

SESSION 1

REVELATION 1:1-20

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK (1:1-8)

A. Prologue (1:1-3)

1. The Announcement of Revelation from God (1:1)

a. "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Αποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ)¹

The word "Revelation" is the Greek word *Apokalypsis*

- (1) Meaning: to unveil or uncover (implies prior hiddenness)
- (2) Implication: In the context of this book, the things of the future are going to be disclosed by Jesus Christ (particularly in relation to the 2nd Coming of Christ).

b. "which God gave Him to show to His bondservants"

- (1) Main point: This is a single revelation that originates with God the Father and is entrusted to God the Son.
 - (a) In the gospels, Jesus was entrusted with the role of revealing the things of God to man (Jn 5:19-23).
 - (b) In Rev, Jesus is the only one considered *worthy* to open the seals (5:5-9) and disclose its contents

Lessons for our Life

- i) God knows the future and is able to reveal it to His believers (see Isa 46:9-10; Dan 2:28-29).
- ii) We can count on these things happening (see Dan 2:45).

- (2) The recipients of this revelation are Christ's "bondservants" (*Gk δουλοισ*)

This is a term used for true believers in the book of Revelation.

Lessons for our Life

- (a) Our future involves the greatest privilege and honor (Rev 22:3)
- (b) We need to stop living for self, because we belong to Christ (1 Cor 6:19-20).

¹Thomas (1:52) takes Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as a *subjective genitive* (note the clause "which God gave Him to show to His bond servants).

- c. "the things which must shortly take place" (ἐν τάχει; *NIV* = soon)
- (1) What does he mean by "shortly take place"?
- (a) The fulfilment of these things was expected soon after John wrote them.
- Implication:
- i) The book was fulfilled historically in the first few centuries, and the prophecies have to be understood *spiritually*.
- or ii) John was wrong and the book is not trustworthy.
- (b) Some would interpret the Greek term to mean "quickly" (so Walvoord)
- Implication: The idea is not that these events will occur soon but that when they do begin to happen, they will take place quickly.
- Comment: Grammatically, the Greek expression can mean either "soon" or "quickly." This occurs 8 times in the NT. The idea of "soon" (i.e., in the near future) is attested in 1 Tim 3:14 and Acts 25:4. The idea of "quickly" is attested in Acts 12:7 and 22:18 (cf. the LXX at Deut 9:3; 11:17; Josh 8:18).
- (c) These things will take place "soon" but from God's viewpoint, not man's
- This implies the "imminency" of the events . . . they are possible any day. They will occur "soon" from the standpoint of Scripture. See notes on 1:3.
- (2) RESOLUTION: Option #3 is best! The eschatological events of Revelation will happen shortly in the sense that the "end times" are close by God's calendar.
- (a) We also have to account for vs. 3 - "the time is near" (ὁ καιρὸς ἐγγύς)²
- This is repeated at the end of the book in Rev 22:10
- (b) Notice the many references in Revelation to the fact that Christ is coming *quickly* (a related word to "shortly" in 1:1):
- "I am coming quickly" (ἐρχομαι ταχύ) - 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20.
- (c) Notice how these phrases are put together in Rev 22:6-7.

²Phrases closely related to καιρὸς ἐγγύς are found in Mt 26:18; Lk 21:31; and Phil 4:5.

"the Lord ... sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must *shortly* (ἐν τάχει) take place. 'And behold, I am *coming quickly* (ἔρχομαι ταχύ)."

- (d) The New Testament consistently views the "end-times" and the return of the Lord as imminent (see Rom 13:11-14; 1 Cor 7:29ff; 10:11; Jam 5:8; 1 Pet 4:7; 2 Pet 3:9; and 1 Jn 2:18).
 - (e) Clarification: In the book of Daniel, a vision was given to the prophet concerning the kingdoms of history (Dan 2; 7).
 - i) There would be four successive world empires: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome
 - ii) A final kingdom would emerge out of the Roman Empire headed by the Antichrist which would be overcome by Messiah's kingdom.
 - iii) From the standpoint of the NT, the first four kingdoms had all come (Rome was ruling at the time John wrote). The reign of the antichrist was expected to be short, so that Messiah's kingdom could come at any time.
- d. "communicated *it* by His angel"
- (1) More reference is made to "angels" in this book than any other book of the NT (67 times)!
 - (2) Notice the many things that angels do (see *Suppl. 1.1*).
2. The Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus (1:2)
- a. Interpretative Problem: Is this a reference to the testimony given by Jesus or the believer's testimony to Jesus?³
 - b. Observation: Notice how these expressions are used in the book
 - (1) Rev 1:9 - The basis for John's own persecution on Patmos
 - (2) Rev 6:9; 20:4 (cf. 12:17) - A basis for persecution
 - c. Conclusion: Included in what John saw was how future believers would be loyal to the Word of God and maintain their testimony for Jesus.⁴

Lessons for our Life

- (1) The Book of Revelation is not given just to tickle your imagination or give you a *special knowledge* of the future, but to call you personally into a deeper walk of discipleship with Jesus.

³Grammatically, either option is possible. The former is referred to as a "subjective genitive" and the latter an "objective genitive." Usage in the book of Revelation seems to support the latter.

⁴Thomas (1:59), however, takes Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as a *subjective genitive* (so Mounce, 66). But Thomas must take the καὶ as epexegetical.

Note: This introduces the theme of *perseverance* which is one of the main motifs of the book.

- (2) Most Christians today are living undisciplined lives, which would not hold up to intense persecution.

Questions for thought:

- a. Do people you work with know that you are a Christian?
- b. Are you ashamed to be identified with Jesus Christ?
- c. Are you living out the Word of God in your daily life?

3. The Promise of a Blessing (1:3)

"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."

a. Insights

- (1) This is the first of seven beatitudes promised in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14). These are related to the theme of perseverance and reward.
- (2) Notice the phrase "he who reads" is singular in contrast to the plural phrases which follow.

Explanation: Refers to the time when few believers would have had a personal copy of the Scriptures. Instead, the Scriptures would be read publicly when they met to worship.

Lessons for our Life

How thankful we should be to have our own personal copy of the Bible! Let's be faithful with that privilege, and read every day.

Illustration: Believers in Mongolia (for many years, have only had a copy of the New Testament).

- (3) Hearing and heeding go together!

In the Greek text, the verbs "hear" and "heed" are both participles, but there is only one *article* for both.⁵ This links them together. There is no blessing just for hearing, but only for hearing followed by obedience.

Lessons for our Life

The goal of reading/studying the Bible is not to gain head knowledge but to experience a transformed life! [Lk 11:28; Jas 1:22]

⁵The *article* (Gk οἱ) is something like the English word "the." The point is clarified if we were to translate this "the ones who hear and heed."

B. Salutation (1:4-8)

1. "to the seven churches that are in Asia"

John had spent the latter part of his life in Asia Minor (present day western Turkey), from the late sixties to near the end of the 1st century. Hence, these were churches with which he was familiar and they adequately represented the spiritual condition of churches elsewhere.

2. "the seven spirits who are before His throne" (4)

Some take this as a reference to *angels*, but more probably this is a reference to the Holy Spirit (cf. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6).⁶

a. Notice the "Trinitarian" structure

(1) Father = "Him who is and who was and who is to come"

Notice how this is used in 4:8, in which the One on the throne is distinguished from the Lamb. Reflects the "I AM" of Ex 6:14.

(2) Spirit = "the seven spirits who are before His throne"

(3) Son = "Jesus Christ" (v 5)

b. Why refer to the Holy Spirit this way?

John is making an allusion to Zech 4:1-10 in which the Holy Spirit was depicted in a seven-fold way.⁷ The *lampstand* with the seven lamps depicts the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Note Zech 4:10 - "these are the eyes of the LORD which range to and fro throughout the earth" (cf. Rev 5:6). Hence, this depicts the omnipresence of the LORD through the Holy Spirit.

3. "from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (5)

a. Why was the *Son* referred to last in the mention of the Trinity? Ans.- The remainder of the chapter will focus on him.

b. Notice that three things are said about Christ in this sentence:

(1) *faithful witness* - His response to the Father's will (cf. 3:14; 19:11)

(2) *first-born of the dead* - He was the first in the line of those who will be resurrected.

(3) *ruler of the kings* - This looks forward to His reign

These three descriptives reflect aspects of the Davidic covenant promises in Ps 89 (see vv 27 & 37). They also portray the Lord Jesus as an example for us. Note that all three are major themes in Revelation connected with the idea of *overcoming*, and prepare the reader for the messages to the churches. Hence, those who faithfully endure with Christ to the end can look forward to resurrection and sharing in Christ's kingdom rule.

4. Note the Structure of vv 5-6

a. What He experienced (v 5a) - see above

⁶ Angels are unlikely as the source of grace and peace.

⁷ Some have thought that the allusion might be to Isa 11:2, but that verse seems to point out only six "energies" of the Spirit.

b. What He has done for us (v 5b)

Note that one article unites both participles!

(1) “*who loves us*”

Present participle (only time used in present tense in NT), emphasizing the continual aspect of His love toward us. This is an encouraging reminder to one under fire and tribulation.

(2) “*released us from our sins by His blood*”

Aorist participle (in contrast to the above), denoting completed action. The phrase “by His blood” involves the *instrumental* use of prep. ἐν (“by means of”). This is also a reminder that His suffering was not in vain, and by implication neither is ours.

c. What He deserves and shall receive: “*glory and dominion*”

The word “Amen” at the end of v 6 underscores the importance of this last aspect. In fact, this introduces us already to where the book is headed, namely, His glory and dominion. In light of v 7 which follows, this will be realized in His Second Coming.

When He comes again, He will establish His kingdom on earth. Yet even now, we have been made a “*kingdom, priests to His God and Father.*” This is an allusion to Ex 19:5-6, in which Israel had initially been designated to be a kingdom of priests. That sense of purpose and mission, once entrusted to Israel alone, is now entrusted to all those comprising the Church (cf. 1 Pet 2:9-10). We have a *priestly function* in the present era: we worship God with our prayers, we render spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet 2:4-5; Heb 13:15-16), and we have a mission as mediator to the unbelieving world (our witness for Him).

5. The anticipation of the Second Coming (v 7)

Verse 7 is appropriate at the outset of the book, as it anticipates the Second Coming of Christ, the main theme of the book. Verse 7 is a conflation of Dan 7:13 and Zech 12:10 (cf. Mt 24:30). The Daniel passage contained the thoughts of *glory* and *dominion*, thus supporting v 6. The Zechariah passage is in a context of Israel under siege in the Tribulation. “*Every eye will see Him*” – it is inevitable that the whole human race witness this (i.e., those who are alive at that time).

II. UNVEILING OF THE GLORIFIED CHRIST (1:9-20)

A. The Command to John (1:1-9)

1. Notice the three things emphasized in v 9:

a. Tribulation (θλιψει) - cf. 2:9-10; 2:22; 7:14

John, the seven churches, and the tribulation saints all participate in this. Hence, it is not just that of the Great Tribulation (so Thomas, 1:86).

b. Kingdom (βασιλεια) - This term occurs more frequently in Rev than any other NT book (except the gospels). Note 1:6,9; 5:10; 11:15; 12:10; 16:10; 17:12,17,18. This must find an earthly realization (see 5:10!), and John anticipates that he will be a fellow-partaker of it. Note Satan’s attempt to

establish his counterfeit king (16:10; 17:12-13,17).

c. Perseverance (ὀπομένη - endurance; to remain under)

This term is used more times in Rev than anywhere else (1:9; 2:2-3; 2:19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). Note especially 2:3 - what we endure for His name sake.

Observation: In this triad, the idea of kingdom rule is sandwiched between the ideas of tribulation and endurance. Point: our rule is closely associated with these two ideas. Note that this is not just a matter for the Tribulation time, for John calls himself a *fellow partaker* (cf. Acts 14:22 - “through many afflictions . . .”).

2. “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”

This probably looks at John’s reception of the vision *as a prophet*. Hence, “in the Spirit” refers to the ecstatic condition that John was in as the Holy Spirit took control of his faculties (for the purpose of receiving visions). Most likely, the “Lord’s day” refers to Sunday, the day that early Christians celebrated the resurrection of the Lord (so Thomas, 1:91).

3. **Purpose of the Book**

In light of several elements in the first eleven verses, we can see the purpose of the book already emerging. There is the matter of “unveiling” (which comes from Christ but is also about Him). There is the element of hardship that is to be met with perseverance and faithfulness. There is also the expectation of Christ coming again and the dominion that He will receive. Thus, we could state the purpose of the book:

To encourage and exhort believers to perseverance and faithfulness by an unveiling of Christ as victor in His final role in world history.

B. The Description of Christ (1:12-20)

The remainder of the chapter is a description of the glorified Christ, much of it using symbolism, to prepare John and the readers for the messages to the seven churches. The point is this: *the key to faithful endurance is to visualize Christ as He really is!*

The emphasis of chapter one is on Christ as the supreme and unquestioned victor, the faithful Lord of the Church. In light of the extensive elaboration concerning the details of the judgement and the struggles between God and Satan, it is essential for the believer to grasp right from the start that Jesus is the triumphant Lord. To present Christ in such an exalted way prepares the reader for everything that follows. If there is to be any wholehearted obedience in the churches, if there is to be a godly perseverance by His people, then we must rightly focus in on who Christ is, what He has done and His authoritative position in respect to everything else, even death itself.

As a young man, John walked with the Lord and saw Him in His earthly appearance. Now, John is older, and the Lord allows Him to see Jesus once again in vision. This time, however, John sees Him as the Lord of glory . . . the resurrected and glorified Lord of His Church.

1. According to Rev 1:20, the seven lampstands are symbolic of the seven churches that John will be writing to. The Son of Man in the midst of the lampstands (1:13) is obviously Jesus. He is the Lord in the midst of His Church. There is a great deal of correlation between this paragraph in Rev 1 and Daniel 7. It was in Dan 7:13-14

that the title Son of Man was used to portray the One who would receive glory and a kingdom from the Ancient of Days. The remaining characteristics in Rev 1:14-16 are drawn primarily from Dan 10:2-10.

2. The clothing in 1:13 (“*a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across the breast with a golden girdle*”) is probably a depiction of Christ like an OT priest. This is very relevant to Rev 1–3, for it depicts Christ as the Great High Priest of His Church (cf. Heb 4:14–5:10; 7:1-28). As High Priest, He intercedes for His Church and gives enabling grace to those who faithfully persevere. As Heb 12 reminds us, He also disciplines those who are unfaithful.

3. Seven Bodily Descriptions (1:14-16)

- a. “*His head and hair were white like snow*”

This recalls Dan 7:9 where God the Father (referred to there as the Ancient of Days) was so depicted. What is true of the Father is thus also true of Jesus. This is symbolic of the eternity of God. This implies that Jesus is God, eternal with all the wisdom of God.

- b. “*His eyes were like a flame of fire*” (1:14)

This recalls Dan 10:6, where Daniel had seen the preincarnate Jesus in vision. He describes “the man” as having *eyes like flaming torches*. This is symbolic of the Lord’s penetrating sight that qualifies Him to judge His Church (cf. Prov 15:3; 2 Chr 16:9). Notice the connection to Rev 2–3, as highlighted in the message to Thyatira:

Rev 2:18 “*The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this*”

Rev 2:23 “. . . *and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts*”

The point is that Jesus sees straight into the heart of each one of us, and He will eventually reward us accordingly (or, in judgement, deny us reward).

- c. “*feet like burnished bronze*” (1:15)

In Dan 10:6, immediately after the comment about His eyes, we are told that He had “*arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze*.” The same order is maintained in Rev 1. Feet represent movement and bronze is symbolic of strength. The point is that He has the capability to act in judgement. There is a very natural connection between His eyes aflame and His feet like burnished bronze. He can see intently into our hearts, and He can act in judgement (appropriate for what He is about to say to the seven churches).

- d. “*His voice was like the sound of many waters*” (1:15)

This may be a reflection of Ezek 43:2 as well as Dan 10:6. The point is this: when He speaks, He speaks with great divine authority. All should listen (as should the seven churches).

- e. “*in His right hand He held seven stars*” (1:16)

This is explained in Rev 1:20 as being angels. The point: they are in His grip (standing ready to obey His orders), either to protect or to render discipline.

- f. “*out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword*” (1:16)

This is explained in Rev 2:12,16. The point is that Christ is not *sitting idly*

on the sidelines; He will pronounce and carry out judgement (even on His Church!).

g. “*His face was like the sun shining in its strength*” (1:16)

This reflects Dan 10:6 “his face had the appearance of lightning.” Perhaps at this point, John flashed back to an earlier moment in his life when he had been one of the three disciples that witnessed the transfiguration. Mt 17:2 states, “And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.” At that time, the disciples were given a glimpse of how Jesus would look in His kingdom glory (note Mt 16:28!). This looks forward to Jesus’ glory in triumph. How wonderful it will be when we behold Him in all His resurrected kingdom glory! If we are faithful, we will have authority over the nations and rule with Him (Rev 2:26-27).

4. John’s Reaction to the Vision (1:17-20)

Compare Daniel’s reaction to his vision of Christ in Dan 10:7-12. Daniel fell to the ground and into a deep sleep. Subsequently, the “man” touched him (10:10), and told him “do not be afraid” (10:12). In John’s case, he was told to “write therefore the things which you have seen” (the vision of the glorified Christ in ch 1), “the things which are” (the current situation in the seven churches, ch 2–3), and “the things which shall take place after these things” (the future Tribulation followed by the Kingdom of Christ, ch 4–22).

Lessons for our Life

The main point of this vision of Christ is to communicate that Jesus is the God of glory who is watching over His Church. He is watching (1) to discipline and correct His Church and (2) to reward those who are faithful. The seven churches mentioned in Rev 2–3 have problems that are characteristic of many churches throughout the ages, and certainly of churches today. What we do and how faithful we are really does matter. The One “with eyes like flaming fire” does take notice. For us to be shaken from complacency or sin, we need to envision the Lord Jesus as He really is. Has a short-sightedness of Christ led to sin or complacency in your life? Is there a need for repentance? Then act accordingly, for He is also the One “who loves us” (1:5).