

Introduction to Revelation: What is this Book About?

Call to Worship: Psalm 94:12-15

Hymn #722- *Wonderful Words of Life*

1st Scripture: John 15:9-17

Hymn #700- *Trust and Obey*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 1:1-3

Hymn Insert- *Open My Eyes, That I May See*

Introduction:

Who is the anti-Christ? Is he Nero or Vespasian or Hitler or some other tyrannical ruler yet to come? Is there a rapture of the church, and if so, when will it take place? Will Christ reign on earth for a literal thousand years? Are the locusts described in chapter nine, literal monster like locusts that will come out of the earth at some point in the future, or are they possibly helicopters that John would have seen and described from the standpoint of a first century prophet who had no understanding of our modern technology, or do they represent some great and ferocious army? Do we find evidence of nuclear warfare going on in Revelation? What of a one world government, the Eurodollar and the mark of the beast? What is the significance of Israel entering the Promised Land again in 1948 and how closely ought we to be watching that small nation in the near future? Will the Roman Empire be revived again and do we see any evidence to that end in the present? How can we identify today's major events and catastrophes in the symbols given in the Book of Revelation?

Some of you are familiar with these kinds of questions, which seem to constantly make the headlines in many churches of our day. And you will find no shortage of Christian articles and magazines that conveniently update our understanding of the "end times," in the light of current news. You see, there is a growing desire to understand and unlock all of the so-called "symbolic mysteries" of the Bible, and I believe that, often times, at the root of all this is the innate desire of our sinful flesh, to be God. We want to discover the undiscoverable because we want to be omniscient. Who wouldn't want to have a complete understanding of the future? Who wouldn't want to read and understand history before history takes place as opposed to just reading about it when it has past? And of course, on a more positive note, the Christian's longing to see Christ exalted, sin forever banished from existence, and the consummation of the

righteous Kingdom of God, might motivate us to peel through the pages of Revelation with a strong desire to make sense out of current events.

However, the irony is that in the midst of all of this dissecting of symbols and running to the newspaper in order to make sense out of these symbols, sadly, the very clear and general message of Revelation is often overlooked and passed right over. Curiosity about things that we are not really meant to understand tends to shield us from the very clear message that God has *for us*. But the clear message doesn't peak our interests, and it often requires faith and obedience, and a willingness to be the creature, allowing God to be God.

And so, as we make our way into this sobering and adventurous Book, right from the outset, it is important that we drop all preconceived notions and enter the Book *not* with a sense of curiosity nor with the anxious desire to solve every symbolic riddle (which I don't believe was God's intention for us to begin with), but rather with the desire to know precisely what *God* really wants us to grasp here, the primary message, leading to an obedient and faithful response on our part. Revelation, like every other Book of the Bible is given *not* as a means of filling us up with all kinds of nice information. Rather, it is given because God has a very specific message here for us, which calls us to respond with a life of obedience. God is looking for a response. God is looking for this to affect our lives in some way, and sadly, you hardly find that emphasis given in all of the dramatic ways that this Book is dissected and explained. But when we are willing to settle for God's design for this Book, the good news is that the symbols begin to come together not as a dominant message of their own, but as complimentary images that help support and fill in the main theme of the Book.

As we begin this introduction this morning, even in just considering these first three verses, I believe that we will already begin to see these introductory words validated in a relatively clear way. And so, for this morning, I want *to begin* to work on developing the main theme of this Book, so that we can carry that theme with us throughout our consideration of the many parts that make up this main theme. This morning then, we will seek to head in the direction of asking the question, "What is this Book about?"

What is the Book of Revelation About?

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants--things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (vs. 1-3).

The word translated, “Revelation” here is actually the Greek word “Apokalupsis,” which is why we often here people call this Book, the “Apocalypse.” And this is significant because the word, “apokalupsis” given here in the words, “The Revelation (or “the apokalupsis”) of Jesus Christ” actually means “the unveiling” of Jesus Christ. In other words, God is actually revealing something to His church (to “His servants”) by the mediation of Jesus Christ. That is why we are told, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His servants...”

Now, right from the outset, it is important to understand a few things about this Book, just taken from these few words. First, Revelation is a direct message given from God to His people. It is in fact, given to Jesus Christ who then delivers it over to His angel, who then walks John through the message, so that upon receiving and writing it down, John would then have it delivered to the churches. And as we move through the Book, we will see this type of a chain transferring the Revelation along to its destination (it begins with God and is then mediated through Christ, who then sends his angel to pass it on to John, who then writes it down and has it delivered to the churches). For now, I say this just to confirm that unlike most of the Books of the NT, Revelation was not written by the Holy Spirit *inspiring John*, and John writing the Book, inspired by God through his own personality...etc. This is direct prophecy, which is why we are told in verse three, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of *this prophecy...*” Now this doesn’t make it more authentic than the rest of Scripture, but it is different in the sense that it comes directly from God without moving through John’s person.

Secondly, we also see here that this message from Jesus Christ is an “unveiling” of sorts. In other words, the purpose of this Book is to make clear that which may not be clear to the naked eye. It is to expose and reveal the truth in such a way that the church will gain clarity about some important matters. Revelation is not meant to be some hidden code that only the

brilliant and intelligent can grasp; it is not meant to be a mysterious grouping of complex symbols; yes, it is full of symbols and imagery, but these symbols are actually given in order to reveal and expose something deeper than the field of our natural vision. Revelation “reveals.” It pulls back the curtain and exposes that which really is. You see, especially from the standpoint of a persecuted, suffering, tempted, warring, tested and perhaps even wavering church, things may *seem* hopeless from the perspective of what we can see on the surface. Or perhaps from the standpoint of a church that *seems to be thriving* in so many ways (doctrinally, numerically, financially...etc), there might be a temptation toward complacency and laziness, which is left unchecked and regressing more and more because after all, everything looks so good at the surface level. Well Revelation is in the business of “unveiling” and exposing things as they really are, in the light of what *seems to be*.

Let me illustrate this for a moment. Suppose there was a well respected man with a wonderful family, who works a decent job, makes an honest living and seems to get along well with everyone...who is later identified as the most wanted serial killer, who has violently taken the lives of several women. What often happens in such situations? They interview the neighbors and his co-workers and friends, and other people, and they all say, “He was such a nice guy. I just can’t see how he could have done this. You would never have convinced me of this if the facts were not so clearly proven.” Doesn’t that kind of thing happen often, when people commit crimes? People seem so nice and clean and friendly on the outside, but what is going on, on the inside, is not so nice, clean and friendly. You here of a horrible murderer, and right away you expect to see some grossly, distorted, disheveled animal of a man, but not the clean cut, well shaven, hard working, handsome, smart man with the briefcase. In such cases, what is on the outside, what seems to be, is not what really is. And after finding out about such a criminal, you will hear people describe him as an animal, a violent beast, a monster or in some other fashion that will strip away his deceptive exterior, so that others might get an accurate understanding of who this man really is. Well, this is precisely what Revelation does.

Revelation brings gullible, emotion driven, surface focused sheep to look beneath all that is in this world, so that we can see the truth and respond accordingly. It pulls the leaf piles off of the traps; it shines the light brightly in the darkness, so that we are able to discern what God knows, as we apply His revealed Word to our lives and all that surrounds us in a world that is

driven and run by a deceptive, well experienced, ancient devil, who, though he presents himself as an angel of light, is actually best described as a wicked, terrible, dragon. Revelation introduces us to the subtle and not so subtle instruments and companions of the dragon, who do his dirty work in deceiving the world and seeking to destroy the church. And so, we are given graphic descriptions in the latter part of the Book of the two beasts and the whore of Babylon who conspire with the dragon in the working out of his evil, wicked schemes. And these kinds of symbols (beasts and dragons and the multitude of other symbols) all come together in this big picture of the unraveling of God's will, so that we can grasp that which really is, in the light of what *seems to be*. Unlike the world, we don't bury our heads in the cycle of everyday life; in what is expected because that is classified as "normal" in this world. No, we see through it all. We take note of the ways of the enemy; we take note of the ways of our sovereign God and His Christ and His working in and by the church, and we act accordingly. By faith, we align ourselves with His will so that we are not swept away with the rest of the world, which is under the sway of the devil. Rather, we stand out as lights (or as a "lampstand"), calling others who are presently deceived, out of darkness and into the light of God's truth. Revelation reveals!

This is the Revelation of *Jesus Christ*...it is His by right; He is the lamb that was slain; He has been given authority over all things in heaven and on earth; history is in His hands. God delivers the divine will over to Him, because it is His by right, and He mediates it to John, by means of His angel. And John delivers it to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and through them to the church of all ages.

And what is the content of this unveiling? "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the Word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw."

The message is delivered to John. He saw the visions *firsthand*, that make up this revelation. What Jesus has testified to John through His angel, John saw directly as an eye witness, and now he is relaying that to his recipients. And within this revelation, we are given a recording; an unveiling of "things which must shortly take place."

What ought the church to expect in the times ahead, beginning from the time John had received the revelation and continuing on throughout the entire church age? What ought we to expect? What are we waiting for? And I would add, “in light of the fact that the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem has already taken place; since that landmark event has taken place, representing in full the end of the Old Covenant era and the moving forward into the New Covenant church age, what do we expect from here on?” The “Revelation” answers such questions as these. It exposes the very things that were expected to take place right there, beginning in John’s day, but not limited to John’s day alone. These things will continue right up until the final coming of Christ. Now, I am taking a little liberty here by jumping ahead, but I want to give you a bit of the full picture in advance so that we can move in the direction of unfolding the main purpose of this Book. For now, we see it as a revealing of that which must shortly take place; an exposing of the hidden realities that will soon (and are already beginning) to exist (right in John’s own day), beneath the surface of what *seems to be*.

And because these hidden realities are invisible to the naked eye, because most of the world will continue on; the blind leading the blind, assuming all is well because all seems well at the surface, John moves on to say in verse 3, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.”

You see, those who see what God unveils here and act accordingly, are blessed because they will avoid the traps; they will enclose and enfold themselves in the protective tower of Christ’s grace, so that they are not swept away into destruction. Those who are given the privilege of taking in and obeying what is given in this Book will find themselves blessed, because they will find themselves acting in keeping with reality and not in accordance with what *seems to be* and what the naked eye can only see at the surface level. The coming of these realities was “near” in John’s day. The churches could not brush this aside and leave it for a future generation. It was relevant for them. And if such was the case for them, what can we assume about the present day, nearly 2000 years later? Can we safely say that we are in the midst of all that is given in this Book? Could we presume that there is something sobering given here for the modern day church, which perhaps has been neglected, at least in our own country? Can we look into the moving pictures of Revelation and perhaps begin to diagnose the problem that exists within the American church? Can we further shift the focus in a more precise

direction...in the direction of our own church, and towards *us* as the individuals who make up this local body?

As we conclude for this morning, brethren, (continuing onward with this theme next week, Lord willing), notice something you hardly ever hear emphasized about this Book: It calls for an active response. It presents us with moral obligations of sorts, and if we miss this, and just delve into dissecting individual symbols to no end, then we have missed the very intent of the Book and thereby risk foregoing the blessing. And in fact, this “beatitude” (or blessing) is one of seven given in this Book. But see, brethren, there is a call to action here; a call to respond. Information is given with the intent of moving us in some way, and brethren, that is something that we must come away with here this morning, and carry with us all throughout our study of this Book. A clear message is given; an unveiling; a making known of what really is, *not* to confuse us, but to move us toward obedience in light of what we are told.

Just a quick note: If you are wondering why he says, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy...,” again, we must keep in mind the historical context within which this Book was written. We must remember who this Book speaks to first before we carry it over to us. In that day, far before the printing press was invented, generally, one individual would read the Scriptures aloud to a listening audience. Unless you were particularly wealthy, you would not have had a written copy of almost anything.

Well, next time, Lord willing, we will develop this theme a little further, seeking to understand what this Book is indeed about. For now, brethren, let me encourage you to pray that God would open our hearts in such a way that we would be moved away from any overwhelming desire toward curiosity about the symbols of this Book, and more in the direction of seeking to understand exactly what God wants us to understand, to the end that we would respond in obedience to the will of Christ, to whom this Revelation belongs.

The Gospel

Let me just close with a final word to those of you who are not sincere Christian's this morning. If you are outside of Christ; if you are resting in the hands of this world of uncertainty, clinging to sin and putting off seeking reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ; if you are stuck in the hopeless pattern of wanting to live life your way, rather than submit to the authority and Kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ, then there is so much that this precious Book has to say to you. For, it is both a great encouragement to those who are persevering in Christ and a stern warning to those who live outside of Christ. You will be given the rare privilege of once again seeing reality; God's reality made bare before you. Do not neglect what you hear, but rather, put it to good use. Seek the Lord while He may be found. Repent and flee to Christ before it is too late and you find yourself among the condemned who are described in such horrifying ways throughout the course of this Book. May God give you ears to hear and eyes to see and a responsive heart as we journey through this Book.

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Revelation 22:12-17