

**1** The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place, and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, **2** who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

**3** Blessed is the one who reads the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

**4** John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, **5** and 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 freed<sup>[a]</sup> us from our sins by his blood **6** and made us a kingdom, priests serving<sup>[b]</sup> his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

**7** Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him,

and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

So it is to be. Amen.

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

<sup>9</sup>I, John, your brother who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>10</sup> I was in the spirit<sup>[d]</sup> on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup> saying, “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

<sup>12</sup> Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup> and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. <sup>14</sup> His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire; <sup>15</sup> his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. <sup>16</sup> In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

<sup>17</sup> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last <sup>18</sup> and the Living One. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. <sup>19</sup> Now

write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. <sup>20</sup> As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

Angels. Lightning coming out of thrones. A scroll with seven seals. A lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. A pale green horse whose name is Death. An Earthquake that kills thousands. A dragon. A beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads. A lake of fire. Water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

These are just a few of the characters and phenomena you will find when reading the Revelation to John. When you think of the list of creatures and events that are in Revelation, frankly, it sounds like a Lord of the Rings book, or some other fantasy novel with all these exotic creatures and events.

Reading much of Revelation is also like going to a play written by one of the ancient Greek playwrights such as Sophocles and which is performed completely in Greek. Most of us wouldn't understand a thing. Reading through Revelation is a similar experience.

We need a program to explain what is going on. We need a guidebook to Revelation, the way we need one for traveling to a foreign country for the first time. We need a trail map for our hike through Revelation. I want the next few weeks – with the exception of next week because I won't be here -- to be that trail map for us.

Now I know Revelation has a reputation for being difficult to understand, and that it's a little out there, and scary in spots. I want the next few weeks to dispel some of those notions. I want to open Revelation to you so that you don't have to be afraid to read it, and instead, you find it inspiring and fascinating. Revelation is a story as old as time itself: it is a story of a conflict between good and evil, with good winning in the end.

I hope at the end of this trip you will have a better understanding of the book, what the writer was trying to do, learn a little ancient history of the church, and discover some things that we can all gain from this piece of religious literature.

We all know there are many ways to interpret scripture. Some interpretations are stretches. Some make a lot more sense. Now, I'm not here to suggest that I know everything about Revelation. I don't. But I think part of my job as a teaching elder is to make the most sense I can out of scripture and communicate that to you. In the case of Revelation, some of the big questions I have and want to address include what was the

writer trying to say back when the text was written? And what is the scripture saying to us here in the 21st century?

Interpretation of Revelation can be tricky, and I would argue that the text has been misused, abused, and manipulated at times over the years by charlatans.

People over the years have read Revelation trying to find out when the second coming of Jesus Christ was happening; and how many people would end up in heaven. People have also speculated on who the beast was, who had the mark of 666.

Trying to figure out when the end is coming is big business. Lots of religious leaders over the years have made fortunes and achieved great fame predicting the date of the second coming. Of course, all of them have failed.

Two of the keys to understanding Revelation are number 1: that it was written in a period of oppression in the Roman empire, and two: that it contains scores of references to the Old Testament. Much of the imagery in the book is borrowed directly from books of the Old Testament, including Ezekiel and Daniel. In other words, a lot of the writing and references in Revelation are stolen from Old Testament writers well before the age of Christ. Revelation isn't a roadmap as to when things are going to take place. Only God knows that.

Why should we care about the Revelation to John? First, it's in the Bible, our sacred scripture. The more we know about the Bible the more our faith can grow, and the more our understanding of God can grow.

Another reason is because it contains part of our history as Christians. John is writing to seven churches in the ancient world. There are lessons from these churches that we can learn from today. For example, what were these churches like and what did they struggle with? What positive and negative traits did they have then that we have now?

Finally, as we will see, Revelation is the story of Christian hope, that one day we and our world will be made whole, and renewed in ways we cannot even imagine, they are so wonderful and glorious. The story of hope, that one day, all will be made right by the Lord's design alone.

But before we get to the end, we have a lot of ground to cover. Chapter One of Revelation sets the stage for what is going to come.

So, who is John? And why is he writing this? Well, he is commanded to do it by an angel from Jesus Christ, and he is sending this book to seven churches in what is now modern Turkey. He points out that he is a brother in Christ, and he shares with them that he has been persecuted the way they have. He indicates he is on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea because he was a preacher and follower of Jesus. The

implication is that he fled to Patmos on his own or was sent there by the authorities because of his evangelization work. So, he is indicating that he knows their pain and the trouble they are dealing with.

The key function of Revelation is as a pastoral address to the seven churches in Turkey. Its function is not to predict the future or decide how many people are to be saved when Jesus returns or even how that is all supposed to unfold. I think Presbytery Pastor Brad Munroe sums up what Revelation is about quite well in his 2023 book, *Rhythms of the God-Life*: “The Revelation is not written to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians wanting to know a timeline for the future but to 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians needing pastoral encouragement to endure in the face of massive trials! In chapter one John begins his encouragement by focusing on the person at the center of all things: The Glory found through Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

John reiterates who Jesus is, the faithful witness, the son of God, the risen Lord, the “firstborn of the dead,” and the ruler of all the leaders of the earth. John also tells us how Jesus feels about his people, he loves us, and he died for our sins.

Toward the end of chapter one, John hints at the good news that is to come and that the love from God for us is our great comfort here and hereafter.

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Munroe, *Rhythms of the God-Life: Romans to Revelations Through Paraphrase, Poetry, and Prayer* (2023), 294.

It is my hope that we will all learn a lot in these next few weeks, that the Holy Spirit opens our minds to the Word, and that the beauty of Christian hope is further strengthened in our hearts and minds in the Revelation to John.

“Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one” (Rev 1:17).

Amen.