

An Introduction to the Book of Revelation

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[0 : 00] This icon is? Ikea, yes. It's part of the Ikea instructions. This is what you're supposed to look at if you're making flat pack furniture from Ikea. Home building instructions. You can see from the general blankness that not many of you frequent Ikea.

But that's it. So let me just tell you from experience that if you don't look at the instructions and you don't have the correct tools, you get in a right pickle.

You need the big picture of what you're trying to make. You need the right instructions and you need the correct tools. And it looks as though for this particular thing you need a, not that, ah, that's not what I meant to do, this button, a screwdriver with a flat head, a screwdriver with a cross head and a hammer.

So I wonder what you need, I wonder what you could possibly make with that set of tools. Anyway, in God's world, we also will make a right pickle of things unless we have the instructions.

Unless we have a view of the big picture, what's being built, what's the right way to do it, and what tools you need for the job. And that's one of the things that the book of Revelation does.

[1 : 25] It tells us what is being built. It tells us what tools are key in this building project.

And it tells us how to be properly involved in this big project. And that will introduce us to the book of Revelation.

So this morning I want to ask five questions. Number one, what is the book of Revelation? Let's just imagine that we've no idea at all. Let me introduce the book to you.

And then I'd like to ask these questions. What does it say to people who are not interested today? So it's a little bit of an odd question because if you're not interested you probably wouldn't be here. But you might be sitting here thinking, well I'm not really interested. Well the Bible says something to you. The book of Revelation says something to you. What does it say to people who are interested? Maybe you've come along this morning and said, I'm quite interested in Christian faith.

[2 : 25] Don't quite understand it. But I'd like to know more. What does the book of Revelation say to me? And fourth question, what does it say to Christians?

So this is a Christian meeting. And what does God say to us as Christians today? And I've missed out an important question which is vital really.

How does the book of Revelation say things? How does it speak? Because that really ought to be top of the list. Because if we don't understand how it speaks, we're not going to get what it's saying.

So I might move question five up the list. That's what we're going to look at this morning. Okay with that? That's the, what is the book? What does it say to people who are not interested, who are interested, but not Christians and who are Christians?

And we need to look at this. How does it speak? So let's, what is the book of Revelation? So if you'd been following in the Bible this morning, when Julia read, you will know that it is the last book in the Christian Bible.

[3 : 35] And it is famous for its weirdness. I didn't spell check weirdness. Is that the right way to spell weirdness? It didn't, it didn't come up as an error.

Anyway, the book of Revelation is famous for its weirdness. It has visions. Don't get worried, too worried about spelling yet. It has visions in it.

It has dragons. It has dragons. Beasts. It has a lake of fire. It has battles.

Huge. As we might say, apocalyptic battles. It has women in it. Two in particular. It has a prostitute. And her opposite number, a bride. It has two cities. The city of God. Zion.

[4 : 33] And its opposite. Babylon. Like the Tower of Babel. Same thing. And it calls upon these things of conflict and fighting opposites.

And it is about a cosmic spiritual conflict. Now, ladies and gentlemen, in our culture, we can have...

Oh, I forgot to do the prayer, didn't I? I'm so sorry. I was going to do... We were going to pray for the nation. Okay. My mistake. And we have... We've been able to have elections just this past week. Actually, in Brighton, the political situation wasn't totally changed. But in other parts of the country, the political situation has been totally changed.

We didn't have guns. We didn't have shooting. We didn't have armed people threatening. We had change without violence. But the book of Revelation says that despite that sense of peacefulness, which is in our nation, nation, actually, the reality is there is a violent spiritual conflict going on, whether we notice it or not.

[6 : 09] The book of Revelation is famous for its weird interpretations. So, at one point, the ten horns on the beast were thought by some people to be the ten nations of the common market.

But we don't have the common market anymore. I won't go into that. So, that particular interpretation didn't have much shelf life.

There was an interpretation, I think, back in the 1970s, of... It was actually talking about Russian tanks invading Europe. That's obviously a very Western mindset interpretation.

If you lived in Asia, you wouldn't be that bothered about that. You'd be thinking about China and India and Pakistan. But anyway, that didn't seem to happen. Interpreters have said the book of Revelation proves that the last days are here.

And that was said in the time of Martin Luther in 1500 and something. So, that particular interpretation didn't have much shelf life either. If you read around, particularly if you look on YouTube, I guess you'll find all sorts of weird things because you can find all sorts of weird things on YouTube.

[7 : 25] You have to be discerning. It talks about the millennium, a thousand years. Now, that is in the book of Revelation. It's in chapter 21, I think.

The Antichrist... Well, actually, to the best of my knowledge, the book of Revelation does not mention the Antichrist. It uses other wordings.

So, that's not in any chapter. Sometimes Christians get caught up in something they call the rapture. And that's... I think you'll struggle to find that in the book of Revelation.

But when they say the rapture, they mean the supposition of a miraculous removal of believers from the earth while history goes on without them.

I think you actually struggle to find that in the New Testament. But anyway, there's lots of theories and it can get unbelievably complicated and off-putting, which is one of the reasons why people don't often read that book.

[8 : 28] It's famous for its weird interpretations. But let me just tell you what it does say that isn't weird, that's definite. And if you have the book there, you could open it at chapter one.

It says, chapter one, verse one, the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.

And the word revelation is, I put it in there from my Greek dictionary, apokalypsis is the word. If you look at the word up on your computer, it's number, Strong's word number 602. Apokalypsis, meaning to take away the veil, to reveal.

Now some churches have got curtains behind the speaker to hide whatever is behind the curtains. It's probably a wall with plaster falling off it.

[9 : 31] So if you just imagine curtains here and you can see the curtains easily. But in order to know what's behind, somebody has to remove the curtain to take it back and then you can see the reality behind the curtain.

And right at the beginning, the book of Revelation says, that's what I'm going to do. Everybody can see history and geography unfolding, but I'm going to take away the veil and show you the reality behind all of that.

I'm going to show you the reality behind it and where it's all heading. It's an apokalypsis which doesn't mean the end of everything, it means the revealing. Hence the book of Revelation.

Shows the true reality behind the surface appearance. Second thing that we can be definite about in this book is it is a circular letter. It begins in verse 4.

John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits before his throne and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, the faithful martyr, the first born from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

[10 : 59] Now, that's very grand but it's also the way you start a letter in those days. So, if you're starting a letter politely in English speaking culture you would say Dear Mr. Smith and you start off like that and you end Yours sincerely put your name at the end.

That's the form of a letter. In those days the form of a letter was My name to you Grace and peace to you and this is a letter.

It is a circular letter. It is to the seven churches in the province of Asia and the seven churches have got seven names seven individual churches and Julia read to us three or four four of the particular addresses to the church in Ephesus this to the church in Smyrna this to the church in Pergamum this to the church in Thyatira this circular letter to specific churches and you know how if you are writing a letter you would write specific things that were relevant to the person concerned so if I was writing a letter to Mark I would say Dear Mark how are you how was your birthday because it was Mark's birthday or if I was writing to Daniel I might say Dear Daniel how is your revision going because you got exams or something oh dear

I'm upsetting now but you would write something relevant so we can deduce that this whole letter has relevance to the people to whom it was written it was written in the time of the Roman Empire it was written in a certain cultural setting and that is to those people who got it it must have been relevant to them and one of the things that the Saviour says to those seven churches in many cases is repent did you notice that doesn't say that to all of them but he says that to most of them you need to be turning back to me it is also a prophecy we're told it's a prophecy in Revelation 1 verse 3 blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it because the time is near so it's a prophecy it says it's a prophecy in fact it's the climax of all prophecies so if you take all the prophetic books in the Bible particularly something like

Isaiah Ezekiel Daniel Jeremiah all these huge monumental prophetic books John takes strands from each of them and weaves them together and says you know my book is the fulfillment of all of this all these streams of prophecy I'm going to weave them together and say this is the last word in New Testament times of prophecy a prophecy is something like projecting forward into God's future this is where we're heading this is what's going to happen with action points for now this is where it's heading so now this is how you should live you got that in the book of the prophet Isaiah behold in the last days the mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised upon all mountains and all the nations will flow to it and then he says so let us walk now in the light of the

[14 : 54] Lord that's what it says in Isaiah and in this book too there are action points for now based on the future so in particular when it says it's a prophecy in verse 3 he says blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy so Julia had a blessing reading the words of the prophecy and blessed are those who hear it so we had a blessing listening to the words of the prophecy and blessed are those who take to heart what is written in it because the time is near so if we take it to heart if we go away this morning thinking I heard something which changes the way that I live today and tomorrow then there is a blessing in that blessed are those who read it and hear it and keep it keep the things that are said in it so that was what is the book little introduction to the sort of book it is now then let's promote question five to question two how does it say what it says because it's an unusual book and we need to know how it speaks so I put it this way what is the writer's accent now a very dear friend of mine who is a minister in

Hove said he said you know I've been speaking to the people in my church for the last three months and one of them came up to me and said what are you talking about when you talk about fear I should give you a little bit of context because he was from Northern Ireland and he spoke like that and he often talked about faith and there was somebody in his congregation who had no idea what is he talking about what is this faith now you know what it is don't you because you've got his accent he was talking about faith faith believing faith and in that part of the world they say faith so you're saved you're justified by faith so you've got to get it you've got to listen it might take three months you say I know what he means by faith he means faith yeah I get it now and you just have to listen and you say justified by faith that's faith

I get it there's other things that you just pick up by listening so when I've spoken about this in Sri Lanka I talk about car horns or the beep beep that you have on a three wheeler because in Sri Lanka they're always driving along going beep beep beep beep beep like that now in England now it would be different in other European countries but in England that's quite aggressive that would be seen as a sign of aggression a hostile act why are you doing that to me beep go away but

in Sri Lanka driving what it means is I'm here that's all it means I'm behind you beep okay got it or I'm about to overtake you beep and the person being overtaken says oh yeah I got that beep beep beep and actually it's quite a valuable tactic because if people aren't good at looking in their mirrors it's very helpful to tell them I'm coming behind you and I'm about to overtake you but you it would have different meanings in different cultures so you just got to observe and see how people do it so let's observe some things in the book of revelation his accent his way of communicating he uses symbols he uses symbols he uses symbolic names for example so the sort of thing in you know western culture would be like this so that is a 1917 recruiting poster and there is a man with a top hat with a star on it and a sort of red waistcoat does anybody know who that man would be is it uncle sam yeah I think it's uncle sam uncle sam and who is uncle sam yes it's a way of a way of referring to the u.s government I have no idea why it's doing this yeah it's uncle sam he stands for the usa and we've got similar things like the bulldog stands for great britain or john bull stands for great britain so it's a visual symbol meaning in this case the american state or the uk state or whatever it is and we had read to us I think in chapter two I have this against you you tolerate that woman jezebel who calls herself a prophetess so I invite you to think do you think she was really on the membership list mrs jezebel do you think that was her real name I think she's using symbolically because jezebel was who was jezebel ahab's wife yes somebody said a queen she was a queen was she a good queen no why was she not a good queen pardon yes I think she was she was after elijah she was an antagonistic queen she was a pagan wife of an ancient king so when he says jezebel he's doing this sort of like uncle sam thing he's saying this is a symbolic name so we have to be on the lookout for that that's how he speaks that's how he does things he uses symbolic visual type of images so from drawn from his own culture the goddess of rome was called roma so there I've done a beautiful picture of the goddess roma but she would stand for rome and we get chapters about a woman on a beast and seven hills meaning rome i think if we've understood him correctly there are other things that he uses so we've got to be on the lookout for these drawn from the bible the hebrew scriptures so locusts there's a locust where in the bible do we get locusts plagues yeah plagues plagues in exodus yeah the plagues on egypt so the locusts there's various uses for locusts you can eat locusts if you're john the baptist he ate locusts didn't he but I don't think it's meaning a source of food I think it's meaning judgment a nasty thing that has come as a judgment upon a city or a culture hail isn't that funny what it does that it's not very impressive really is it but hail hail is in the bible hail plagues yeah it's another plague it's a plague on egypt wasn't it the plague's on egypt so we get hail in the book of revelation and beasts so there's a very ferocious beast where do we get beasts in the bible beasts beasts from the sea there's leviathan in job yes I think we get some other beasts as well I think we get beasts in the book of daniel don't we different beasts that come up out of the sea and chew things and destroy things I think that's what he's picking up on that particular prophecy serpent snake dragon where do we get that in the bible garden of eden and the serpent being who or what the devil yes satan and satan is active in the book in fact in what we had read to us I think there are at least two references about a synagogue of satan and I you did not renounce your faith in me he says to the church at pergamum even in the days of antipass my faithful witness who was put to death in your city so he was a martyr who was a martyr where satan lives so satan is part of the view of this book and so here are some of the visual sort of very they summon up visual pictures in our minds of such things now another thing that the book of revelation does is use symbolic numbers now we don't do this [24 : 22] I can't think of anything in english speaking culture which does numbers but he does numbers number 12 the number 12 ring any bells tribes yeah and 12 disciples 12 apostles yes so that's that's a key number the number of the tribes of Israel so 12 meaning like the people of God or the old testament people of God perhaps it's also the number of the apostles in the new testament so old testament 12 new testament 12 number seven seven seven crops up a lot creation yeah and which particular bit of creation seven trees seven days so God made the whole thing in seven days and I think having listened to it quite a bit I think that the seven is a number of completeness so God made the whole thing in seven days that's number of completeness so when he addresses the seven churches he's meaning the whole church and we'll see some other sevens in a moment where am I 24 24 24 is what 2 times 12 12 plus 12 12 plus 12 and perhaps that number also is connecting with old testament people of God new testament people of God the 12 tribes the apostles the whole people of God old and new testament 144 12 times 12 so I think that's two lots

of 12 combined in a different way again perhaps meaning the people of God 12 times 12 the number of thousand what can we say about the number of thousand lots yeah it's a big number I think we would say it's a big number so it's a big number so if you were to take 144 and multiply by 12 you get 144 thousand sorry if you were to take 144 and multiply by a thousand that's 12 times 12 times a thousand so that's you're thinking the people of God old and new testament and a big sort of a big number so I think that's the sort of way that he uses numbers and I thought I had something else on that but obviously I don't now one more thing to notice about the way he communicates now I don't know if any of you know ancient languages can anybody tell us what that means there at the symbol there fast forward yeah pause playback rewind yes okay I was trying to deceive you by asking you about ancient languages yeah that do you get that this is this is what you see on those of you who remember cassette recorders this is what's on a cassette recorder but nowadays you get it as an icon wouldn't you on your playback app yeah so fast forward pause play rewind and I think as we go through the book we find that John presses those buttons would you like to look please with me at the end of chapter six six verse seventeen where it says the kings of the earth the princes the generals the rich the mighty every slave every free man hidden caves and among the rocks of the mountains they call to the mountains on the rocks fallen us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand that seems to me to be fairly clear that when we get to chapter six verse seventeen we've got to the end of the world the great day of their wrath has come who can stand that's the end so it seems to me that it makes sense to say that although he might hit the pause button there for a bit he's going to hit the rewind button in order to move on so I think when he gets to chapter eight verse one there was the seventh seal so we had seven seals in fact in that section and the seventh is the complete and last one there's silence in heaven for about half an hour I think he's saying okay we've got to the end of that section so we just sit down and breathe and then he's going to hit the rewind button take us back to the beginning and look at that whole thing again and he sees seven angels with seven trumpets and I think he goes through what he wants to say starting from the beginning and working through to the complete end of that seven 1115 seems to be a similar pause the seventh angel sounded his trumpet and there were loud voices in heaven and there is a declaration of praise and it talks about in verse chapter 11 verse 18 the nations were angry your wrath has come the time has come for judging the dead and rewarding your servants the prophets your saints and those who reverence your name both small and great and for destroying those who destroy the earth so I think we've come to the end and he might hit the pause button but I think he's going to hit the rewind button and so on so I think that as you read it you will find that the book of revelation is in sections so there's seven churches which tells us the whole story of the church is seven seals which are opened rewind seven trumpets rewind seven signs rewind seven bowls and so on and if you were really neat you could say there were seven sections in the book but I think that's quite extra neat so how does it speak speak symbolically and you have to tune in to the way that he speaks to get what the symbols are about that's those are sort of getting the idea of the accent of it so that was question five let's go back to question two what does it say to people today who are not interested so I think if you were in that category you probably wouldn't be here this morning and what it would say is ladies and gentlemen whatever else we can say about you you may be very creative you may be very kind you may be very thoughtful you may be very educated but without this book you will only see the surface you only see the surface you will not see what's really happening underneath and the book of revelation says you ought to be interested because at the moment you're only living on the surface of things you are missing out on what is really going on and the book of revelation would say come and see more deeply you can see the troubles in the world and the book of revelation will refer to famine and war civil war earthquakes disease and anybody can see those things you could see them but you don't understand why they're there the book of revelation tells us why they're there they have a message and the message from god is repent god sees this whole wide world doing what it does getting on with the things it gets on with and not worshipping the god who made everything and these troubles come like trumpets sounding and what the trumpet says is repent and if you will have heard this trumpet if you have had trouble in your life which made you turn back to god if you heard that trumpet of perhaps illness or unexpected things or suffering or bereavement and it's made you turn back to god you have heard the trumpet calling you to repent that's what it says turn round from ignorance and indifference and irreverence and it says actually how dare you live another moment in god's universe without worshipping him it says there's a fight but you're on

the wrong side you swim with the tide and go with the flow but god is calling you to go against the flow that's how god calls that's what this book says to those who are not interested and there's actually a message of strong warning if you have a little kid playing on the pavement and the kid seems to be straying out into the carriageway where the cars are you would shout at that kid wouldn't you get back here and the more you cared about the kid the louder you'd shout wouldn't you get back here and the kid might burst into tears and say that was very unkind of you that was very cruel why did you speak to me like that but you say it because you care and god shouts at people to come back to him to repent and that's what this book is saying it's a message of strong warning because god cares about people what does it say to people who are interested maybe people who come along interested like to know more really would what does the book of revelation say to such people well it says that you know the world just seems confusing and incoherent doesn't seem to make sense maybe you struggle with that but there is a key there is an explanation there is a message which puts it into that makes sense of it an explanatory word that makes sense of it to do with there being a throne there being somebody in charge and a word about that and that that's the blessing at the beginning isn't it blessed is the one who hears and keeps what is written hearing is good but living according to it is essential blessed is the one who hears and keeps what is written book of revelation says there is a center of authority that rules everything and we didn't read chapter 4 but it's all about the throne there is a throne which is a seat for a king and the throne is not empty there is a throne over this universe and there is one sitting upon the throne and our job is to bow to the one upon the throne and

[37 : 41] there is a lamb at the center of the throne now when it says a lamb he's not talking about sheep and sheep farming the lamb is a symbolic term because the lamb is a sacrificial animal and it's referring to Jesus Christ who came to this world to be a sacrifice for the sins of his people to be this enormous mind boggling awe striking sacrifice for the sins of his people and it's this lamb who is now seated upon the throne and John sees early on in this vision look I saw a lamb as it had been slain in the midst of the throne and the book of revelation says there is authority to bow to and there is forgiveness to be found in Jesus

Christ and what amazing message that is all the diagnostics of the profession sociology psychology you name it can point out where we've gone wrong but not one of them shed blood so that we could be put right but Jesus Christ is the lamb upon the throne he shed his blood so that we could be forgiven and it doesn't matter how foul our sin has been or how vile our sin has been or how chronic our sin has been or how deep our sin has been or how complicated our sin has been the blood of Jesus Christ washes it all away and cleanses us from all sin and there is a lamb upon the throne I think it was

John Murray the theologian who says this says omnipotent compassion omnipotent compassion the lamb as it had been slain in the centre of the throne that's what it says to people who are interested come and find out about that and throughout the book there is this echo of the word come it might be come Lord Jesus and finish what you started bring it to completion or it might be you come it's time you came to Jesus Christ you can drink of the water you can come to the feast there's still time to come what does it say to Christians today well it says lots of things and it's a bit of a silly thing to try and summarise the whole thing in five minutes but at least it says this there is a loving risen saviour seated on the throne he's in that place of power and glory and he also walks among the seven golden lampstands the seven golden lampstands symbolically are the churches of Jesus Christ all seven of them meaning the complete thing and we learn from that that Jesus Christ is walking here in our assembly today he is here speaking he is here observing and he knows our every thought our every action our every motive which is at the same time the most frightening thing because we can't hide anything from him and the most comforting thing because he knows us and he still loves us we have such a saviour there is a spirit who speaks to the churches he who has an ear listen to what the spirit says to the churches there is a speaking spirit who says things to his church or his churches and it's our job to listen he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches and in many cases and this is individualized but in many cases he says repent doesn't he in those seven churches repent and I think the safest thing to do brothers and sisters is to repent and the theologian

Calvin would have said that's what the Christian life is is constantly repenting we're constantly going off course we're constantly being turned aside to things that are distractions and enticements and we constantly need to turn back to God and even as we meet this morning we can be repenting

forgive me Lord for being so caught up with that I turn to you forgive me for thinking that way I want to rethink according to you and all these things to repent it also says to the Christian there is a battle we're in a cosmic battle the outcome of the battle is not in doubt in fact the victorious army has already been photographed you know like those school photographs you had school photographs the ones I did we were just to sit like this you know class 3D and you can look back at them and say gosh what a funny haircut I had in those days whatever that sort of thing but it's a trophy of class 3D well the picture has already been taken of the triumphant army of the

[43 : 42] Lamb of God the outcome is secure and there is an action point for now and the action point is that every comment that Jesus makes about his churches he makes a promise to the one who overcomes interesting that isn't it to the one who fights and wins through in chapter 12 it says they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb they overcame the evil one that is by the blood of the Lamb by the word of their testimony they did not live their lives so much as to shrink from death so these people are martyrs in the modern sense but the book is about martyrs in the original sense people who testify to the Lord and keep doing so and hang on to that faith and keep on and endure to the end they overcame by the blood of the Lamb so we're to fight by the blood of the Lamb that means to say among other things when we fall terribly and disappoint ourselves terribly and disappoint the Lord terribly we're to get up and keep going because the blood of

Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin we have to have faith in the blood of the Lamb we fight by the blood of the Lamb they fight by the word of their testimony by their witness Christians we must not become ashamed of Jesus Christ we must not get to the point where we're embarrassed to say we're Christians perhaps if you've gone on in the Christian life when you were younger you told everybody in the most rude inappropriate and unhelpful way that you're a Christian good on you and then when you got older you decided things were appropriate and less appropriate to say but please Lord don't let us get to the point where we are too embarrassed to say we're Christians we fight by the word of their testimony and they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death they put

Jesus Christ first they loved him more than anything else there is a warning to the church that one of the churches you've lost your first love you used to put the Lord first so clearly so distinctively so definitely but you've gone cool on that and he says repent put the Lord back in the place that he ought to be number one in your life love the Lord most and not just for one crisis day but every day we'll look some more at that God willing next week we're going to sing number 972