοέω) [3340]** “change one’s mind,” “repent”

The biblical teaching of repentance starts with a genuine “change of mind”—an internal reversal of one’s thoughts, attitudes, values, and emotions. However, it would be misleading to conclude that authentic repentance is limited only to the “invisibles” of life. True repentance also leads to a change in actions. Thus, Jesus Christ calls believers to “repent” by doing the things they did at first (2:5). And he calls unbelievers to “repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons” (9:20).

***nikaō* (νικάω) [3528]** “conquer,” “overpower,” “overcome”

In Revelation 2–3, Jesus extends promises to the one who “overcomes” (*nikaō*). The word has a range of meanings, from overpowering an enemy (Luke 11:22) to overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21). John uses *nikaō* in his writings to speak of overcoming Satan and the world by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, who overcame on our behalf (John 16:33; 1 Jn. 4:4). The key to understanding what it means for believers to “overcome” is found in 1 John 5:4-5: “This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

The Messenger in His Majesty

REVELATION 1:1-20

NASB

¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and ^acommunicated *it* by His angel

¹This is a revelation from* Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the events that must soon* take place. He sent an angel to present this revelation to his servant

NLT

NASB

to His bond-servant John, ²who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, *even* to all that he saw. ³Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and ⁴heed the things which are 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 ⁵is 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 released us from our sins ⁶by His blood— ⁶and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to ⁷His God and Father—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. 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 ⁹is to come, the Almighty.”

⁹I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and ¹⁰perseverance *which are* in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was ¹¹in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like *the sound* of a trumpet, ¹¹saying, “Write in a ¹²book what you see, and send *it* to the seven churches: to Ephesus

LT

John, ²who faithfully reported everything he saw. This is his report of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

³God blesses the one who reads the words of this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to its message and obey what it says, for the time is near.

⁴This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia.*

Grace and peace to you from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold Spirit* before his throne; ⁵and from Jesus Christ. He is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the ruler of all the kings of the world.

All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. ⁶He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.

⁷ Look! He comes with the clouds of heaven.

And everyone will see him— even those who pierced him.

And all the nations of the world will mourn for him.

Yes! Amen!

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end,”* says the Lord God. “I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come—the Almighty One.”

⁹I, John, am your brother and your partner in suffering and in God’s Kingdom and in the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and for my testimony about Jesus. ¹⁰It was the Lord’s Day, and I was worshipping in the Spirit.* Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. ¹¹It said, “Write in a book* everything you see, and send it to the

and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; ¹³and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like ^aa son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. ¹⁴His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. ¹⁵His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun ^ashining in its strength.

¹⁷When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living One; and I ^awas dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. ¹⁹Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

1:1 ^aOr signified 1:3 ^aOr keep 1:4 ^aOr is coming 1:5 ^aOr in 1:6 ^aOr God and His Father 1:8 ^aOr is coming 1:9 ^aOr steadfastness 1:10 ^aOr in spirit 1:11 ^aOr scroll 1:13 ^aOr the Son of Man 1:16 ^aLit shines 1:18 ^aLit became

seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

¹²When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. ¹³And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man.* He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. ¹⁵His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. ¹⁶He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, “Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.*

¹⁹“Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen.* ²⁰This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels* of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

1:1a Or of. 1:1b Or suddenly, or quickly. 1:4a Asia was a Roman province in what is now western Turkey. 1:4b Greek the seven spirits. 1:8 Greek I am the Alpha and the Omega, referring to the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. 1:10 Or in spirit. 1:11 Or on a scroll. 1:13 Or like a son of man. See Dan 7:13. “Son of Man” is a title Jesus used for himself. 1:18 Greek and Hades. 1:19 Or what you have seen and what they mean—the things that have already begun to happen. 1:20 Or the messengers.

From psychics to seers, from statisticians to scientists, people from every nation and every generation have been trying to discover what the future might hold for them. Occasionally these forecasters get it right, and things turn out the way they predicted. Far more often, however,

these secular or religious prophets miss the mark. In your own lifetime, just think about some of the false forecasts that have let people down.

- A political analyst calls an election, but the other candidate wins!
- An army general predicts a swift victory, but then the war drags on for years!
- A Bible teacher dates the return of Christ, but Jesus doesn't appear!
- A financial expert banks on a bull market, but then the stock market crashes!

Prophecies about the future are only as reliable as the wisdom, knowledge, and insight of their sources. When the source of information is our limited human perspectives on the past and present, the most intelligent “expert” can only offer an educated guess. On the other hand, if the source is the all-knowing sovereign God, we can be certain that what He speaks will surely come to pass.

Before God gives us a glimpse of future events, He reveals the reliable source of this information. The visions of the future do not come to us from the pen of a crazed quack or wild-eyed fanatic. The prophecies of the book of Revelation come from our omniscient, sovereign God, through Jesus Christ Himself. They are therefore a reliable and relevant source concerning the future of the world.

— 1:1-3 —

The book of Revelation wasn't written to confuse, frighten, frustrate, or entertain us. The opening verse of this incredible book reveals its own purpose in no uncertain terms: “to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place.” Though the book shows the unfolding of future events, don't let its portrayal of the end times distract you from the real heart of the book: the *Author* of those events. The title, “the Revelation of Jesus Christ” may actually mean both the revelation *from* Jesus Christ as well as the revelation *concerning* Jesus Christ. As we witness the events leading up to Christ's coming kingdom, our mental picture of the person of Jesus becomes clearer. This is true because “the testimony of Jesus Christ” mentioned in 1:2 is itself identified in 19:10 as “the spirit [or inner heart] of prophecy” (NASB) or “the essence of prophecy” (NLT). The person and work of Christ is the blueprint that holds together all of the pieces of the prophetic puzzle.

The Greek phrase translated “soon” or “quickly” in Revelation 1:1 is *en tachei* [1722, 5034]. The same phrase is used in Luke 18:8 in reference

to the judgment of God and in Romans 16:20 to describe the future destruction of Satan. The other common Greek term for impending fulfillment is found in Revelation 1:3, where the Greek word *engys* [1451] appears, meaning “near.” These two terms, *en tachei* and *engys*, communicate that the fulfillment of future events could begin at any moment. It’s as if Christ now stands at the very door of our world, ready to enter at any moment. Our response should not be to expect the return of Christ at a particular time, but to be ready for His return no matter when it occurs.

In Revelation 1:3 John states that those who read, hear, and heed the words of his prophecy will be “blessed.” What does it mean to be “blessed” in a biblical sense? One commentator notes that the underlying Greek word “does not express superficial sentiment but instead the rugged and tested assurance that it is a good thing to be walking in the pathway of God’s will.”¹ The same Greek term is used repeatedly by Jesus in the famous “beatitudes” passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-11). We often think of Revelation as containing nothing but death, destruction, and suffering. In reality, Revelation actually contains seven “beatitudes” designed to provide hope and encouragement to believers in the midst of trials.

THE SEVEN “BEATITUDES” OF REVELATION

Blessed are those who

- read, hear, and heed the prophecy (1:3)
- die in the Lord (14:13)
- stay alert and keep their clothes (16:15)
- are invited to the wedding feast of Christ (19:9)
- have a part in the first resurrection (20:6)
- heed the words of the prophecy of this book (22:7)
- wash their robes (22:14)

— 1:4-8 —

John begins by greeting the churches in Asia Minor with “grace . . . and peace” (1:4).² When sinners come to Christ through simple faith, accepting Him as God in the flesh whose death on the cross paid the penalty for their sins, they receive eternal salvation through *grace*—unmerited, unearned, undeserved favor. God doesn’t save us because of any good thing we have done, will do, or even promise to do. God saves us solely by His grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Salvation is God’s gift to undeserving sinners—we must never forget that! The result of this precious grace is a relationship that offers us true peace that overcomes any trials and tribulations the world can bring. What a reassuring greeting to the members of the persecuted church! Though John will later

describe *judgment* and *distress* that will overtake wicked unbelievers in the future, God’s own people receive *grace* and *peace*.

This present peace and future fulfillment of our salvation come from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Drawing on several images he saw in the visions, John presents an “elaborate triadic formula for the Trinity.”³ He calls the Father the One “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4). We see this same description in the song of the four living creatures (4:8). As an allusion to the divine name “I AM” in Exodus 3:14, it indicates God’s complete transcendence over all history—past, present, and future.⁴ God is just as much in control of our unknown future and unnerving present as He is of our unpleasant past!

The names John used for Jesus Christ are also drawn from Old and New Testament language. From Psalm 89:27, 37 come the titles “faithful witness,” “firstborn,” and “ruler of the kings of the earth,” all referring to Christ’s authority and kingship as the promised descendant of David. These phrases also appear in Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 3:14, possibly referring to Christ’s authority to rule as the promised King from the line of David.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is described as “the seven Spirits who are before His throne” (1:4). John isn’t describing seven distinct Holy Spirits. There’s only one Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4). In a vision of the heavenly throne room described in Revelation 4, John saw the Holy Spirit symbolically represented by “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne” (Rev. 4:5). The image of the “sevenfold Spirit” is also drawn from a similar image in Zechariah 4:2-7 and from the seven qualities of the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 11:2-3—the Spirit (1) of the Lord, (2) of wisdom, (3) of understanding, (4) of counsel, (5) of strength, (6) of knowledge, and (7) of the fear of the Lord.⁵

In light of this glorious truth about the triune God, John responded with a grand doxology, or song of praise (Rev. 1:5-6). In doing so, he draws our attention back to the cross where he had once stood as an eyewitness to the sufferings of his Savior (John 19:26-27, 35). By the shedding of His blood, Christ paid the debt in full for the sins of the world and thereby released believers from the guilt and penalty of their sins. On our behalf, He conquered death and gave new life to all who believe. We can therefore share with Christ His authority as Priest and coming King through a supernatural union with Him by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:4-7; Rev. 5:10; 20:6). Such glorious news is worthy of a grand doxology!

Ultimately, the book of Revelation tells the story of Jesus Christ

Himself. As John concludes the opening greeting, he breaks into a prophetic description of the coming King in all His glory. When the true Sovereign sets foot on the Mount of Olives, no applause will erupt from those who have rejected Him. No marching band will play His anthem. No red carpet will mark His way. No massive banner will greet Him by displaying a bold “Welcome Home!” Instead, Christ’s coming will be accompanied by mourning, because He will be coming as Judge (1:7). Using biblical imagery common in his day, John offers a preview of the glorious descent of Christ at the final battle of Armageddon. Every eye will see Him, even those who did not believe in Him, and all who see Him will mourn greatly.

Jolting us to attention, John interjects a direct quote from God Almighty Himself—“I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). “Alpha” and “Omega,” the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, mark God as the One who has both creation and re-creation in His hands. However, it would be a terrible misunderstanding if we were to assume that God cares nothing about what comes between the “A” and “Z” of the universe. This is why He reminds us that He is the God not only of the past and the future but of the present as well. As “Almighty” God, the Lord exercises control over all time.

— 1:9-11 —

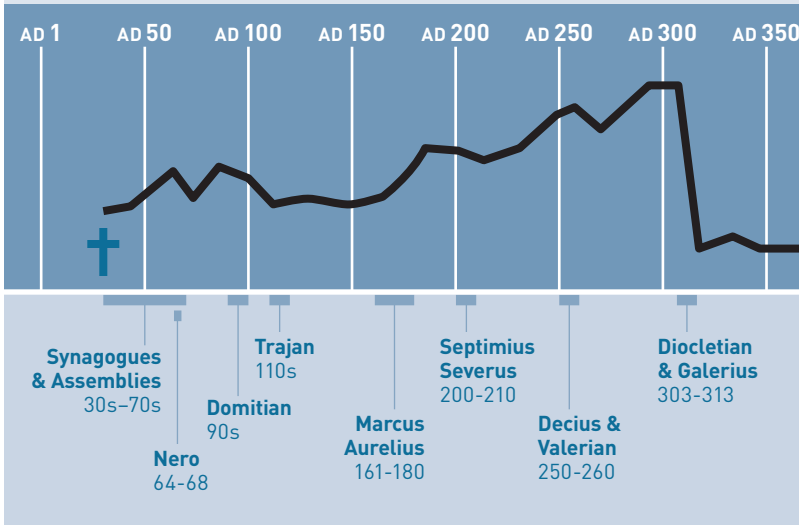
After a powerful introduction that climaxes in a quotation from the Almighty Himself (1:1-8), John transitions abruptly to the setting of his first vision (1:9-11). As if he were going out of his way to keep the spotlight on Jesus, the apostle introduces himself and his circumstances with simplicity and humility: “I, John” (1:9). John had been banished to the penal colony on the island of Patmos by the cruel emperor Domitian for refusing to confess the emperor as “lord and god.” How like that faithful apostle to keep the spotlight on the only true Lord and God, Jesus Christ!

John could have pointed out items in his résumé that no one then alive could have equaled, but he didn’t. Instead, he described himself in ways that emphasized the common experiences he shared with fellow believers: “your brother and fellow partaker” (1:9). The term translated “partaker” (*synkoinōnos* [4791]) is related to the concept of “fellowship.” Today, it’s hard for most Christians to imagine fellowship in the church without three so-called essentials—*food*, *folks*, and *fun*. Yet John demonstrated that fellowship in the early church centered on an altogether different threesome—*perseverance* through *tribulation* in light of the coming *kingdom*.

DOMITIAN'S PERSECUTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

REVELATION 1:9

Throughout the history of the church, Christianity has experienced various degrees of persecution. Historians identify two major world-wide, official attacks on the church by the Roman Empire: the first by Emperor Decius in the AD 250s, the second about fifty years later under Diocletian. This latter, brutal persecution ended with the Edict of Milan of 313, in which the Emperor Constantine put an end to official Roman persecution of Christianity.



But local persecutions preceded and followed those major upheavals. In the years immediately following the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the church experienced opposition and persecution both by local synagogue leaders and by Gentile authorities. In the late 60s, Nero persecuted the church in Rome, executing Peter and Paul as well as many other Christians. Thirty years later, a persecution arose under Domitian, in which a primary target was one of the last surviving apostles, John.

Tradition has it that the Roman authorities attempted to boil him in oil but that he was miraculously preserved, which baffled and frightened the superstitious officials. John was then exiled to Patmos because of his testimony of Jesus Christ. Domitian, afraid of the kingdom of God and wanting to rid the world of any threats to his own power, sought out the known descendants of King David. He questioned two grandsons of Jesus' brother Jude regarding the nature of Christ's kingdom and whether they were heirs to the throne. To Domitian's surprise,

these Jewish Christian relatives of Jesus explained that the kingdom they proclaimed was not earthly but heavenly and that it was to be established at the end of the world. Additionally, the two had little monetary worth. After they showed the emperor their empty pockets, he released them from custody. John soon returned from exile and directed the churches of Asia until his death after the crowning of Emperor Trajan in AD 98.⁶

The Greek word *thlipsis* [2347], “tribulation,” can refer to the coming Great Tribulation of the end times, leading up to Christ’s physical return (Matt. 24:21, 29). More commonly, though, it refers to general trials and persecutions experienced by Christians of every era (Matt. 13:21; 24:9; John 16:33; Rom. 5:3). The term *kingdom* refers to a future earthly kingdom that will be established at the return of Christ (Matt. 19:28; Acts 1:6-7; 2 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 20:4). In light of their common destiny as co-regents with Christ at His coming, believers are occasionally referred to as members of God’s kingdom in a spiritual sense (1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13). In the context of shared suffering, and in light of the promise of future glory, the Spirit enables believers to share in *perseverance*. The word *hypomōnē* (Rev. 1:9 [5281]) implies endurance under extreme difficulty, as a beast of burden might endure under a heavy load. God Himself gives believers the ability to endure hardship (Rom. 15:5; Col. 1:11). By reminding believers that they share these three things—perseverance, tribulation, and the kingdom—Jesus Christ drew the believers together, giving them purpose and perspective in the midst of suffering. If Christ the coming King could suffer unjustly for them, they could certainly endure persecution for Him.

During Domitian’s reign, John was exiled to the island of Patmos because of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). Rome had established a penal colony on this unpleasant, tiny, remote island. According to the earliest records of the ancient church, John was exiled to Patmos for eighteen months, beginning in AD 95.⁷ Even in exile for his faith, in the uncertain surroundings of a rocky penal colony, the elderly apostle set aside time on “the Lord’s day” (Sunday) to worship and pray. That’s what I call devotion! Perhaps he was kneeling in prayer or reciting psalms when something supernatural took hold of him, ripped him out of the sphere of this world, and transported him into the spiritual realm.⁸

Immediately upon finding himself “in the Spirit,” John heard behind

him the clear, penetrating voice of Christ calling to His beloved disciple “like the sound of a trumpet” (1:10). His instructions were simple: “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (1:11). Perhaps Christ selected these seven churches because their situations represented conditions applicable to churches of every age, including our own. Ephesus, the first of the seven churches and John’s own home church at the time, was nearest to Patmos. The rest of the churches were on a natural overland route in the specific order given by Christ (see map in the Introduction, page 2).

— 1:12-20 —

With the booming, majestic voice of the Savior still echoing in his ears, John slowly turned to see who was speaking to him. The first thing he noticed was not a man, but seven golden lampstands, each holding an oil-burning lamp (1:12). Then his eyes settled on the source of the voice—“one like a son of man” standing in the midst of the seven lampstands. This was Jesus, no doubt, but not Jesus as John remembered Him from earlier years—preaching to the multitudes, healing the sick, suffering on the cross, or even ascending into heaven. No, the message from this Jesus sent John’s memories racing backward over sixty years to a powerful experience on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). There Peter, James, and John had witnessed Christ transformed before their eyes, as He briefly unveiled His glory. Now, near the end of his life, John was seeing a vision of the risen Lord in all His splendor.

John used the best descriptive terms he could muster to put into words what was essentially indescribable. The initial image resembled a human form, but Jesus was clearly more than a man. The details of the vision—the long robe, golden sash, white hair, flaming gaze, bronze feet, bellowing voice, and brilliant features (1:13-16)—all pointed to one thing: Jesus Christ is God! From His mouth shot a two-edged sword—a symbol for the word of God (Heb. 4:12) as well as an instrument of judgment (Rev. 19:11-15). In His hand He held seven stars (1:16). In a brief glimpse of unveiled deity shrouded in mysterious symbols that surpassed even John’s experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, the beloved disciple quickly learned his place in the universe. Saint John—evangelist, theologian, elder, apostle, and elite member of Christ’s inner circle—was instantly reduced to a trembling sinner lying

WHO ARE THE “ANGELS” IN REVELATION 2–3?

REVELATION 1:20

When we hear the word “angel” in the twenty-first century, we immediately picture heavenly messengers—sometimes appearing in human form, other times in brilliant attire. We may even imagine the six-winged creatures of Isaiah 6. However, if you lived in the first century and heard the Greek word *angelos* [32], white-clad and winged messengers may not have been the first things to come to mind. In fact, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the word sometimes refers to a human messenger or herald who represents a king or carries an important message.⁹ One early Christian writing (ca. AD 95–100) describes the pastor of Rome as the one whose job it was to send correspondence to the churches abroad, functioning in the role of a human *angelos*.¹⁰ Context must determine whether the word refers to angelic heavenly beings or to human beings functioning as messengers.

The context of the word *angelos*, first mentioned in Revelation 1:20 and repeated throughout chapters 2 and 3, suggests that the *angelos* in each of the seven churches in Asia Minor was the head elder or “pastor” of the church. In fact, the “messenger” of each church is addressed in the singular (“you”) several times in the messages to the seven churches, and the “messenger” is also charged with bad behavior (2:4, 14, 20). Heavenly angelic beings couldn’t be charged with wrongdoing and asked to repent.¹¹

Therefore, we should understand that when Jesus told John to write his messages to each *angelos* of the seven churches, he referred to what we call today the “pastors” of the churches—men with whom John was probably already familiar. But although the primary recipient was the pastor of each church, Revelation 1:11 reminds us that these messages were intended for the church under his care.

powerless before the King of kings and Lord of lords. In a word, he was terrified.

Yet in the midst of the apostle’s heart-stopping terror, the unsurpassable Son of God stooped down, reached out with His nail-pierced hand, and comforted His old friend. Helping the elderly disciple to his feet, He told John not to fear (1:17). Then Jesus described Himself in exalted terms: “I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (1:17-18).

Immediately the Lord reiterated his command for John to write down everything he saw (1:19; cf. 1:11). This time he outlined the divine information into three distinct units that can be broken down into past, present, and future:

The things which you have seen	Vision of Christ in all his glory (Rev. 1)
The things which are	Messages to the seven churches (Rev. 2-3)
The things which will take place after these things	Visions of things to come (Rev. 4-22)

Like a reporter in the midst of a historic event, John began frantically recording the vision of Jesus that was still impressed upon his mind (“the things which you have seen”). Then Jesus helped all of us by interpreting two symbols from that vision, the stars and the lampstands. The seven stars in His right hand are the “angels” (or human messengers) of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 1:11. The seven golden lampstands are the seven churches themselves (1:20). The charge is clear: John was to write everything he saw and heard and send it to the seven churches through each church’s pastor. This wide distribution of the book guaranteed that the revelation from Jesus Christ would not only address believers in John’s own day, but it would continue to inform and encourage believers of every age.

APPLICATION: REVELATION 1:1-20

Falling on Our Faces before the Glorious Lord

As I reflect on John’s breathtaking experience on Patmos that Sunday, I’m struck by two principles.

First, *the better our understanding of who Christ really is, the quicker we’ll respond in submission and obedience.* Revelation 1:17 says, “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man.” We sometimes hear people talk about meeting Jesus face-to-face, giving Him a hug, sitting on his lap, and asking Him all those theological and biblical questions that have been nagging them throughout their lives. In light of John’s response to his brief glimpse of Christ’s unveiled glory, such a notion fails to measure up. As we ponder John’s awesome encounter with the risen Lord, we should ask ourselves a couple of questions.

- Do I know and adore the awesome, glorious, powerful Jesus portrayed in the Bible, or have I adopted a culturally appropriate, mild-mannered, user-friendly Jesus of my own imagination?