

## When God Speaks From Heaven

### Revelation 1:1-8

Introduction: 1) If ever there was a book that could be described as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma,” it is the last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation (Do note there is no “s” at the end!). And yet it is the only book in the Bible with a direct blessing for those who read it, listen to it, and obey it (1:3). Why? Because this is a book when God speaks directly from heaven! And, it is a book that talks about heavens favorite subject: the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed I believe the theme of the book could be described as “the majesty and glory of the Warrior Lamb, King Jesus, who is coming again to rule and reign forever!” I believe the book addresses the future, but I believe the book is even more interested in exalting Jesus. Regardless of how you understand the book, if you miss this, you have missed its main message.

2) Revelation is a book that has puzzled, confused and frustrated the minds of the best biblical scholars. Neither John Calvin or Martin Luther wrote a commentary on it, and Luther was quite harsh in his evaluation of Revelation’s worth saying, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it – that Christ is neither taught nor recognized.”<sup>1</sup> Wow! One wonders if Luther was reading the same book we have

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<sup>1</sup> Preface to Luther’s 1522 Bible.

in our Bible. You see Revelation is a mystery but it is also a masterpiece. It does not constitute an unsolvable puzzle but contains a definite promise and a magnificent portrait of the coming again of the Lord Jesus.

3) In 404 verses, with 285 Old Testament citations and as many as 550 Old Testament allusions, we discover not a closed book but an open book, one to be read and not rejected. Daniel 12:4 said “shut up and seal the book until the time of the end” but Revelation 22:10 says “seal not the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” Revelation is to be explored, examined and embraced, for in it we discover a marvelous message whose theme is the theme of the Bible: the greatness and the glory of Jesus. From 1:1 to 22:21 the apocalypse is from Jesus and about Jesus. As He is the focus of the Bible, so He is the focus of this book.

4) Revelation 1:1-8 constitutes the prologue or introduction of the book. Here our God speaks from heaven with power and promise to His saints on the earth. How is it that He wants us to respond?

#### I. Receive the blessing for the true disciple      1:1-3

- 1) Revelation is a unique book because it is comprised of three different literary genres. It is apocalypse (v. 1), a prophecy (v. 3) and a letter (v.4). That God intended for us to read and understand it is made clear when he tells us twice in verse 3 that there is a blessing for those who read, hear

and keep the words of this prophecy. God intended to bless, comfort and encourage His people in every generation to be faithful and persevere, especially during times of opposition, persecution and suffering. Revelation had a word of blessing for the 1<sup>st</sup> century church just as it has a word of blessing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. To miss this is to immediately get off on the wrong hermeneutical foot in interpreting this book.

1) The blessing comes from God's prophetic revelation from Jesus 1:1-2

- The book begins “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation” is the title of the book and comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis* which means to reveal, unveil, uncover or disclose. This is the only time the word appears in the entire book. It tells us God is pulling back the curtain in order to show us something previously hidden and unknown. He is letting us catch a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes in the realm of spiritual conflict and war. That the book is an apocalypse tells us it is highly metaphorical and symbolic. The images and symbols stand for and represent real truth and real things, but we err if we interpret them in an overly literal sense. Symbols are meant to be symbolic.
- This is a revelation of, from and about Jesus Christ. Three times John (v. 4) uses the phrase “Jesus Christ” in 1:1-5 but never again in this

book. Notice the divine or heavenly chain of communication of this great unveiling: God → Jesus Christ → angel → John → His slaves or servants (Gr. *doulos*). Revelation is a blessed gift from God the Father which He gave to His Son which the Lord Jesus graciously shares with us.

- The things in this revelation “must quickly (or “soon”) take place. This phrase occurs 7 times in Revelation and emphasizes imminency and expectancy. We must put this phrase in biblical and theological context. Hebrews 1:2 teaches we are now in “these last days.” James 5:9 tells us “the judge stands at the door.” First John 2:18 affirms “it is the last hour.” Alan Johnson says, “In eschatology and apocalyptic literature, the future is always viewed as imminent... The church in every age has always lived with the expectancy of the consummation of all things in its own day. “Imminent” describes an event that is “possible any day, impossible no day” (*BSC*, Zondervan, 22).
- Jesus made this apocalyptic vision known as “He sent it and signified it through His angel.” Angel (Gr. *aggelos*) means messenger. They are mentioned 67 times in Revelation which accounts for ¼ of the references to them in the Bible (Johnson, *BSC*, 22). And, he made it

known, signified it. He sign-i-fied it by signs and symbols, visions and revelations.

- And to whom was the angel sent? It is the apostle John who is now an old man residing on “the island called Patmos (v. 9)”. Here John is referred to, not as an apostle, but as a slave. John will be faithful to testify, to bear witness to God’s Word and to the testimony about Jesus Christ, in all he saw (v.2)” What an insightful way to talk about the Bible. It is from Genesis to Revelation “God’s Word.” Further, the heart of its message is the “testimony (or “witness to”) of Jesus Christ.” But, it comes to us from faithful human servants like John who tell us all they see, exactly what God wants us to have. That is why I often say the simplest way to describe the Bible is to say, “it is the Word of God written in the words of men.”

## 2) The blessing comes in the church’s public reading of God’s Word 1:3

- I believe it is a sin to read the Bible poorly! Why? Because it is the infallible and inerrant Word of God. And, John tells us there is a blessing that should and will accompany the public reading of God’s Word. “Blessed” (Gr. “*makarios*”) calls to remembrance “the Beatitudes” and Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). This is the first of

seven blessings in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9 20:6; 22:7, 14).

Interestingly the book begins and ends with a blessing.

- The one who reads (pre. tense) scripture publicly has a special and sacred assignment. In the first century many were illiterate and few could afford even a portion of Holy Scripture. And, the public reading and use of a book in corporate worship was a sign and test of *canonicity*. A perfect book should be read well in private, but especially in public.<sup>2</sup>
- John says those who hear what is read will hear “the words of this prophecy.” The idea of “prophecy” also appears seven times in Revelation (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Grant Osborne is helpful when he writes, “Revelation must be characterized not as apocalyptic but as prophetic-apocalyptic. Its purpose is not merely to outline the future intervention of God or to portray the people of God symbolically in light of that divine reality but to call the saints to accountability on that basis. This is a prophetic book of warning as well as comfort to the church” (*BECNT*, 59).

### 3) The blessing comes with our personal response of obedience 1:3

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<sup>2</sup> For a brief treatment of the public reading of Scripture see *Engaging Exposition*, 155-157. There you will find “Ten Tips For Reading Scripture in Public Worship.”

The purpose of Revelation is not to titillate our imagination to wild speculative interpretations. It is to inspire and motivate us to faithfulness and obedience: “To Him who loves us and has set us free from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom of priest to His God and Father” (v. 5-6). John wants us to read, hear and keep what is written in Revelation. Why? Because 1) we will be blessed and 2) the time is near. What we hear we need to obey. What we believe we need to live. The nearness of the Lord’s return is meant to challenge us to live faithful lives. “In other words, in light of the fact that “the time is near,” we are called to live decisively and completely for God” (Osborne, 59). The *Life Application Bible Commentary* says it like this, “The phrase “the time is near” is like the phrase “what must soon take place” in 1:1 and refers to imminence. Believers must be ready for Christ’s second coming. The Last Judgment and the establishment of God’s kingdom are certainly near. No one knows when these events will occur, so all believers must be prepared. They will happen quickly, with no second chance to change minds or sides.” (p. 4).

## II. Welcome the greeting from the Triune God 1:4-6

- The Bible teaches us that God loves us because “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). The Bible also teaches that God loved us in Jesus when our Savior

died upon the cross and “set us free from our sins” (v. 6; cf. Gal 2:20; Eph. 5:25).

- These verses constitute a greeting or salutation from the Trinity. Craig Keener says we could entitle this section “From God with love” (*NIVAC*, 68). Each member of the Godhead addresses us in this “elaborate triadic formula for the Trinity” (Alan Johnson, *EBC*, vol. 12; 420; *BSC*, 24). Each is characterized in rich theological and practical instruction.
- John now takes up his pen to write “To the seven (54 times in Rev.)<sup>3</sup> churches in Asia,” that is Asia Minor or modern Turkey. It is here that John, almost certainly John the apostle, is named as the author. Exiled to the island of Patmos during the reign of emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96), he is an old man and the last living Apostle. He has been sent here to labor and die because of his witness to Jesus. Perhaps he, like the 7 historical churches he addresses, needed assurance, comfort, encouragement and instruction. As we will see numbers are highly important and symbolic in Revelation, with none more significant than the number 7. It stands for that which is perfect, complete, or full. John writes to 7 literal churches in and around Ephesus, but this book and these letters (2:1-3:22) are for various local churches and the church universal throughout the church’s history.

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<sup>3</sup> For the use of all numbers in Revelation and their symbolic significance, see Mark Wilson, *Charts on the Book of Revelation*, pgs. 47-49 (Kregel, 2007).

“Praise God from whom all blessings (v. 3) flow” comes to mind as we delve into verses 4-6.

1) The Father is perfect in His person 1:4

- Grace (God’s unmerited favor; all that He does in redemption for underserved sinners) and peace (blessing and wholeness; Shalom) combine a Greek and Hebrew greeting with the order being important. Peace “with God” (Rom. 5:11) and the peace “of God” (Phil. 4:7) flow out of the amazing grace of God, what Paul calls “the surpassing grace of God” (2 Cor. 9:14). This grace, Paul also says, “has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (Titus 2:11). All members of the Godhead are avenues, conduits, for the flow of grace and peace in our direction. John begins with the fountainhead, God the Father.
- God is described as “the One who is, who was, and who is coming.” The focus is on His perfection as He relates to time and eternity. This title appears only in Revelation (cf. 4:8; 11:17; 16:15), but reflects the language of Exodus 3:14 and the great I AM declaration. Additional allusions may be found in Isaiah (41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12). He is the God of the present, the past and the future, the God who is “the incomparable, sovereign Lord over history, who is thus able to bring

prophecy to fulfillment and to deliver his people despite overwhelming odds, whether from Egypt, Babylon or the nations” (Beale, 188). Others point out John also may be countering a popular pagan slogan of his day: “Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be” (Mounce, *NICNT*, 46). With a word of helpful application Charles Swindoll says, “God is just as much in control of our unknown future and unnerving present as He is of our unpleasant past” (*Swindoll’s N.T. Insights: Revelation*, 28). Robert Mounce adds, “An uncertain future calls for one who by virtue of His eternal existence exercises sovereign control over the course of history” (46). Little things or big things, all things are under his rule and control.

2) The Spirit is perfect in His presence 1:4

- Grace and peace also run in our direction “from the seven spirits (also 3:1; 4:5; 5:6) before His throne.” There is debate over exactly who the seven spirits are. Some believe it is a reference to the seven archangels of Jewish tradition (Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saragâêl, Gabriel, and Remiel; Mounce, *NICNT*, 47). Others see them “as part of a heavenly entourage that has a special ministry” to the Lamb, the Lord Jesus (Mounce, 48). I believe, however, the reference is to the Holy Spirit. In 5:6 His divine omnipresence is in view.

Further, the phrase should be understood in light of Isaiah 11:2 and Zechariah 4:1-6, 10 (Osborne, 61).

- The Holy Spirit of God, John tells us, is before God's throne. The Spirit who energizes and equips the churches for service is the Spirit who proceeds from the very throne of God. We are indeed made sufficient for every assignment, every challenge, for the God who lives in us (1 Cor. 6:19) is the God who is before the throne! The one who is in heaven is the one who also is in us!

### 3) The Son is perfect in His provision 1:5-6

- Revelation may be about eschatology and the future. But even more than that, it is a book about the glory and greatness of the Warrior Lamb (ch. 5) and the KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (19:16), the Lord Jesus Christ. Even those with differing theological perspectives can agree on this.
- Though it is unusual, John places the Son last in this greeting from the Trinity for emphasis. Indeed he will say more about the Son here than he does the Father and the Holy Spirit put together because the focus of Revelation is on Him! Five tremendous truths concerning who He is and what He does are highlighted and explained in verses 5-6.

- a) His revelation – Jesus is “the faithful witness,” the trustworthy revealer of the Father (John 14:9). By His perfect, sinless life and by His words and works He showed us the character of God. By His present ministry among the churches (chs. 2-3) He reveals the continuing interest and concern of the Father. Gordon Fee makes the interesting observation that in Psalm 89:37 the moon is called “a faithful witness in the sky” and “that language is now transferred to Christ.” Further, “The word translated “witness” (*martyrus*), which eventually came to mean “martyr,” is here a forensic term, and thus a live metaphor for John, reflecting Christ’s having stood trial and then being sentenced to death. Indeed, this language will occur again only in 2:10 and 13, where it clearly refers to those who have borne witness “unto death.” Thus “Antipas, my faithful witness,...was put to death in your city” (2:13). In turn these linguistic realities are what caused the Greek word to make its way into English not as a word for “witness” but as a reference to someone who is put to death by others...” (*NCCS*, 7).
- b) His resurrection – Jesus is “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:15, 18). Jesus did what no person has ever done: He died, rose from the dead, and stayed alive. However, He is not the only one who

will do this, He is the firstborn, the first of a new order, the pledge and promise of our resurrection! (cf. 1 Cor. 6:14). Firstborn is messianic and Davidic (cf. Ps. 89:27 –“And I will make Him [Messiah] my Firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.”) Jesus is first in time but also in importance as God’s firstborn over death. Jesus himself puts it in perspective in 1:18 when He says, “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold I am alive forever more. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”

c) His rule – “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” This is a recurring theme in Revelation (11:15; 17:15; 19:16). Note it is not He will be...He is! All authorities, spiritual and earthly, are under His dominion and rule. That is true now and it will be made crystal clear when He comes again (19:11-21). Larry Helyer and Richard Wagner are helpful in context and application at this point, “Talk about being countercultural! This title flies directly in the face of the Roman imperial cult with its claims about the divine Caesar and *Roma* (the Latin name for Rome). John’s work portrays the truth as presented in the Bible: All glory and dominion belong to the rightful king (Jesus) – all the more reason for the faithful to remain steadfast” (*The Book of Revelation for Dummies*, 109).

d) His redemption – “To Him who loves us and has set us free from our sins by His blood.” Jesus loved us (Gal. 2:20) and He continually loves us. How do we know? The cross! There by His bloody and brutal death He set us free, loosed us once and for all from our sins. He died as our penal substitute. He lived the life we should have lived but didn’t. He died the death we should have died but now don’t have to. He paid the penalty we should pay but can’t. And He gives us a salvation we do not deserve but can freely receive. The *KJV* and *NKJV* read He “washed us” viewing sin as a stain, and that is certainly true. However the best manuscripts do render the text as He “loosed” or “set us free” where sin is viewed as a chain. I delight in saying it this way:

He freed us from sin’s penalty, our justification.

He is freeing us from sin’s power, our sanctification.

He will free us from sin’s presence, our glorification.

Philip Bliss the hymn writer got it right when he wrote, “Guilty, vile, and helpless we, Spotless Lamb of God was He; Full atonement! Can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior!”

e) His reign – “made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father – the glory and dominion are His forever. Amen.” Bloodfreed

sinner now fill His kingdom to the glory of the Father. To be fully forgiven would be more than enough, but He does even more.

Drawing on Exodus 19:5-6, John informs us we have entered the dominion of King Jesus as kings (we reign) and priest (we serve).

First Peter 2:5 calls us a “holy priesthood.” We serve, worship and bear witness to the kingdom for our Christ that is both now and not

yet. It is real and it is happening right now. However, its full

manifestation awaits His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. John can only conclude these

verses of glorious doxology to our redeeming King with one word:

“Amen.” It means “it is so” or “so let it be!” (Mounce, 50). I

agree! Don’t you?!

### III. Look for the coming of the triumphant Lord 1:7-8

- John concludes his prologue with a brief word on what Paul calls “the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Having discussed His work of redemption, he now draws attention to His day of consummation “when he will return in triumph and bring history to a close” (Mounce, 50). Allusions to the Old Testament dominate these two short verses.

#### 1) His coming will be seen 1:7

“Look!” (*ESV*, “behold”; 25 times in Revelation) is a call to pay attention. Listen, this is important! “He is coming with the clouds (see Matt. 11:2-3; John 3:31) draws from Daniel 7:13 (cf. Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:9) where the prophet “saw One like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.” He who is coming is literally, historically and visibly “coming with the clouds,” also a theological symbol for the presence of God (Ex. 13:21; 16:10). He who is coming is Jesus Christ (1:5-6) “and every eye will see Him.” This is not the coming of God incognito which was the case, to some degree, when He came the first time. No, His authority, deity and sovereignty will be put on full display for all to see. The whole earth will see this!

2) His coming will bring sorrow 1:7

John now combines Daniel 7:13 with Zechariah 12:10 and notes the audience to this epiphany includes those “who pierced Him.” In that day Israel will see and understand that they (along with us) crucified their Messiah. And, “all the families of the earth will mourn over Him. This is certain. Amen.” Yes, Israel will mourn and the nations will mourn. But by God’s grace, some will mourn in repentance and salvation, Jew and Gentile (5:9-10; 7:1-17; cf. Zech. 13:1; Rom 11:25-26). Others, however, will mourn in remorse as the just and righteous judgment of God is poured

out in the great day of wrath (6:16-17), what is called “the great tribulation” (7:14). Amazing, they will seek death not deliverance (6:16). Repentance will not be found in their hearts (9:21).

3) His coming will be strength 1:8

- Three of the many titles of God appear in verse 8. They serve as a revelation of His person and power. They also serve as a confirmation and guarantee that these things will surely come to pass. The “Amen” of v. 7 affirmed this. This divine confession settles it! This is one of the only two times God speaks directly in Revelation (cf. 21:5-6).
  - a) “I am the Alpha and Omega,” says the Lord God.” These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. We would say the A to Z. The phrase is expanded in 22:13 and applied directly to Jesus. What is said of God can be said of Him because He is God. There we read, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” Emphasis here falls particularly on His omniscience. “He knows the certainty of this promise” in 1:7 (MacArthur, *MNTC*, vol. 34).
  - b) “The One who is, who was, and who is coming” (cf. v. 4). Our God is the eternal and everlasting One. There never was a time “when He was not” and there will never be a time “when He is not.” Stephen

Smally notes the phrase “is repeated from verse 4, and forms an inclusion at the end of the address with its opening.” Further, “The advent theme of verse 7 centered in the returning Christ, is picked up here once again, and set within the total context of the judgment and salvation brought by the living Godhead.... John is saying that God is in control of his world, and of all the human activity within it; he is the eternal origin and goal of history in its entirety” (*The Revelation to John*, 38).

- c) “The Almighty.” (Gr. *pantokrator*) appears 10 times in the New Testament. Nine of those are in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22; cf. 2 Cor. 6:18 where it is in a quotation). The title again emphasizes God’s sovereignty and omnipotence. This God has absolute authority, control and power. He is “in control of this world and the next” (Osborne, 72). This is no finite deity. This is no God in process on the way to completion and perfect. These titles leave no room for “open theism” and a God who is not absolutely omniscient in the fullest sense that word can bear. It is hard to imagine how God Himself could make this more clear!

## Conclusion

Several years ago a colleague told me about an interesting experience he had on the mission field when ministering to an underground and persecuted church in a totalitarian country. Out of curiosity he asked, “What are your favorite books in the Bible?” To his surprise the answer was Daniel and Revelation. When he asked why they said, “Because they teach us in the end our God wins!” Those faithful brothers and sisters in Christ are right. Revelation, in particular, teaches us that Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” and that “the glory and dominion” are our God’s forever. He is “the One who is, who was, and who is coming, the Almighty.” This is a God who is victorious. This is a God you can trust. This is a God who will do what He promises. This is what we learn when God speaks from heaven.

### **A Run through Revelation: An Overview**

- I. Introduction: The Christ of Communication (1:1–8)  
(He is the God who reveals His will to His people.)
- II. *Vision 1: The Christ of the Churches* (1:9–3:22)  
(He is the God who rebukes and refreshes His churches.)
  - A. To Ephesus He says, "Remember your first love." (2:1–7)
  - B. To Smyrna He says, "Remain faithful to your God." (2:8–11)
  - C. To Pergamum He says, "Repent of false teaching." (2:12–17)
  - D. To Thyatira He says, "Remain fast among false teachings." (2:18–29)

- E. To Sardis He says, "Repent from incomplete service." (3:1–6)
  - F. To Philadelphia He says, "Rest in the promise of God." (3:7–13)
  - G. To Laodicea He says, "Repent from your indifference." (3:14–22)
- III. *Vision 2: The Christ of the Cosmos* (4:1–16:21)  
(He is the God who reclaims the earth for His kingdom.)
- A. The Vision in Heaven (4:1–5:14)
  - B. The Destruction on the Earth (6:1–16:21)
    - 1. The seal judgments (6:1–17)  
Detailed explanation (7:1–17)  
The 144,000 Jewish Evangelists
    - 2. The trumpet judgments (8:1–9:21)  
Detailed explanation (10:1–15:8)  
The two witnesses (10:1–11:18)  
The war in heaven (11:19–12:17)  
The beast and false prophet (13:1–18)  
A description of the end (14:1–15:8)
    - 3. The bowl of judgments (16:1–21)
- IV. *Vision 3: The Christ of Conquest* (17:1–18)  
(He is the God who repays the ungodly for their sin.)
- A. Judgment on false religion (17:1–18)
  - B. Judgment on evil commercialism (18:1–24)
  - C. Justice in Christ's return to the earth (19:1–21)
  - D. Justice in Christ's reign on the earth (20:1–6)
  - E. Justice in Christ's consignment of Satan and sinners to the Lake of Fire

- (20:7–15)
- F. Joy in Christ's call of His saints to the new heaven and new earth  
(21:1–8)
- V. *Vision 4: The Christ of Consummation* (21:9–25)  
(He is the God who reigns for all eternity.)
- A. The description of eternity (21:9–27)
- B. The delights of eternity (22:1–5)
- VI. Conclusion: The Christ of Challenge (22:6–21)  
(He is the God who requests all to come to Him.)
- A. He invites the church (22:5–9)
- B. He invites the world (22:10–19)
- C. He invites the individual believer (22:20–21)

\*Adopted and expanded from Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 33.