

Before digging into this book, we need to understand that John was writing what he saw. It was a message to the church near the end of the first century to help them endure the persecution of Domitian. It tells of the final judgment of mankind in which everyone is driven to a decision for or against their Creator. But it is also about the arc of history from a spiritual perspective.

Some people obsess over the book as if it were the most important in Scripture, while others avoid it for several possible reasons. I have been on both sides. When in a cult, I thought I understood all the details. But after hearing other interpretations, I realized there were many other viewpoints. I not only became less certain of my interpretation but began to worry about the curse upon those who add or take away from it (Revelation 22:18,19ⁱ). I avoided teaching the book. Oh, I would read portions now and then. I taught on the letters to the churches. But my uncertainty about the meaning of the mystical descriptions and how it all fit together caused me to avoid it.

I cannot tell you how many times I was asked to preach through it. I never read a commentary that I felt really got it right. So, my answer was always that I did not want to preach it until I understood it better.

Then Jory and I attended a conference on preaching apocalyptic literature. As they explained the genre and how most of the symbolic language was explained in other books of the Bible, I began to see that it was not so impossible to understand. But the thing that really helped me to decide to take the leap, was that I began to see that the book is not so much about knowing the future as it is about how we should face the fallen world in which we live. I still am not certain about many details, but we need to hear its message.

Think about the first readers and those through the generations that have read it since. Understanding all the symbolism and exactly what would take place was not that important to their lives. What was important is the message of how to live in this fallen world. It was important for them to see the big picture that this world is passing; it will be judged; Jesus will reign, and we will reign with Him. We need to see that too.

It is important to know the genre of a text to interpret it: parables, fables, sci-fi, beatitudes, poetry, etc. Most are intuitively observed. We watch the news and know when the commercial comes on. We can tell an editorial from a news report even though the fad is to blend the two. But what if you never faced a particular genre before? First and second century Jews and Christians used a style we call apocalyptic literature. The book of Revelation overlaps this genre with prophecy and exhortation. There are standard symbols in this genre in other books as well. Horns almost always refer kings or kingdoms. Waters refer to the chaotic mass of humanity. You will see stars refer to angelic beings, and so forth.

This genre sometimes refers to heaven's view of all of human history, God's overarching perspective, and sometimes uses evil versus good metaphors. There are five or six principle orientations among Bible believers of today: futuristic (dispensational premillennialism); preterist - already in the past except maybe last couple chapters; historical - of church history; principles of God's administration/abstract philosophy, and historical background of first century while yet predicting future events (foreshadowing 1 John 2:18ⁱⁱ). You will find that I lean toward the last view.

¹ *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,* Revelation 1:1 Is this the revelation from Jesus or of Jesus? The context shows us it is “from”! God gave him... John's Gospel always shows Father giving to Jesus who gives to help us, given to an angel to give to John to show us how to live during the coming trials. Apocalyptic literature often has an angel interpret or relay the message. We saw this in our study of Zechariah and Daniel.

However, one could argue that it is also a revelation of Jesus, for throughout the book, we see something of Jesus. The Greek word translated as revelation is *apocalypsis* which means to unveil. Jesus used the word in Matthew 11:25-27ⁱⁱⁱ and Matthew 16:16,17^{iv}. There it was translated it as “revealed”. I believe we could take it both to unveil or reveal Jesus to us and also unveil to us the conclusion of history. I preached a sermon based on D.A. Carson’s entitled Jesus in Revelation. Nearly every chapter tells us something of Jesus. However, apocalypse is usually a description of the end of history. But this book is much more than that. Guthrie writes that Revelation unveils: “*the opposition we can expect to escalate, the endurance we need to cultivate, the judgment we will celebrate, the victory in which we will participate, the enemy Jesus will annihilate, the sorrow He will alleviate, the creation He will regenerate, the marriage He will consummate, and the home we can anticipate - sharing with Him forever.*”^v

God gave this revelation to Jesus to show His servants what must soon take place. We saw in James that the coming of the Lord was at hand (James 5:8^{vi}). And yet, 2000 years later we are still waiting. Peter tells us why. 2 Peter 3:8,9 ⁸ *But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.* ⁹ *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.* Jesus told us that no man knew the day or hour of His return. Only the Father knows. But we are aware of the brevity of life. James described it like a mist that is here one moment and then vanishes (James 4:14^{vii}). Our time in this life passes quickly. We need to heed the message of this book.

There are two signs given to us by the Apostle Paul in the second letter to the Thessalonians chapter two. He tells us that before we are gathered together to the Lord there will be a great falling away, and that the man of lawlessness will be revealed (2 Thessalonians 2:3,4^{viii}). That is a term for the Antichrist. While the church has always expected the return of Christ, we should be aware that those signs are precursors to His return.

² *who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.* Revelation 1:2 This book is John telling us what the angel showed him of God’s Word and of Jesus’ testimony. It is as if the angel pulled back the curtain of heaven and time and showed John the whole picture of what God’s Word declares and what Jesus is doing. It is a summary of the entire book. Revelation is God’s Word and Jesus’ testimony. As Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14^{ix}), the two are conveying the same message of the triumph of God over evil and the sanctification of the bride of Christ .

The words here translated as “witness” and “testimony” are both a form of the word martyr (*martureo* and *marturia*). The people of that day who were bold witnesses of Jesus’ lordship were often martyred. That is how the word for witness came to mean one

who lays down their life for the faith. We will see a multitude of martyrs in Revelation (19:7^x).

It is significant that much of the language of these first two verses come from the Greek version of Daniel 2:28,29^{xi}, 45^{xii} “to show... what must come to pass.” Since the disciples understood that they were in the “latter days” as we see in the Pentecost sermon, John changed Daniel’s expression “what must come to pass” to “quickly”.

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. Revelation 1:3 This verse promises that those who read aloud, hear, and keep what is written in the book will be blessed. I know reading aloud helps me focus and go slower. I am not sure if that is the intent, or if it is meant to share it with those who are illiterate. The blessing is on those who hear and keep the words. To keep means to observe, guard, or hold fast. Prophecy in this case is not as we usually interpret as predicting future events, but rather God revealing how we should live in the present. This is the more common use of the word in the Bible. Prophecy literally means to speak out. While it may refer to the situations that are to come upon us, the emphasis is how God is directing us to respond.

John’s witness to the heavenly commentary concerning what God has done in Christ is not intended as an apocalyptic curiosity to tantalize the intellect but to inform Christians about how God wants them to live in the light of recent redemptive history.^{xiii}

"For the time is near" and "time is near" indicates the readers would have seen it applying to their day. That is how it each generation should read it. The apocalypse may be in our time as none of us knows the day or hour. That is why we should act on what we hear from this book. As we will see in the letters, Jesus does come in judgment even now though we do not see Him physically (Acts 5:4,5^{xiv}). And He will come again in glory at the conclusion of the age.

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, Revelation 1:4 John gives his greeting of grace and peace to the seven churches that were in Asia at the time. If we look at a map of where these churches were, we can see that they are listed in order as if you were traveling in one direction from one church to the next. However, in apocalyptic literature numbers are very significant. Seven indicates fullness. Though the book literally went to the seven churches, it is for the whole church in all the world and throughout this church age. We will see the number come up throughout the book. The numerical complexity of the Bible in Hebrew and Greek revolves around the number seven and its multiples.

One of the early church fathers tells us that John wrote this at the end of Emperor Domitian’s reign, which ended in 96 AD. Domitian, like many of the emperors, was a degenerate. He ordered those watching his brother die to leave him to die alone. He seduced his niece, made her abort her baby, which caused her death. He had a man executed for mildly mocking him. When he found one of the vestal virgins had a lover, he had her buried alive. And yet, he insisted on being called “Lord and God.”

There are disagreements as to the extent of the persecution under his reign, but we know there was always the threat that Christians could be executed for not proclaiming Caesar is lord. You can imagine how it would be impossible for a Christian to say that especially such a man as Domitian. There was also the poverty that resulted from the loss of one’s place in a guild for refusal to burn incense to the guild god. Grace and peace for

the believers could only come from the One who is and who was and who is to come. The same is true for us. Our circumstances may not be as dire, but all who live godly in Christ face some form of persecution. It is an honor, though it is never easy.

The One who was and is and is to come reminds us of the name of God, The I Am (Exodus 3:14^{xv})! He always is, unbound by time or location. The author of Hebrews says Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8^{xvi}). The same God who delivered Israel from Egypt and led them through the wilderness while supplying all their needs and giving them the Promised Land is the same today.

The Apostle Paul began most of his letters with the greeting: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The next verse begins, “and from Jesus Christ.” So, John was referring to the Father.

The greeting is also from the seven spirits before the throne. First, we have God the Father, and then is added the seven spirits before the throne which represents the Holy Spirit. Seven throughout the book is fullness. There is nothing lacking in the Holy Spirit. He is one with the Father and the Son who is added in the next verse. Grace and peace come from Trinity. It is what the churches in every age need. We need the grace that leads us to salvation, grace to grow in Christ, and grace to finish the race. We need peace in our hearts while the world rages around us. We need peace with God that is ours because of what Jesus had done for us. We need the peace of knowing our lives are in God’s hands so that people see that peace in us while enduring life’s struggles.

⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood
Revelation 1:5 Jesus is the faithful witness of God's nature. His death was the greatest expression of God’s love. This book mostly speaks of victory via martyrdom. It is a book on how to face opposition starting with Jesus' example.

He is the firstborn of a resurrection body (Acts 26:23^{xvii}). The firstborn in Scripture had the right to represent the father of the family. He would receive a double portion of the inheritance and responsibility for the family. Though it usually was determined by birth order, the title could be given to someone born later if the firstborn offended the father. In Jesus’ case, He only pleased the Father in all that He did (John8:29^{xviii}).

Jesus is already ruler of the kings of the earth. All authority is already His, but there is still opposition (Psalm 110:1^{xix}). This book has been most cherished during times of persecution. He who loves us is ruler over kings. They may be as evil as Nero or Domitian, and yet Jesus has set their limits.

Washed (KJV - *louro*) and freed (ESV- *lyo*) sound the same in Greek. Either is applicable and both are an expression of His love - delivered from the burden, from slavery, and from the judgment our sin deserves (Ephesians 3:18,19^{xx}). Because the soul that sins must die (Ezekiel 18:4^{xxi}), and the life of the flesh is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11^{xxii}), Jesus paid our sin debt with His blood. That sets us free from our debt that separated us from God and washes clean in God’s sight. It was the only way we could be justified before God. That is why God sent His Son out of love so that we could be justly reconciled to God, which is to be at peace with God and be under His grace (John 3:16^{xxiii}; Romans 5:1^{xxiv}). John declared the gospel in these two verses. That is more than we could ever merit, more than enough, super-abundant grace. But there is more!

⁶ *and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.* Revelation 1:6 In His love for us, He made us kingdom. That means we are Jesus' subjects. And because He is good and only does good, we have the most beneficent King we could ever hope to have.

In addition, we are priests to the Father. That means we always have access to Him (Hebrews 4:16)^{xxv}. We can intercede for the lost. We can pray His will into the earth. It also means that He provides for us. And we offer ourselves as living sacrifices as we minister to Him (Romans 12:1^{xxvi}). His glory and His kingship will be forever. That is the only real happily ever after.

⁷ *Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.* Revelation 1:7 This verse draws from Zechariah, another book of apocalyptic literature. In chapter 12 Zechariah predicted: Zechariah 12:10¹⁰ *“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.* It speaks of a day when Christ returns, and the Jewish people recognize Him as Lord. But in this verse in Revelation, it is combined with Jesus' expression in the Olivet discourse. Matthew 24:29-31²⁹ *“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.* ³⁰ *Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.* ³¹ *And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*

When Jesus ascended into heaven, Luke tells us that two angels asked the disciples, ¹¹ *and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”* Acts 1:11 He ascended in clouds which are in Scripture often related to glory. He will return the same way. The entire world will see Him. And the world will mourn. That is because they are opposed to His reign and know their judgment is coming. The elect, those who are in Christ, will rejoice and receive their eternal bodies.

John concludes that present reality of the gospel, making us a kingdom and priests, and the future promise of the Lord's return, judgment of the wicked by saying, “Surely, let it be so!” He has the vision for how wonderful the future will be. He is saying, “Bring it on!”

⁸ *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”* Revelation 1:8 In Isaiah, God declares Himself to be the first and the last (Isaiah 41:4^{xxvii}; 44:6^{xxviii}). The Alpha and Omega is like saying He is the A to Z. It is similar to God's declaration in Isaiah 43:10¹⁰ *“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.* The one who says that is the Lord God. That name means the eternal and almighty One.

Then He repeats what John declared in verse 4. Jesus was and is and is to come. He has seen us through our past and is with us in the present and will be with us in what

is to come. Time cannot separate us from His love. He can tell us the future because He is already there. What He declares is certain and unchangeable. What a mighty, wonderful, gracious God we serve! If you heard this and will keep it, you will be blessed.

Questions:

- 1 Why do people avoid with Revelation? Obsess with it?
- 2 What are the main ways in which the book has been interpreted?
- 3 Who is it from? To whom?
- 4 What do we do to receive the promised blessing?
- 5 What is the source of grace and peace?
- 6 What was the tension for Christians in the Roman world?
- 7 How does John describe God in verse 4?
- 8 Go over the gospel in verses 5 and 6.
- 9 What passages are verse 7 drawn from?
- 10 Review Jesus self-descriptions in verse 8? What do they mean to us?

ⁱ Revelation 22:18-19 (ESV)

¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

ⁱⁱ 1 John 2:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 11:25-27 (ESV)

²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

^{iv} Matthew 16:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

^v Guthrie, Nancy, *Blessed*, Crossway 2022, p.35

^{vi} James 5:8 (ESV)

⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

^{vii} James 4:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

^{viii} 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 (ESV)

³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

^{ix} John 1:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

^x Revelation 19:7 (ESV)

⁷ Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;

^{xi} Daniel 2:28-29 (ESV)

²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: ²⁹ To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be.

^{xii} **Daniel 2:45 (ESV)**

⁴⁵ just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.”

^{xiii} G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 184.

^{xiv} **Acts 5:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

^{xv} **Exodus 3:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

^{xvi} **Hebrews 13:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

^{xvii} **Acts 26:23 (ESV)**

²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

^{xviii} **John 8:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”

^{xix} **Psalms 110:1 (ESV)**

¹ The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

^{xx} **Ephesians 3:18-19 (ESV)**

¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

^{xxi} **Ezekiel 18:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

^{xxii} **Leviticus 17:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

^{xxiii} **John 3:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

^{xxiv} **Romans 5:1 (ESV)**

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{xxv} **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

^{xxvi} **Romans 12:1 (ESV)**

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

^{xxvii} **Isaiah 41:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.

^{xxviii} **Isaiah 44:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.