

## A Very Special Book Revelation 1

“Don’t ever prophesy,” said American humorist Josh Billings, “for if you prophesy wrong, nobody will forget it; and if you prophesy right, nobody will remember it.”

Over the centuries, prophecies have come and gone, and yet the book that the apostle John wrote near the close of the first century is still with us. Many have wondered over the years what this book is all about. Even today, many are still fascinated by its message and mysteries.

In **Revelation 1**, John introduces his book and gives us the data essential for appreciating and understanding this prophesy.

### 1. The Title (1:1a)

- a. The word translated “revelation” simply means “unveiling.” It gives us our English word *apocalypse* which, unfortunately, is today a synonym for chaos and catastrophe. The verb simply means “to uncover, to reveal, to make manifest.” In this book, the Holy Spirit pulls back the curtain and gives us the privilege of seeing the glorified Christ in heaven and the fulfillment of His sovereign purposes in the world.
- b. In other words, Revelation is an *open* book in which God reveals His plans and purpose to His Church.
- c. When Daniel finished writing his prophesy, he was instructed to “shut up the words, and seal the book” (**Dan. 12:4**), but John was given the opposite instructions: “Seal not the sayings of the prophesy of this book” (**Rev. 22:10**).
- d. Why? Since Calvary, the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, God has ushered in the “last days” (**Heb. 1:1-2**) and is fulfilling His hidden purposes in this world. “The time is at hand” (**Rev. 1:3; 22:10**).
- e. John’s prophesy is primarily the revelation of Jesus Christ, not the revelation of future events. You must not divorce the Person from the prophesy, for without the Person there could be no fulfillment of the prophecy. Dr. Merrill Terry wrote, “He is not incidental to its actions, He is the Chief Subject.”

## 2. The Author (1:1b-2, 4, 9; 22:8)

The Holy Spirit used the apostle John to give us three kinds of inspired literature: the gospel of John, the three epistles, and the book of Revelation. His purposes may be outlined as follows:

<i>Gospel of John</i>	<i>Epistles</i>	<i>Revelation</i>
Believe, 20:31	Be Sure, 1 John 5:13	Be Ready, 22:20
Life received	Life revealed	Life rewarded
Salvation	Sanctification	Sovereignty
The Prophet	The Priest	The King

John wrote Revelation about AD 95, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Titus Flavius Domitian. The emperor had demanded that he be worshipped as “Lord and God,” and the refusal of the Christians to obey his edict led to severe persecution. Tradition says that it was Domitian who sent John to the Isle of Patmos, a Roman penal colony off the coast of Asia Minor. This being the location of John’s exile, perhaps it is not surprising that the word sea is found twenty-six times in his book.

- a. John was the last of the apostles to die, but he suffered on Patmos before his death.
- b. How did the Lord convey the contents of this book to His servants? According to **Revelation 1:1-2**, the Father gave the revelation to the Son, and the Son shared it with the apostle, using “His angel” as intermediary. Sometimes Christ Himself conveyed information to John (**Rev. 1:10ff.**); sometimes it was an elder (**Rev. 7:13**); and often it was an angel (**Rev. 17:1; 19:9-10**). Sometimes a “voice from heaven” told John what to say and do (**Rev. 10:4**).
- c. The book came from God to John, no matter what the various means of communication were, and it was all inspired by the Spirit.
- d. The word *signified* (**Rev. 1:1**) is important; it means “to show by a sign.” In revelation, the noun is translated as “sign” (**Rev. 15:1**), “wonder” (**Rev. 12:1, 3**), and “miracle” (**Rev. 19:20**). This is the same word used in the gospel of John for the miracles of Jesus Christ.

## 3. The Readers (1:3-4)

While the book was originally sent to seven actual local churches in Asia Minor, John makes it clear that *any* believers may read and profit from it (**Rev.1:3**). In fact, God promised a special blessing to the one who would read the book and obey its message. (The verb *read* means “to read out loud.” Revelation was first read out loud in local church meetings).

- a. John did not send this book of prophesy to the assemblies in order to satisfy their curiosity about the future. God's people were going through intense persecution, and they needed encouragement. As they heard this book, its message would give them strength and hope.
- b. The special messages to each of the seven churches are given in **Revelation 2—3**. Some students see in these seven churches a “panorama of church history,” from apostolic times (Ephesus) to apostate days of the twentieth century (Laodicea). While these churches may *illustrate* various stages in the history of the church, that was probably not the main reason why these particular assemblies were selected.
- c. These letters remind us that the exalted Head of the church knows what is going on in each assembly, and that our relationship to Him and His Word determines the life and ministry of the local body.
- d. Keep in mind that the churches in Asia Minor were facing persecution and it was important that they be rightly related to the Lord and to each other. They are pictured as seven lampstands, each giving light in a dark world (**Phil. 2:15; Matt 5:14-16**). The darker the day, the greater the light must shine; unfortunately, situations existed in at least five of these assemblies that required correction if their lights were to shine brightly.
- e. What's more, the promise of Jesus Christ's coming should be to all Christians at all times a motivation for obedience and consecration (**Rev. 1:3, 7; 2:5, 25; 3:3, 11; 22:7, 12, 20; see also John 1:1-3**).

#### 4. The Dedication (1:4-6)

John had no problem knowing to whom his book should be dedicated! But before he wrote the dedication, he reminded his readers that it was the Triune God who had saved them and would keep them as they faced the fiery trials of suffering.

- a. God the Father is described as the Eternal One (see **Rev. 1:8; 4:8**). All history is part of His eternal plan, including the world's persecution of the church.
- b. Next, the Holy Spirit is seen in His fullness, for there are not seven spirits, but one. The reference here is probably to **Isaiah 11:2**.
- c. Finally, Jesus Christ is seen in His threefold office as Prophet (faithful Witness), Priest (First-begotten from the dead), and King (Prince of the kings of the earth). *First-begotten* does not mean “the first one raised from the dead,” but “the highest of those raised from the dead.” *Firstborn* is a title of honor (see **Roman. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18**).

d. But of the three Persons of the Trinity, it is Jesus Christ alone that this book is dedicated. The reason? Because of what He has done for His people.

- i. To begin with, *He loves us* (present tense in most manuscripts).
- ii. *He also washed us from our sins*, or as some text read, *freed us from our sins*.
- iii. As a grand climax, Christ has *made us a kingdom of priests*.

Today, Jesus Christ is a Priest-King like Melchizedek (**Heb. 7** NIV.), and we are seated with Him on His throne (**Eph. 2:1-10**, emphasis **v.6**). In His love, God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests (**Ex. 19:1-6**), but the Jews failed God and their kingdom was taken from them (**Matt. 21:43**). Today, God's people (the church) are His kings and priests (**1 Peter 2:1-10**), exercising spiritual authority and serving God in this world.

## 5. The Theme (1:7-8)

- a. The overriding theme of the book of Revelation is the return of Jesus Christ to defeat all evil and to establish His reign. It is definitely a book of victory, and His people are seen as "overcomers". In his first epistle, John also called God's people "overcomers" (**1 John 2:13-14; 4:4; 5:4-5**).
- b. Through eyes of unbelief, Jesus Christ and His church are defeated in this world, but through eyes of faith, He and His people are the true victors.
- c. The statement in **Revelation 1:7**, "Behold, he cometh with clouds," describes our Lord's return to the *earth*, and is amplified in **Revelation 19:11ff**. This is not the same as His return *in the air* to catch away His people (**1Thess. 5:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51ff**).
  - i. When He comes to catch away (rapture) His church, He will come "as a thief" (**Rev. 3:3; 16:15**) and only those born again will see Him (**1 John 3:1-3**).
  - ii. The event described in **Revelation 1:7** will be witnessed by the whole world, and especially by a repentant nation of Israel (see **Dan. 7:13; Zech. 12:10-12**). It will be public, not secret (**Matt. 24:30-31**, and will climax the tribulation period described in **Revelation 6—19**).

Godly Bible students have not always agreed as to the order of events leading up to the establishment of God's eternal kingdom (**Rev. 21-22**). Many believe (including the author of the books we are studying from) that the next event on God's calendar is the rapture, when Christ shall return in the air and take his church to glory. Christ's promise to the church in **Revelation 3:10-11** indicates that the church will not go through the tribulation, and is further supported by Paul in **1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9-10**. It is significant that there is no mention of the word *church* between **Revelation 3:22** and **22:16**.

Knowing the Bible Series, Stephen Witmer, Crossway; Life Application Study Bible, Tyndale; ESV Study Bible, Crossway; King James Open Study Bible, Nelson; Be Victorious, Warren W. Wiersbe, David Cook.

- d. The titles given to God in **Revelation 1:8** makes it clear that He is certainly able to work out His divine purposes in human history. *Alpha* and *Omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; so, God is at the beginning of all things and also at the end. He is the eternal God (**Rev. 4**), and unlimited by time.
- e. He is also the Almighty, able to do anything. *Almighty* is a key name for God in Revelation.
- f. God the Father is called “Alpha and Omega” in **Revelation 1:8** and **21:6**, but the name also applies to His Son (**Rev. 1:11; 22:13**). This is a strong argument for the deity of Christ. Likewise, the title “the first and the last” goes back to Isaiah (**Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12-13**) and is another proof that Jesus is God.

## 6. The Occasion (1:9-18)

This book was born out of John’s profound spiritual experience while exiled on Patmos.

- a. **What John Heard (vv. 9-11)**. On the Lord’s Day, John heard a trumpet-like voice behind him. It was Jesus Christ speaking! As far as we know, the apostle had not heard His Lord’s voice since Christ had returned to heaven more than sixty years before.
  - i. The Lord commissioned John to write this book and to send it to the seven churches He had selected. Later, John would hear another trumpet-like voice, summoning him to heaven (**Rev. 4:1**). (Some students translate this to **1 Thess. 4:13-18** and see John’s “rapture” as a picture of the rapture of the church.)
- b. **What John saw (vv. 12-16)**. He saw a vision of the glorified Christ. **Revelation 1:20** makes it clear that we must not interpret this vision literally, for it is made up of symbols. The seven lampstands represents the seven churches that would receive the book. Each local church is the bearer of God’s light in this dark world. Compare this vision with Daniel’s (**Dan. 7:9-14**).
  - i. Christ’s garments are those of a Judge-King, One with honor and authority. The white hair symbolizes His eternality as “the Ancient of Days” (**Dan. 7:9, 13, 22**). His eyes see all (**Rev. 19:12; Heb. 4:12**), enabling Him to judge righteously. His feet of burning brass also suggest judgment, since the brazen altar was the place where the fire consumed the sin offering. The Lord had come to judge the churches, and He would also judge the evil world system.

- ii. Two ideas are suggested by the “the sound of many waters” (**Rev. 1:15**): 1) Christ gathers together all the “streams of revelation” and is the Father’s “last Word” to man (**Heb. 1:1-3**); 2) He speaks with power and authority and must be heard.
- iii. The sword from His mouth certainly represents the living Word of God (**Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17**). He fights His enemies by using His Word.
- iv. **Revelation 1:20** informs us that the seven stars in His hand represents the angels (*messengers*, see **Luke 7:24** where the Greek word is so translated), or perhaps pastors, of the seven churches. God holds His servants and places them where He wants them to “shine” for Him. In **Daniel 12:3**, wise soul winners are compared to shining stars.
- v. The Lord’s shining countenance reminds us of his transfiguration (**Matt. 17:2**) and also the prophecy of **Malachi 4:2** (“the Sun of righteousness (shall arise”).

This vision of Christ was totally different in appearance from the Savior that John knew “in the flesh” when He was ministering on earth. He was not the “gentle Jewish carpenter” that sentimentalists like to sing about. He is the risen, glorified, exalted Son of God, the Priest-King who has the authority to judge all men, beginning with his own people (**1 Peter 4:17**).

- c. **What John did (vv. 17-18) was predictable.** He fell at the Lord’s feet as though he were dead! And this is the apostle who leaned on Jesus’ breast (**John 13:23**)! A vision of the exalted Christ can only produce awe and fear (**Dan.10:7-9**). We need this attitude of respect today when so many believers speak and act with undue familiarity toward God (see **2 Corinthians 5:16**).

The Lord reassured John by touching him and speaking to him. “Fear not!” is a great encouragement for any child of God. We need not fear life, because He is “The Living One.” We need not fear death, because He died and is alive, having conquered death. And we need not fear eternity because He holds the keys of hades (the world of the dead) and of death. The One with the keys is the One who has authority.

At the very beginning of this book, Jesus presented Himself to His people in majestic glory. What the church needs today is a new awareness of Christ and His glory. We need to see Him “high and lifted up” (**Isa. 6:1**). There is a dangerous absence of awe and worship in our assemblies today.

## 7. The Outline (1:19)

To the best of my knowledge, the book of Revelation is the only book in the Bible that contains an inspired outline of the contents. “The things which thou hast seen” refers to the vision in **Revelation 1**. “The things which are” refers to **Revelation 2—3**, the special messages to the seven churches. “The things which shall be hereafter” covers the events described in **Revelation 4—22**. What John heard in **Revelation 4:1** substantiates this interpretation.

In review, we can summarize the basic characteristics of the remarkable book as follows:

- **It is a Christ-centered book.** To be sure, all Scripture speaks of the Savior, but the book of Revelation especially magnifies the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. The book is, after all, the revelation of Jesus Christ and not simply the revelation of future events.
- **It is a book filled with symbols.** Biblical symbols are timeless in their message and limitless in their content. For instance, the symbol of “Babylon” originates in **Genesis 10—11**, and its meaning grows as you trace it through Scriptures, climaxing with **Revelation 17—18**. The same is true of “the Lamb” and the bride.” It is exciting to seek to penetrate deeper into the rich meanings that are conveyed by these symbols.
- **It is a book of prophecy.** This is definitely stated in **Revelation 1:3; 22:7,10,18-19**; note also **10:11**. The letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor dealt with immediate needs in those assemblies, needs that are still with us in churches today. But the rest of the book is devoted almost entirely to prophetic revelations. It was by seeing the victorious Christ presented that the persecuted Christians found encouragement for their difficult task of witnessing. *When you have assurance for the future, you have stability in the present.* John himself was suffering under the hand of Rome (**Rev. 1:9**) so the book was born out of affliction.
- **It is a book with a blessing.** We have already noted the promise in **Revelation 1:3**, as well as the six other “beatitudes” scattered throughout the book. It is not enough simply to hear (or read) the book; we must respond to its message from the heart. We must take the message personally and say a believing “Amen!” to what it says. (Note the many “Amens” in the book: **Rev. 1:6-7, 18; 3:14; 5:14; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20-21.**)
- **It is a relevant book.** What John wrote about would “shortly come to pass” (**Rev. 1:1**) because “the time is at hand” (**Rev. 1:3**). The word *shortly* does not mean “soon” or “immediately,” but “quickly, swiftly.” God does not measure time as we do (**2 Peter 3:1-10**). No one knows when our Lord shall return, but when He begins to open the seals of the scroll (**Rev. 6:1ff.**), events will occur with speed and without interruption.

- **It is a majestic book.** Revelation is the book of “the throne,” for the word *throne* is found forty-six times throughout. This book magnifies the sovereignty of God. Christ is presented in His glory and dominion!
- **It is a universal book.** John saw nations and peoples (**Rev. 10:11; 11:19; 17:15**) as part of God’s program. He also saw the throne room of heaven and heard voices from the ends of the universe!
- **It is a climactic book.** Revelation is the climax of the Bible. All that began in Genesis will be completed and fulfilled in keeping with God’s sovereign will. He is “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending” (**Rev. 1:8**). What God starts; He finishes!

But, before visiting the throne room of heaven, we must pause and listen to “the Man among the lampstands” as He reveals the personal needs in our churches and in our own hearts. “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (**Rev. 2:7,11,17, 29**)!

**Homework: Christ And The Churches—Part 1. Read Revelation 2.**