

A Survey of Revelation

Week 2: Prologue and Original Vision

Revelation 1:1-20

Prologue

¹The 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, ²who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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.

Greetings and Doxology

⁴John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

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

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷“Look, he is coming with the clouds,”^[b]
and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him”;
and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”^[c]

So shall it be! Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John’s Vision of Christ

⁹I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

¹²I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man,^[d] dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹ “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels^[e] of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Footnotes:

- a. **Revelation 1:4** That is, the sevenfold Spirit
- b. **Revelation 1:7** Daniel 7:13
- c. **Revelation 1:7** Zech. 12:10
- d. **Revelation 1:13** See Daniel 7:13.
- e. **Revelation 1:20** Or *messengers*

Chapter 1 Summary

Revelation is written by the [1] Apostle John, while exiled on the Island of Patmos, (likely) sometime during the end of the first century. [2] He is writing to strengthen and encourage seven literal churches in Asia Minor. [3] He is writing about a vision he received from God, given to him through the exalted and glorified Christ.

[1] The Author and Circumstances

[2] The Audience

[3] The Content and Source

Note: See important information on the resources used in this study at the end of Week 1's handout.

[1] The Author

Revelation is written by the Apostle John, while exiled on the Island of Patmos, (likely) sometime during the end of the first century.

The Author: The Apostle John (?)

- The author is clearly stated in Revelation 1:1:

*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**... (Rev. 1:1 NIV)*

- But who exactly is this John?
 - o Early church history (up until about the fourth century) was unanimous that the author was the Apostle John, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, and the author of the Gospel of John and 1, 2 and 3 John.
 - o Starting in the fourth century, the Apostle John's authorship became debated. This was because some observed that John never explicitly refers to himself in Revelation as an apostle; he only refers himself to a "servant" (1:1), a "brother" of his readers (1:9) and a "prophet" (22:9).
 - o Because of this, and because of some stylistic differences between Revelation and the gospel and letters of John, some have suggested that the author of Revelation was a different John than the apostle, and was instead written by a "John the Elder," "John the Seer" or some other John.
- My View:
 - o It's important to note that nothing *requires* us to believe that Revelation was written by the Apostle John. Even if Revelation is written by some other John who was not an Apostle, it is still God's authoritative word, as the author makes it clear that the vision comes ultimately from God Himself.
 - o Even still, it's best to agree with the early church: the book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, and the author of the Gospel of John and 1, 2 and 3 John.

- It's also important to note that John wrote Revelation while in exile: he had been banished from for preaching Christ.

*I, John, your brother and **companion in the suffering** and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos **because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.** (Rev. 1:9)*



- John's situation places him in close connection with his audience. Like them, John was beginning to face the opposition that came with proclaiming Jesus as "Lord."

"In Revelation, enduring affliction and opposition means a lot more than just gritting your teeth and getting through it. It means overcoming temptation and remaining faithful and true to God when the world has turned against you. You must wait on God and stand fast against the evil demands of secular society....John is the perfect example of that himself."

- Grant Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse*

But When Did John Write Revelation?

- Though we can't say for certain when John wrote Revelation (John doesn't date the book), the (nearly) universal witness of the church throughout the century has placed its writing around A.D. 90, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian.
- This gives us background on what God's Church was going through:
 - **Heresy was becoming more pronounced.** The end of the first century marked the beginning of heretical strands of Christianity that would turn into full-blown cults within 100 years. The church was fighting to maintain doctrinal integrity amidst this heresy. Revelation makes it clear that the church must be on guard against any false teachings.
 - **The church was struggling with how to be *in* but not *of* this world.** Prevalent in the Roman Empire towards the end of the first century was the dominance of the "Imperial Cult," a Roman state-sponsored religion that viewed the emperors of Rome—past and present—as gods to be worshipped. Many towns and temples and statues erected to these emperors, and in some cases it was impossible to do business without participating in festivals worshipping these emperors. Revelation makes it clear that *any* participation in the Imperial Cult was to be condemned to the highest degree.
 - **The church was experiencing the beginnings of persecution.** Though empire-wide, systematic persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was still 100 years away, the "storm clouds" of persecution were beginning to form. Further, Christians were experiencing increasing hostility from those in the Jewish faith.
- Thus circumstances surrounding the writing of Revelation are not wildly different from the issues facing the church right now—which means that this study comes at a perfect time.

[2] The Audience

John is writing to strengthen and encourage seven literal churches in Asia Minor.

To Whom is John Writing?

- The original audience of John's letter is stated in Revelation 1:4 and Revelation 1:11:

John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, (Rev. 1:4)

"Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to [1] Ephesus, [2] Smyrna, [3] Pergamum, [4] Thyatira, [5] Sardis, [6] Philadelphia and [7] Laodicea." (Rev. 1:11)

- Thus the audience is seven churches in the province of Asia: *Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.*
- Chapters 2-3 of Revelation are explicitly addressed to these seven churches; each church receives an individual "letter" directly from Jesus Christ to them:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false..." (Rev. 2:1-2)

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan..." (Rev. 2:8-9)

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live-- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives..." (Rev. 2:12-13)

And so on!

- Though each church gets a unique letter, there are some things common among them, namely, the threat of heresy and persecution.

- Considerable debate over the years has surrounded whether there is “more than meets the eye” with these churches. One notable view is that the seven churches—and the letters written to them—actually represent an overview of all of church history, starting with the first century church and leading up until today:¹

Church	Church History Typified	Dates
Ephesus (2:1-7)	The Apostolic Church	A.D. 30-100
Smyrna (2:8-11)	The Church of the Roman Persecution	A.D. 100 – 313
Pergamum (2:12-17)	The Church of the Age of Constantine	A.D. 313-600
Thyatira (2:18-26)	The Church of the Dark Ages	A.D. 600-1517
Sardis (3:1-6)	The Church of the Reformation	A.D. 1517-1648
Philadelphia (3:7-13)	The Church of the Great Missionary Movement	A.D. 1648-1900
Laodicea (3:14-22)	The Church of the Apostasy	A.D. 1900-present day

- Though there are some intriguing connections between these churches and the time periods of history, there is nothing in the text that suggests such a reading. Further, many of the so-called “connections” between the churches and church history are subjective, and not everybody agrees on how to divide the time periods of history.
- Furthermore, there is nothing in the text that even hints at such a reading:

“What slightest hint or intimation does the Spirit of God give that we have [in these seven churches] the great successive acts and epochs of the kingdom of God in the course of its gradual evolution here upon earth? Where are the fingerposts pointing this way?”

- Richard Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches*

¹ Taken from <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/revelation/related-topics/representative-of-seven-stages-of-church-history.html>.

- Instead, it's best to see these seven churches as **seven literal churches facing the problems that are being talked about in chapters 2-3.**
 - o These were *actual* churches in the first century, and from what we know about them, they were facing the problems John talks about!
 - o In fact, these churches—and the order that they are listed in—actually form a unique geographical pattern: they are in the order a messenger would travel if he were delivering the book of Revelation from city to city.



Modern-Day Turkey

- o Thus John likely intended this letter to be a “circular” letter: John most likely sent it first to Ephesus with the expectation that the Ephesian church would read it and then, perhaps after making a copy, send it on to Smyrna, who would send it to Pergamum, etc.
- o This is very important for the interpretation of the book of Revelation: **the contents of Revelation were meant to be accessible to the first-century audience.** John was **first and foremost** speaking to *their* situation. (See discussion from last week!)

But Is There Something More Going On?

- We do know of other churches that existed in this area of the world when John wrote (for example, the church in Colossae, the church that Paul's letter of Colossians is written to); why did John only write to these seven?
- The answer may be found in the fact that Jesus chose specifically "seven" churches to write to:
 - o "Seven" is a very important number in the book of Revelation (appearing 55 times!) and very symbolic in the Bible. It often represents the idea of "completeness" (because God created the heavens and the earth in seven days).
 - o Thus these seven churches may have been chosen because they faced problems indicative of all of God's churches.
 - o This is further supported by the fact that although each of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 is addressed to a specific church, each letter ends with the phrase "hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29, etc. – note the plural end of "churches"!).
 - o For that reason, though initially written to seven churches that existed in the first century, **Revelation has a message for all of God's churches throughout all of time.**
- One final note: the letters of Revelation 2-3 are specifically written to the *angel* of these churches (1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, etc.). What exactly does this mean? We'll find out next week!

Thus Revelation was written by the Apostle John, who specifically wrote to seven churches at the end of the first century (ca. AD 90), but generally to all churches at all times. It has a message for all of us.

[3] Content and Source

John is writing about a vision he received from God, given to him through the exalted and glorified Christ.

God's "Unveiling"

- John states the content of this book in Revelation 1:1:

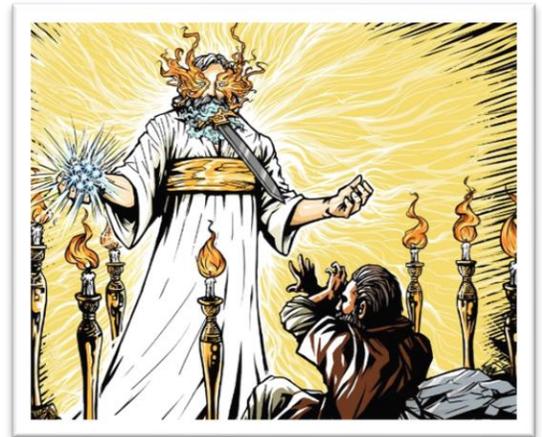
*The revelation [Gk: **apocalypsis**] from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John... (Rev. 1:1 NIV)*

- The key word is the word is "revelation." The Greek is "apocalypsis" from which we get our English word "apocalyptic." The word originally means "uncover" or "unveil."
- **Thus the book of Revelation is an *uncovering* or *unveiling* of something: God is letting John (and the church) in on how the events of the world are going to finally play out.**

The First "Unveiling": A Vision of Jesus

- **Revelation is about Jesus**, and the first "unveiling" we get in Revelation is a portrait of Jesus (1:13-18). It is very different from the Jesus was are used to seeing in pictures:

...among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.



When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last."¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Rev. 1:13-18 NIV)

- As with the rest of Revelation, the images given for Jesus are not necessarily to be taken literally (notice the repeated use of "like" in 1:14-16). Instead, they are at least partly symbolic for different attributes of Jesus.

Description of Jesus in Revelation 1 and What It May Mean:

“like a son of man” (1:13a)	A reference to Daniel 7; Jesus is the “Son of Man” who ushers in the final, eternal Kingdom mentioned in Daniel 7.
long robe and sash (1:13b)	A picture of both Kingly authority and a Priestly mediator role
white hair (1:14a)	A reference to the “Ancient of Days” in Daniel 7:9; also a picture of wisdom and dignity. (See also the transfiguration of Jesus in Mark 9:3.)
blazing eyes (1:14b)	Likely symbolic of Jesus’ all-knowing nature; He has penetrating insight and knows the thoughts and intents of mankind.
bronze feet (1:15a)	Gives the image of a fierce warrior about to wreak havoc on the nations.
voice of rushing waters (1:15b)	A reference to Jesus’ awesome and authoritative voice (see Ezek. 43:2).
stars in his right hand (1:16a)	The right hand in scripture is the hand of power and authority (Ps. 110:1). The stars represent the seven churches of Revelation 2-3.
sword from his mouth (1:16b)	The sword in the Roman Empire was the symbol of its might; here it is Christ, not Rome, that has true might.
face shining like the sun (1:16c)	A reference to the light of God (Isa. 60:19)

- Many of these attributes are the same used to describe God (Yahweh) in the Old Testament; Revelation is one of the best books to go to in order to prove that Jesus is God.

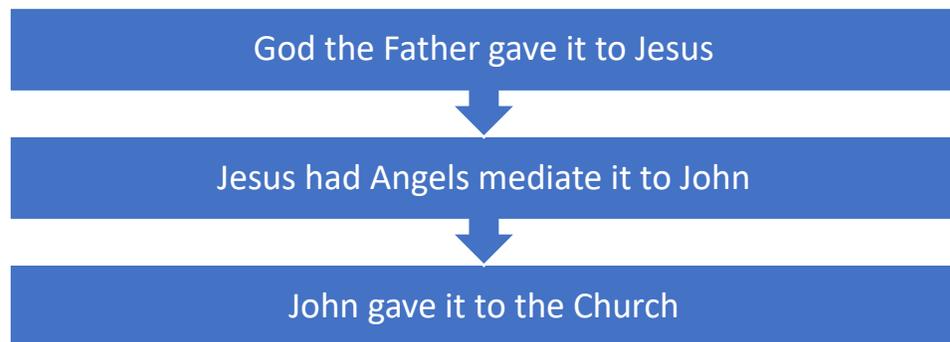
Revelation Prologue Application

- One of the key points of Revelation 1 is...

Pay attention!

- The book of Revelation contains a very strong message on its ultimate source: these are indeed the words of God:

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... (Rev. 1:1)



- Since this comes from God, we need to pay attention, even to the difficult “stuff.” Revelation teaches us that Jesus is coming, and when He comes, He is coming as King and Judge, and those who don’t take Him—and His word—seriously in this life will have to face Him in the next.
- The only way to escape His wrath is to believe in Him, for it is only by His blood that we are freed from our sins (Revelation 1:5).
- Are you sure about Jesus? There is no time better than the present.

Don't forget to email questions!
questions@friends.church

Homework for next week: Read Revelation 2-3 at least twice. Ask yourself: what would Jesus say to Friends Church today?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Read Revelation 1:1-2. What does this passage teach us about the words we find in the book of Revelation? What does that mean for us as we approach this book?
2. Towards the bottom of Page 4 of this handout are listed three circumstances surrounding the early church when the book of Revelation was written. Which one do you think is most applicable for us today and why?
3. In discussing the audience of the book of Revelation, we talked about how important it is to be driven by what the text of Scripture says over and above tradition or what has been taught to us in the past. How willing would you say you are to abandon long-held beliefs if they can't ultimately be supported by the text of Scripture? Do you have any examples of that in the past? Do you feel any resistance to that idea? If so, why do you think that is?
4. The first "unveiling" that John received in the book of Revelation is an unveiling of Jesus in His glorified state. There are actually two descriptions of Jesus in Revelation 1—Revelation 1:4-7 and Revelation 1:12-18.
 - a. Read Revelation 1:4-7. What description are we given of Jesus in those verses? Write down everything that you see.
 - b. Look at your list for part "a" and also the chart on page 10 of this handout. Is there one feature that stands out to you the most about Jesus in how He is described in Revelation? What is it and why does it stand out to you?
5. How important do you think it is to picture Jesus as He is described in Revelation vs. the image we commonly have of us? How might that change how we think about Jesus, approach Him, etc.?
6. We said that one of the main themes of Revelation 1 is to "Pay attention!" As you read Revelation 1, what is God saying to you through it? Where might you need to "pay attention" to what God is saying?