

A Reader's Guide to Revelation: Chapters 1-5

Introduction

While there are countless study resources available for the book of Revelation, most are too lengthy to be used alongside the Christian's daily Bible reading and meditation. This guide is designed to supplement and support that kind of Bible reading. Other study resources can be used as you encounter details that you need to research in more depth.

Please read the sections of Scripture first, then use the guide as you think carefully about what you have read.

All Scriptural wording is from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 ed. Word definitions in quotation marks come from Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.).

Because the introduction to Revelation is so critical for the interpretation of the book, this guide focuses on more of the details in 1:1-9 than the rest of chapters 1-5; and more on chapters 1-5 than the rest of the book.

Read Revelation 1:1-9

Don't skip too quickly over these introductory verses! They lay the foundation for understanding the rest of Revelation.

1:1 - *Revelation* = apokalypsis, "making fully known; revelation, disclosure"

1:1 - *of Jesus Christ*: certainly the book is about Jesus Christ, but here the phrase probably means from Jesus Christ. As the rest of the verse shows, He is clearly the one showing / sending / communicating these things.

1:3 - *heed*: It seems obvious how to heed a command like "do this" or "don't do that." But how do you heed a prophecy?

1:3 *the time is near*: Verse 1 refers to "the things which must soon take place," and now verse 3 indicates that "the time is near."

(Note the ⚡ below, which indicates differing perspectives on the book of Revelation)

⚡ Perspective 1: The phrases in verses 1 and 3 could mean that the events seen in Revelation's visions would occur with a few years of when John wrote these things. This would be the simplest way to take these words "soon" and "near" quite literally. It would fit well with Jesus' words "all these things will come upon this generation" (Matthew 23:36), "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34), and "some of those who are standing here will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power" (Mark 9:1). Problems: This would require that John wrote these things before AD 70, when Jerusalem fell. Though this is possible, it is much

more likely that he wrote these things in the AD 90s. This also means that you must interpret all of the events of Revelation very figuratively to explain how they have already occurred (see also the discussion on verse 7).

✠ Perspective 2: This could mean that the events of Revelation began unfolding immediately in the first century, but are now taking place in a very figurative way throughout this age. In other words, the book of Revelation uses several different visions to picture the triumph of God in this age. Problems: This would mean that the *beginning* of the events of Revelation was "soon" and "near," but that since then they have unfolded slowly and *very* figuratively.

✠ Perspective 3: The Bible's prophetic passages (in both Old and New Testaments) almost always have the perspective that the events they are foretelling are about to happen - they could happen at any time. In that sense, the fulfillment of prophecy is always "soon" and "near," and so the New Testament consistently exhorts God's people to be ready for his "soon" return (Romans 13:12, 16:20; Phil. 4:5; Heb. 10:25; James 5:8; I Pet. 4:7; I John 2:18). It is difficult to imagine that all of those passages are alerting Christians to the coming fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. So from this perspective, the events of Revelation are "soon" in that they could happen at any time, but that does not mean they will happen in a certain number of days or years. They still await their fulfillment today. Problems: Explaining the statements of Jesus noted above.

✠ Perspective 4: The events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in the first century were a foreshadowing of the events of the end times, and they were "soon" and "near." But the final fulfillment has not yet occurred. In other words, the events of Revelation did occur in some sense in the first century, but not in the final sense. Problems: As noted above, this requires that Revelation was written before 70 AD, which is unlikely. It also has to mix together fairly figurative interpretation (for first century events) with more literal interpretation (for end time events).

1:4 - *the seven churches that are in Asia*: "Asia" was the name for the Roman province that covered the western half of modern-day Turkey. Paul was involved in church planting ministry in this area on his first and especially third missionary journey. He didn't visit every one of these towns, but the gospel spread to these towns (see Acts 16:14) and churches were established.

1:4 - *seven Spirits who are before His throne*: Though there is a slight possibility that this refers to angels (maybe the seven angels of verse 20), it is much more likely that this refers to the Holy Spirit. There are several other passages that seem to use the number seven in relationship to the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:2; Zechariah 4:1-10; Revelation 3:1, 4:5, 5:6). Why? We don't know for sure, but it may indicate the full, comprehensive ministry of the Spirit.

If the "seven Spirits" indicates the Holy Spirit, do we have the Trinity in verses 4 and 5?

1:4-5 - When the Bible uses words and phrases to describe God, they are never accidental! Descriptions at the beginning of a book like Revelation are especially important because they clue us in to what this book may be teaching us about God. So, in these verses you want to note

especially the three-fold descriptions of Jesus and the Father. What major themes can you find here? How might these be important for the rest of Revelation?

1:5 - Based on the end of verse 5, for whom is Revelation written?

1:6 - *made us to be a kingdom, priests*: As we note the ways in which Revelation describes God, we also want to note the ways in which it describes God's people. Here they are described as a kingdom and priests. Be aware that these terms were used both in Old Testament descriptions of Israel and New Testament descriptions of the church (Exodus 19:6, I Peter 2:9). Also, take note of these concepts and watch to see if they reappear later in Revelation.

1:6 - *dominion*: *kratos* - "exercise of ruling ability; power, rule, sovereignty." What other words in the first six verses communicate the same idea as *dominion*? Which person of the trinity is particularly being described here? (clearly He is the dominant focus of Revelation!)

1:7 - Here the prophetic message begins! "Behold" means "pay attention, listen carefully." This certainly sounds like a statement of the theme and message of the entire book. But what is that message? When will Jesus come with the clouds, every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him?

First of all, let's note that this description comes quite clearly from Old Testament prophecies in Zechariah 12 and Daniel 7. Revelation must be interpreted in a way that is consistent with and fulfills Old Testament prophecies.

Here are three core questions for interpreting this verse:

What does it mean to come with the clouds?

Who are "those who pierced Him"?

Who are "all the tribes of the earth"?

✠ Perspective 1: From one perspective, this describes the judgment of Jerusalem in AD 70. This is especially supported by the statement that "those who pierced Him" will see Him. "Those who pierced him" would refer quite literally to those (especially Jewish leadership) involved with His death in the first century (see Matthew 23:34-36). The word "earth" often means "land" - and so "all the tribes of the land" could easily refer to the 12 tribes of Israel who were responsible for His death. From this perspective, the point of the book of Revelation is the decisive 1st century judgment on the Jews for their rejection of the Messiah. Problems: It's hard to faithfully interpret "every eye will see him" (One interpreter says this means that the fall of Jerusalem was a "public event, not done in a corner." But that requires considerable interpretation of the clear phrase "every eye will see him."). With much shorter life expectancies in the first century, very few of those who were actually involved with His crucifixion would have been alive 35 years later when Jerusalem fell (also, the only people who *literally* pierced Him were the Roman soldiers). Also, it's hard to see how the Jews mourned "over Him" in AD 70. They certainly mourned - but over Jesus?

✠ Perspective 2: From another perspective, this describes the second coming of Jesus in the future. "Those who pierced him" describes all of those who are guilty in His death,

including every sinner. "All the tribes of the earth" probably describes Gentile nations, though it could describe the Jewish tribes. "Every eye will see Him" will occur literally when Jesus visibly returns to earth. Problems: You have to extend "those who pierced Him" all the way to the end times, and you may have to take "tribes of the earth" as a fairly unusual description of Gentiles. It is a little bit harder to see how the message of Revelation is encouraging for the Christians in John's time, if the events described in it will not find fulfillment for thousands of years.

1:7 - *mourn over Him*: What kind of mourning is this? Mourning of repentance and salvation, or mourning because one is facing judgment? Based on Revelation alone, we would probably conclude that this is mourning because they face judgment (6:16-17, 9:21, 18:9). But if you read Zechariah 12-14, you will find that this might be a mourning of repentance and salvation for the people of Israel.

As you can probably tell, your interpretation of 1:7 will largely determine your interpretation of the rest of the book, because this verse tells us what Revelation is about. While this is oversimplifying things, you could ask it this way: is Revelation about...

1. a first century judgment-coming of Jesus to judge Israel?
2. a future coming of Jesus to discipline and then save Israel?
3. a future coming of Jesus to judge all nations and save Israel?

While the rest of this study guide will discuss various perspectives, it will prefer the view that Revelation somewhat figuratively describes literal events that will actually happen in the future in association with the second coming of Jesus.

1:8 - Note again these descriptions of God. Are these descriptions of the Father or of Jesus? Which of these descriptions are new to this chapter?

1:9 - *the island called Patmos*: This island, off the coast of Turkey, was used by the Romans as a prison colony and labor camp. John may have been sent there as a result of persecution by the Roman emperors against Christians.

1:9 - *fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance*: You may already be familiar with the word "tribulation," because it is often used to describe the time of great suffering before Jesus returns to earth. Is John saying that he and the Christians in the seven churches were currently in that "tribulation"? It is likely that here in chapter 1 John uses the word in a more general sense. The word refers to "trouble that inflicts distress," and it is used generally for Christian "distresses" - like Hebrews 10:33, where it describes those being persecuted, or Philippians 4:14, where Paul uses it to refer to financial distress. In Acts 14:22 Paul exhorted the new Christians that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." So this probably refers to the tribulations of Christian living in this age, not the "great tribulation."

Why do you think John wants the Christians in these churches to know that he is a "fellow partaker [with them] in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus"?

1:9 - *because of the testimony of Jesus*: As we finish up these first 9 verses, we can't miss this vital word *testimony* (martyria). This is the fourth time that this word (or a very closely related word) has occurred in this chapter. Where are the other three? What are some of the reasons why these "testimony" words would be an important part of the message of Revelation for the churches? (to sneak a peek ahead, look at verses like 6:9 and 11:7)

As you come to the end of verses 1-9, you may be feeling a little bit overwhelmed. Go back and reread the section, and enjoy the glorious truths here:

- the character of God
- the rule and authority of God
- the centrality of Jesus Christ
- the importance and blessing of Revelation
- the privilege of God's people
- the testimony of God's people despite tribulation
- the central message: He is coming!

With those truths burning in your heart, you're in good shape to move forward in the book!

Read Revelation 1:10-20

1:10 - *in the Spirit*: one of many places in New Testament in which it is not exactly clear whether the word is referring to God's Spirit or the human spirit. This phrase is describing John's condition as he received these visions from the Lord.

1:11 - *write in a book ... send it to the seven churches*: book = *biblion*, a roll of papyrus paper (scroll). Scholars estimate it would have been about 15 feet long to contain John's handwritten Greek text of Revelation. The seven churches listed in verse 11 are probably listed in the order that a messenger would have taken to deliver the scroll to each of the seven churches. Can you picture the messenger arriving, the church gathering, and someone unrolling and reading this scroll for all to hear? Can you imagine being the person who was given the privilege of copying the scroll, so that each church would have its own copy?

1:12-16 - All but one of these descriptions of Jesus have direct Old Testament background. This Jesus of Revelation is the same powerful, prophetic God who made promises in the Old Testament and is now completing those promised works through Jesus. These particular descriptions of Jesus are surely chosen because these are the things that the seven churches need to remember about Him (see how they are used at the beginning of six of the seven messages to the churches).

1:17 - *I fell at His feet like a dead man*: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10; see Revelation 13:18, 17:19). We cannot understand ourselves, this life, spiritual things - or the book of Revelation - if we do not have a right perspective on who God is. John is told to write, and then he immediately sees this vision of the Lord Jesus in His

power and glory. Everything in Revelation must be understood in the light of the power and glory of Jesus!

1:17 - *He placed His right hand on me*: Why do you think Jesus did this?

1:17-18 - take careful note: here are more important descriptions of Jesus

1:18 - *keys*: will show up three other times in Revelation (3:7, 9:1, 20:1) What does it mean to have the keys of death and of Hades (the place of the dead)?

1:19 - It seems clear that these three phrases summarize the three types of material in Revelation (note 4:1).

1:20 - *mystery*: We knew Revelation was mysterious! The word here refers to something that is a secret or transcends normal human understanding: there is a meaning to the stars and lampstands that must be explained to John. This alerts us to the fact that there will probably be other "mysteries" in the book - visual descriptions (like stars and lampstands) that represent something else which must be explained.

1:20 - *the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches*: the word angels (*angelos*) can refer to either human or angelic messengers. So who are the "messengers of the churches" to whom Jesus speaks?

✠ Perspective 1: the messengers are angels, which represent or care for each church. The uses of *angelos* in the rest of Revelation seem to all refer to angels. Problems: there isn't any other place in the New Testament in which you have "angels of churches," or any explanation of what that would mean. It seems very unusual.

✠ Perspective 2: the messengers are the pastors of the churches. It makes good sense for these messages to go to the leaders of churches. See also Daniel 12:3. Problems: there isn't any other place in the New Testament where pastors are referred to as *angelos*.

✠ Perspective 3: the messengers are human messengers from the churches who may have visited John while he was on Patmos, as some did when Paul was imprisoned. There are several other places in the New Testament where *angelos* is used for messengers like this. Problems: *angelos* isn't used for human messengers elsewhere in Revelation.

1:20 - What does it mean for Jesus to hold the stars in his right hand?

1:20 - *the seven lampstands are the seven churches* - Lamps are used elsewhere in prophecy to describe those who have a mission to accomplish for the Lord (Zechariah 4; Revelation 11). Jesus exhorted us to put our lamps "on the lampstand" and let our lights shine for men to see and glorify God (Matthew 5:14-16). So the lampstand probably pictures the churches as lights for Christ in a dark world (remember the "testimony" word group earlier in the chapter?).

Did you note that Jesus is in the middle of the lampstands (13), His hand is on John (17), and He holds the stars of the churches in His hand (20)? He may be deady powerful (13-16), but He is gently present with His people. Now what will He say to them?

Read Revelation 2:1-3:22

There are many details in the seven messages that go beyond the purposes of this guide. You can also use a Bible dictionary or commentary to learn more about these cities.

The messages to the churches share a very common pattern: what are the basic parts of that pattern?

With each of the messages to the churches, you will want to consider two basic questions:

1. Why/How does Jesus commend or encourage them?
2. Why/How does Jesus rebuke or warn them?

And then two more challenging questions:

1. How is Jesus' description of Himself appropriate for His message to that church?
2. How are the blessings promised to overcomers appropriate for that church?

Here are some other important factors to keep in mind and questions to ask as you meditate on the seven messages:

All seven of these messages were part of the one letter which was delivered to all of the churches. This suggests that each church needed to hear not only their specific message, but also the messages to the other churches (this also suggests that we need to hear all seven!).

✠ Some have concludes that these weren't actually specific messages for real churches, but that the seven churches are symbolic of all churches, or symbolic of different time periods in the history of Christianity. While all seven messages clearly can be applied to all Christian churches across the centuries, it is still best to see these as specific messages for actual first-century churches (keeping in mind that all seven churches heard all seven messages).

You will quickly notice that each letter includes a message for those who overcome. What does it mean "to overcome"?

Nikaō means "to win in the face of obstacles." In each of the messages, you can discern what particular obstacles that church was facing, and what it would mean for them to "overcome."

We can frequently feel that we are too weak and unable to overcome. But remember the presence and power of Jesus at the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 - then look at 5:5. Jesus is the ultimate overcomer. We are not sufficient to overcome the obstacles on our own, but He will lead His people in victory. This same word is used in I Corinthians 15:57 *Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* Remember, Revelation is all about Jesus - so even the exhortation to His people to

overcome leads them to Him! Do not be disheartened as you consider your own inability to overcome: look to the Overcomer who leads His people in victory.

Three of the letters address a worldly compromise that existed in the churches. In 2:6 it is referred to as "the deeds of the Nicolaitans." In 2:14-15 the "deeds of the Nicolaitans" is related to "some who hold the teaching of Balaam ... eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality." 2:21 refers to the same problems (idolatrous compromise and immorality) in respect to "the woman Jezebel." While we know very little about what these things specifically refer to, it is obvious that the Christians faced significant temptations to compromise with the idolatry and sensuality of their culture, and that at times this compromise was actually encouraged by religious leaders.

Another major theme in the letters is the slander and persecution (and probably excommunication) by Jews who were upset about the progress of the Christian message. Jesus makes it clear that these are not true [spiritual] Jews (2:9, 3:9), as Paul teaches in Romans 2:28-29.

Another major theme is the loss of vitality in Christian living. These warnings to the believers in Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea form some of the most poignant and memorable portions of these messages.

After looking at each message individually, try to meditate carefully on the overall picture:

How would you summarize the overall theme of the messages to the churches? One good way to answer that question is by compiling a list of all of the commendations, and a list of all of the rebukes and warnings. Then try to summarize each of those lists.

Why did God choose to put these messages to the churches at the beginning of this book of prophecy? How was the rest of the Revelation helpful for the people in those churches? How are the messages to those churches helpful for us now, as we seek to apply the rest of Revelation to our lives?

Read Revelation 4-5

Don't pay too much attention to the chapter break between these two chapters: this is clearly one vision that is intended to flow together.

Think about Revelation 4-5 in terms of what it *follows*. How do chapters 4-5 help us to have a right perspective on the messages to the churches in chapters 2-3, which may seem disheartening?

Think about Revelation 4-5 in terms of what it *anticipates*. How do chapters 4-5 help us to have a right perspective on the rest of the Revelation?

Note carefully how, in 4:1-2, John's location (or at least his point-of-view) changes. The rest of the visions will be seen from this new point-of-view.

When does this scene in heaven take place?

- ✘ Is John seeing heaven as it was in the first century AD, just before judgment was poured out on Jerusalem?
- ✘ Is John seeing heaven in a timeless way - the way heaven would be if you were to be there right now?
- ✘ Is John seeing heaven as it will be at a particular point in the future, just before the events of the end times unfold?

4:1 - Why does the voice speak of "what *must* take place" instead of simply "what *will* take place?"

4:2 - *throne*: Of the sixty-two times the New Testament uses the word "throne," forty-seven are found in Revelation.

How many times is the throne referred to in chapters 4-5?

Think back to chapter 1, and the words in that chapter that would communicate the same idea as the "throne" here.

What does the throne indicate about God, and about everything else that will unfold in chapters 6-22? Do you think the emphasis is on a throne for ruling or a throne for judging?

How would you summarize the overall description of the throne? Majestic? Terrifying? Calm?

4:4 - *twenty-four thrones ... elders*:

- ✘ Are these "elders" some sort of angels? From the rest of Revelation and Old Testament visions of the throne of God, it's clear that angels are very close to the throne.
- ✘ Are these elders humans? They are described as "elders" - a words that is probably not ever used for angels (except maybe Isaiah 24:23). They sit on thrones, they have crowns - descriptions that are not applied to angels anywhere else.

Though they might represent something (Israel, the church, or both the church and Israel), nothing here indicates that directly. What is very clear is what these elders do: look at 4:10, 5:8, and also look up 11:16 and 19:4.

4:6 - *four living creatures*: The Greek term *zōon* can mean a human or animal creature or "a creature that transcends normal descriptive categories." In other words, these may not be animals (as "beast" or "creature" might suggest) - "living beings" would be a fair translation. It seems most likely that these are angels, similar though slightly different from the cherubim in Ezekiel's vision of God's throne (Ezekiel 1:14-25, 10:15) and seraphim in Isaiah's vision

(Isaiah 6:2-3). If so, they are a very high order of angels who dwell very close to the throne of God.

In addition to worship (4:9), what other role do these living beings play in chapter 6 and in 15:7?

Note these descriptions of God:

4:8 *who was and who is and who is to come*

4:9 *Him who lives forever and ever*

1:8 *who was and who is and who is to come*

1:17 *the first and the last*

4:11 *You created all things, and because of Your will they existed and were created*

Obviously this is an aspect of God's nature that we must understand if we will understand Revelation. Why do you think this aspect of God's nature is so important for this book?

5:1 - *a book*: same word for a "scroll" that we discussed in 1:11, but this is obviously a different scroll than that one. Chapter 4 is not a random glimpse into heaven: it is a view of the throne room in preparation for the appearance of this scroll in chapter 5.

What does the writing "inside and on the back" suggest?

What does this scroll contain?

There are several prophetic scrolls in the Old Testament (Isaiah 29:11-12, Jeremiah 36; Daniel 12:4; Ezekiel 2:8-3:3). The passage in Ezekiel is probably the closest parallel to Revelation 5, because Ezekiel's vision of the glory of God (Ezekiel 1) is very similar to Revelation 4.

What did Ezekiel's scroll contain? (Ezekiel 2:10)

What happens when the seals of the scroll in Revelation 5 began to be broken in Revelation 6?

Some have suggested that the scroll could be a "title deed" to the earth which tells of Christ's rightful inheritance; a title deed which tells of the saints' inheritance; God's divorce decree against Israel (Leviticus 26:18, Is. 50:1, Jer. 3:8); or the Lamb's book of life (20:12, 15). While it is possible that one of those specific explanations is correct, it seems reasonable to assume more generally that the scroll contains God's purposes for the end of the age, which unfold in chapters 6-22 as the scroll is opened.

Why do you think John responded to the possibility that no one could open the book by weeping greatly? What would be so devastating about the possibility that no one would be able to open the scroll?

5:5-10 contains vivid and vital descriptions of Jesus:

Lion that is from the tribe of Judah: see Genesis 49:8-10

Root of David: see Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 1:3

has overcome: remember that this is the same word used in every one of the messages to the churches

Lamb standing as if slain

seven horns: seem to represent strength (Num. 23:22; II Sam. 22:3)

seven eyes: see the notes on 1:4 and also see John 15:26

These descriptions, together with the statements of verses 9-10, explain why Jesus is worthy to take the book and open it.

The concept of being "worthy" suggests that this is a legal scroll (like a deed, summons, or sentence) and that someone has to have the legal right to open it. The great cry of the strong angel (verse 2) confirms the great soberness and seriousness of the question: "Who is worthy for such a fearsome task as unfolding God's plans for the end of the universe?" So what is the answer? How do the descriptions of Jesus in verses 6-10 make Him uniquely worthy to open and "activate" God's final plans?

5:10 they will reign upon the earth: note that there is both a present aspect to the saints' reign (verse 10a, Revelation 1:6, I Peter 2:9) and a future aspect (reigning "upon the earth").

As you conclude chapters 4-5, look carefully at the five expressions/songs of praise (4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13):

Why would they express God's worthiness to receive things that He already has? How might this look forward to the events that are about to unfold in Revelation?

You can almost feel the excitement of the heavenly hosts - from their understanding of that scroll, they are buzzing with anticipation. The Lamb has taken the scroll: He is worthy to receive all of these things. It's as if the heavenly hosts are saying "Let's go! It's time!" Note how the choir grows through chapters 4 and 5. The anticipation for chapter 6 is building fast!