

“Read and Be Blessed”

Revelation 1:1-3

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A lot of people are scared to read Revelation. They are scared of what they do not understand. They think that there is no benefit to them unless they understand everything about Revelation. It is a bit like a person who is so afraid to try anything that they never try anything, because they only want to do it if they can do it perfectly. Revelation itself warns us against this overly timid way of thinking. The book itself says in verse 3 of our text that there is a blessing upon those who read aloud and those who hear the words of this prophecy. We are blessed if we read it! God will give us strength and encouragement when we do. I tested this a week or two ago. I read through the entire book of Revelation in one sitting. It only took a little more than 30 minutes. I was so blessed by reading it. It lifts up our eyes to see a gloriously hopeful future filled with Jesus Christ. There are four main points that this text makes. The first is that the book is a revelation, a revealing of God's will. Secondly, God showed this revelation to us in a very complicated way in order to confirm its authority by revealing its source and to let us know how important this book is for us the recipients. Thirdly, our text reveals the content of what Revelation is: the testimony of Jesus Christ. Fourthly, God commands us to hear and read Revelation, and promises a rich blessing upon us when we do.

The first point is also the main point not only of our passage, but even of the entire book. Revelation is a revelation. It is a revealing, an uncovering, of what will happen. And not only of what will happen, but of what is even now happening. The first word of the book is “Revelation.” The Greek word is “apocalupsis,” from which we get our words “apocalypse” and “apocalyptic.” The word means to uncover something previously hidden. It is an unveiling. Imagine a great sculpture in honor of someone about to be shown off, and there is drapery over the top of it, because this beautiful statue needs to be unveiled at the proper time. When the drapes are still in place, the statue looks like a vague shape, and no more. However, when the person presenting the statue takes off the veil, then the statue is revealed in all its beauty. That is what we are talking about here: a revealing, an unveiling, an uncovering of the truth of what God's plan is for the end of the world.

I am belaboring the point because a lot of people think that Revelation is just the opposite of that. They think that Revelation is entirely cryptic, entirely covered, entirely mysterious, entirely unknown. My friends, that is the exact opposite of what Revelation calls itself. Imagine how much less we would know about the end of all things if we didn't have Revelation! This in itself is an encouragement to us to read the book. We will see truth unveiled, revealed, not

concealed. This is a great encouragement! And when it comes to Revelation, we need all the encouragement we can get!

But why did John get all of this in such a difficult to understand way? Why couldn't Revelation read like a newspaper story? Why apocalyptic language? Why all the symbolism? The answer is that heavenly things are not so easily spoken about, as one commentator notes. How is one going to write down anything about heavenly beings who are unlike anything in our experience? Well, one has to use symbol and metaphor. We will see in future sermons that John has to bend the rules of grammar and language in order to get his point across. John uses every trick of the Greek language he can think of to try to explain what he saw. Furthermore, as Barnhouse says, if the language of Revelation is difficult to understand, we must remember that maybe the reason for that is that God the Father is talking to God the Son. That's a pretty high level of communication! And that point leads us to our second main point.

Secondly, we see a very complicated process of transmission whereby the book of Revelation comes from its ultimate source in God the Father all the way down to us. There are five steps in this process of transmission. The first step is that God the Father gives the revelation to His Son. We see this in the very first sentence of the book: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him..." The word "Him" here is rightly capitalized in the NKJV to show that it refers to Jesus Christ. Jesus not only owns this revelation, but the revelation is about Him, and comes to us through Him. The book of Revelation, then, is about Jesus, belongs to Jesus, and comes to us through Jesus. The second process in the transmission is that Jesus gives the message to an angel. Now, the end of verse 1 says that Jesus gives the message to His servants. That is a summary of what verses 1c-3 are going to say to us. The last part of verse 1 has Jesus sending an angel to John. So, the second part of the transmission is that Jesus gives His message to an angel. That angel, in turn, gives the message to John, who writes it down. That is the third part of the transmission. The fourth part is that a reader reads the words of the prophecy aloud. See, in verse 3, when John says "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy," John is not talking about just anyone reading it (although we will see that the application to all readers is still true). No one in the first century had a private copy of the Bible. For one thing, very few people could read very well. For another thing, copies were tremendously expensive to produce. A church was fortunate to have *one* complete copy of God's Word. So an educated person would read the text of Scripture in Sunday worship, and the people would listen very carefully and try to memorize what they heard. People had much better memories in those days, since they could not rely on computers to remember everything for them. So the only time regular people in the pew would get to hear the words of Revelation is when the lector, or reader, would read aloud the words of the prophecy. So the fourth part of the transmission is when the words that John

wrote become the words that the lector reads aloud. The fifth part of the transmission, of course, is the actual reading of the text, whereby the words finally reach the servants. So Revelation comes originally from God the Father, who gives it to Jesus, who gives it to an angel, who gives it to John, who gives it to the lector, who gives it to the congregation.

Now, why in the world do we need to know about all these steps in the process? Well, Revelation is such a strange book in many ways that God reveals to us the process of transmission so that we can know where this text originates so that we will believe it. Revelation was not always and everywhere believed to be part of the canon. Some people in the early church doubted that the book was canonical. That was a minority, but still it was doubted by some. God knew that this would happen, and so He tells us about the transmission process so that we can have a confidence in this Scripture. The other benefit we have by knowing this lengthy process is that we can know that John did not come up with this stuff out of his own head. He didn't dream it all up.

So what did John see? Verse 2 tells us what John saw. John “bore witness to the Word of God and the to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.” The last part of the verse is another way of saying the first part of the verse. Everything that John saw consisted in the witness John bore to the Word, and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Now here we run into a very important word “testimony.” The Greek word is “marturia.” We get our word “martyr” from it. There is a very good reason why we get the word “martyr” from the Greek word for testimony. And that reason is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came into the world to bear witness to the truth. This is a courtroom term, of course. The witness that Jesus bore to the truth was something He was willing to take all the way to the cross. In fact, Jesus' death is perhaps the most important part of His testimony. Verse 5 connects the idea of witness with martyrdom when it says that Jesus is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead. He was willing to sacrifice His life for the truth. Of course, that is not the only thing He accomplished on the cross. The glorious redemption of His people, and the conquering of our great enemy of death itself was also accomplished on the cross. Here in Revelation, the emphasis is on Jesus Christ's revealing to us what His second coming will look like, and how He will finally win the battle against our foes, and eliminate them entirely.

These are the things, John says, which must take place (verse 1). This word “must” is important. John is not talking about “fate,” whatever that means. He is talking about God's plan. God's plan will be accomplished, and there is nothing Satan can do about it at all. In fact, every time Satan tries to do something to overturn God's plan, we find out later that Satan was really just accomplishing God's plan all along. Satan cannot overturn God's plan, because Satan is part of God's plan in a mysterious way.

So how do we make this testimony ours? How do we apply it? One

commentator puts it this way: “One can be a witness for Jesus only if one is prepared to let oneself be shaped by Jesus' own witness, which means taking the road of suffering obedience for the sake of Jesus' cause uncompromisingly and, if necessary, even to death...Every Christian is fundamentally called to bear witness, which means that he or she must be prepared to suffer for the sake of obedience in relation to the testimony of Jesus, even to the point of death.” This is not just talking about martyrdom in the sense of being killed for the gospel, although that is certainly included. John is also talking about other forms of death being a testimony to the world. What better illustration do we here at Lebanon have than the testimony of Steve Smith? All during his long months of struggle, what is the thing that we always heard? He was telling people about Jesus. In the courtroom that really mattered, Steve offered his testimony as proof of the Father's love for us. May that be our testimony whether we are on the verge of death or not. We should certainly not wait until that time to start witnessing to the truth!

Finally, John tells us of the blessing we have when we read and keep the words of the book of Revelation. There is a certain expectation we should have when we read God's Word, but especially the book of Revelation. And there is a responsibility to do what this word says. And right now, that Word tells us to bear testimony to the world about Jesus Christ, His Father, and the Holy Spirit, our Triune God.

John gives us a reason for why we should read and keep the words of his book. He says that the time is near. In verse 1, he says that these things must soon take place. Verse 1 is an allusion to Daniel 2:28, where Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar that there is a God in heaven who has revealed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Notice that Daniel says “in the latter days,” referring to a time far off in the future, while John says, “which must soon take place,” referring to a time that is close at hand. In fact, many commentators believe that John is actually saying that it has begun. The time, the appointed time, is at hand. This coincides with everything else we know about the end times in the Scripture, that they have already begun. They have not finished yet, but they have begun. And that is why we are blessed when we hear, read, and keep the words of Revelation. Because then, and only then, will we know what time it is. Therefore, read and be blessed. Read the words of this prophecy. Read the whole book in this coming week. Read about Jesus, the faithful and true witness.