

The Big Reveal - Evening Service

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome again. My name is Aaron. I look after the service. If you're new, it's wonderful to have you. Come and say hi if you feel like it afterwards. I love meeting new people. You've joined our church at a, well, it's great. We're beginning a new series in Revelation. I'm very excited that we're looking at it. Somebody was in the office, church office, the other day, and I said, how are you feeling about Revelation? They said, terrified. I thought, oh, that's wonderful. It's perfect. Now, if you're wondering why they felt terrified, if you've never had a chance to look at it, you'll, Revelation is a very unusual book of the Bible. It's the last book of the Bible. You probably know that, but it's often completely baffling. If you haven't had a chance to look into it at all, let me just give you a taster from chapter 12. I'm just going to read seven verses to you. And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head, a crown of 12 stars. And she was pregnant, and she was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon with seven heads and 10 horns, and on his heads, seven diadems. And his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth so that when she bore her child, he might devour it. And she gave birth to a male child, one who was to rule all the nations, and with a rod of iron. But a child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled to the wilderness, where she is a place prepared by God in which she will be nourished for 1260 days. Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. What is going on? Like that's pretty much most of this book. Like it is, it is, it's baffling. And it's beautiful, and it's brutal, and it's wonderful. And it's God's word. And it's vital for our faith. This is the last words of God, like in the Bible. Now, I don't want to make the fatal error tonight of spending all of my time sort of introducing the whole book of Revelation, and not really getting into the passage. So what we're going to do is we're going to jump straight into it. But the sermon will be slightly different. It's, there's going to be a lot of excurses, which is like a lot of kind of like, where we just sort of have to go off for a while and explain something. And like, for example, there'll be a little line in the passage, and we have to do a lot of background work to sort of understanding. But it'll be good, and it's worth doing that, because it'll be helpful for us moving forward in this book. But it will be a little bit, you know, in the movies, when a car hits a fire hydrant, and there's an explosion of water, it just goes, it's gushing, gushing, gushing. It's going to be a little bit like that, which is preaching 101, don't do that, but it's difficult to avoid. So here we go. So Revelation, chapter one, verse one.

The Revelation, we're going to stop right there. All right. We're going to stop right there at that first word. In the original language, the first word is actually Revelation. There's no vahvia. In Greek, it's apokalipsi, from where we get the word apocalypse from. Literally means uncovering something hidden. Now, this tells us straight away that this book, it's a specific genre, and the genre is called apocalyptic literature. Now, what does that mean? Well, apocalyptic literature was really popular for about 400 years, sort of 200 BC to 200 AD. Really popular with Jewish writers during their times of immense persecution. So they'd write in this style, which was this very subversive type of writing, and it was all about predictions of judgment, and God making things right, and judgment against their persecutors. But it wasn't understood by those who were persecuting. So it was this great sort of genre that developed there. And I want to point out a little phrase halfway through verse one, though. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must take place. He made it known by sending his angel to the servant John. He made it known. He made it known. The logic of verse one is this. John, the stuff that

John's saying to the churches is not his. He didn't make it up. It's come through a chain of command. God, to Jesus, to the angel, to John, to the churches. So this angel made it known to John.

Made it known. I'm saying that a number of times because there's a lot to that phrase, made it known. It helps us understand the literature. It literally means helping somebody understand something through symbolism. So one of the attributes of apocalyptic literature, as you heard read in Revelation 12, is that it's heavy on symbolism. And we don't see it much in this introductory bit here, but it's going to come on thick and fast pretty soon. So I thought, let's spend just a couple of minutes on it.

[5 : 27] So Revelation is huge on imagery and symbolism and pictures. Why? Why not just propositions? Jesus is coming back. It's going to be great. Be cool with that. Stay a Christian. Why not just that?

Because a guy called Eugene Peterson, he's a pastor and an author and a theologian. He said this. He goes, when Christians are under persecution or when people are under persecution, what they don't need is new information. What they do need is to have a revived imagination for the truths they already know.

Truths which perhaps have gone cold. So Revelation uses lots of symbols to arrest our imagination. To make things more real to us through these amazing pictures.

It's a bit like standing in front of a great work of art. You know, after looking at a great work of art, you don't, you know, the goal, you don't come up with just sort of four propositions after looking at the Mona Lisa or something. You experience it. I remember when I backpacked through Europe when I was a young man and I was in Florence and I thought, oh, go and see Michelangelo's Statue of David. That'd be good. I'll tick that box. I've seen that. I'm a pretty cosmopolitan kind of guy.

I'll be cool. That'd be a conversation starter. And so I went to this place where it was and I came upon it and was overwhelmed by it. It's immense. It's absolutely gorgeous. And I think I sat there for 30 minutes looking at this incredible statue. It was just so beautiful.

[7 : 11] This is, see, Revelation, what it does is by painting a picture, by using images, it draws us in to an experience of the truth, not just a proposition. So we will feel elation or we will feel dread or we will feel encouragement. So that truth of what it's trying to say is indented in our hearts in this amazing way that you don't get with just maybe saying it straight out.

I'll give you an example. So the word, so Revelation wants us to experience the world differently, okay, as an overarching idea here. So for the original hearers, they were persecuted Christian under Roman rule. And in the world they lived in, they thought Rome was just invincible.

It was this immense, immovable, invincible force. And the Roman government used things like architecture to convey its sense of power. And you think about it, we still do this today.

Like when you think about state capital buildings, I went to Waco, Texas recently and I flew into Austin and I visited the state capital building and it's huge columns and it's massive and this big dome. It's immense. The idea of this, and it's all based on the sort of Roman architecture.

And the idea of it back in the days is Rome wanted you through these, through this architecture to say, we are powerful. You are not powerful. You're weak. You're nothing. We, we're amazing.

[8 : 48] It's a symbol. They use symbols. So the Christians, these persecuted Christians were just constantly confronted by these symbols of Roman power. Now, how does Revelation depict Rome in the book?

What is the symbol of Rome in the book of Revelation? It's a prostitute. Revelation replaces this glorious image of Rome with an image of a broken, outcast, individual woman.

So in the imaginations of these Christians, Rome is no longer invincible. It's not something that demands service and allegiance. It's something to be pitied. It's, it's a broken thing.

So these early Christians, you know, could begin to think, we don't have to deny Jesus. Rome is not what we thought it was. So that's the beauty of the symbolism. Okay, back to the text again. We got a bit sidelined there. Right. Let me read out, I think it might be helpful, if I read out the first four verses as a whole, because I think it's split into two chunks. It's like one to four, four, five-ish, and five to eight. So the first one, I'll read that out as a whole to you.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

[10 : 35] Okay, I'm just going to point out a few other things in that first half there that's going to be helpful for us to know, to understand not only this passage, but all of Revelation. Right. Did you notice the word, the number seven there twice? Seven churches, seven spirits. So we're talking about apocalyptic literature. It's a genre. It's a style. Big on symbolism, big on numbers.

Lots of numbers. In our chapter 12, this woman was 1260 days. We'll talk about that. I will have the definitive answer for you on that in a long time away. So lots of numbers in Revelation.

12 is a big number. 3, 4, 6, 7, 10. Those are big numbers. Seven is a number in the culture of the day that represented completeness. Something was complete. God rested on the seventh day. Revelation, the lamb, which represents Jesus in this book, the lamb has seven horns, has seven eyes. So it symbolizes absolute power, absolute knowledge. There's a scroll in Revelation, which we'll come to in the next few weeks. It has seven seals, and those seven seals represent seven, the definitive judgments of God.

The churches, seven of them are represented later by seven lampstands, seven stars. So there are seven actual churches. But when they say seven churches, they're saying that it's a number of completeness. So these churches represent the worldwide church as a whole, which means it's written for a wider audience than just these churches. The Holy Spirit is called the seven spirits. It's not seven Holy Spirits.

It's trying to say the Holy Spirit is complete. The Holy Spirit is perfect. And it's not just the numbers themselves that are important. The amount of times things are mentioned. For example, the phrase, the Lord God Almighty, used seven times. Jesus is used 14 times. The lamb, 28 times, all divisible by seven. There's tons of examples like that. In verse three, there you see there's a beatitude. You know, a blessed is, that's a beatitude. Blessed is the one who reads aloud, et cetera. How many beatitudes in Revelation? There are seven beatitudes in Revelation. I say all this stuff not to show that I'm clever or I've read a clever book. It's, I want you to see that this book is astonishingly sophisticated.

[13 : 08] Numbers are important. Symbols are important. The next little thing to pick up on before we sort of, before we get sort of get carried away in how complex Revelation is and how symbolic it is, it's important to remember it's still just a letter. It's a letter. Verse four. Let's look at verse four.

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace, et cetera. It's the greeting of a letter written by a guy called John. There was actually a guy called John. It's not a symbol for a guy called John. There's a guy called John. John had this amazing experience. We'll see over the next few weeks. He had this vision of the throne room of God and he had this amazing experience of that.

And he writes a letter to these persecuted churches who are in modern day Turkey. And he writes this letter to encourage them. It's like a letter. It's, it's, it's still just a letter about this crazy experience he's had. Now, who is this guy, John? Well, it's, it's, it's the disciple, the apostle John, maybe strong evidence for that. Um, but maybe not. It doesn't affect the interpretation, but there's no certainty around who the, who the guy is. But he was a Christian who clearly annoyed a lot of people, very powerful people, because he wrote this from a tiny island that's about six miles by nine miles off the coast of Turkey called, um, Patmos. So he was a real, real person, real writer. He's writing to real churches. These churches had real, real challenges, real people. They had a real historic situation they lived in. And that raises the issue. If this was written to these seven churches for their benefit, does that mean it's only relevant for them? And that's, that's a good lead into the discussion of how do we interpret revelation? Like how do we approach it?

Uh, throughout church history, there have been four different ways, four major ways of trying to interpret this very difficult book. Uh, we'll go through them really quickly. One way is called the preterist view. And that says that revelation, it's all about the past. It's predictive, but it's only predicting what happened in John's time. And it's good, this approach, and that it takes the historical context seriously, but the belief that it's about just then, 2000 years ago, is not what revelation says about itself. So it's not, it's not an ideal way of looking at it. Okay. Another approach is the historicist approach. And this approach says that revelation is all about predicting all of church history. So it's these numerous judgment scenes are kind of interpreted as various, uh, wars or cultural phenomenon that's happened over the last few thousand years. And various characters, uh, represent Hitler or the Pope or Napoleon. The problem with this approach is that the people who write from this sort of angle always assume that they are, if this is the timeline, that they are always right here at the ends. And so their interpretations tend to be, you know, like the whore of Babylon and

Revelation tends to be the most baddest person in the world at that time. And so it's variously been Napoleon or, um, Mussolini. And then it just keeps having to be updated, you know, like every 50 years.

[16 : 35] Oh no, it's totally Saddam Hussein. No, it's totally, you know, Assad or it's totally whoever. Uh, most sort of scholars, um, think this doesn't hold much water, this approach here. Another approach that's very popular though. It's called the futurist approach. And this says that revelation is just about, this is the timeline, that revelation is just, and this is where Jesus comes back, that revelation is just about this bit right here. That the whole thing is about this last little bit of history when Jesus comes back and there's like three years and a thousand days and, and, uh, lots of tribulation.

Very popular in North America, uh, came out of Britain, was adopted in North America, big in the 1970s. Um, there was a book came out called the late great planet earth, which, uh, if you're, uh, uh, some of you may have read the left behind series is slightly more current. That is a series that's based on this approach to looking at revelation, uh, the books and the movies. There was a singer who I remember when I was young and I was only reminded of this over summer at Regent called Larry Norman. Yes, Larry Norman, who was a big, big Christian, uh, musician. And he wrote a song called, I wish we'd all been ready.

I don't know if anyone remembers that song, but I do. It was spooky. Should I sing it for you? I will. So there's these spooky lines and he goes, uh, two men walking up a hill, one disappears and one's left standing still. I wish we'd all been ready. There's no time to change your mind. The sun has come and you've been left behind. That's yeah, it's spooky, right? And there's another line about, uh, a man and wife asleep in bed. He hears a noise. He turns, she's gone. Like, it's like she's gone or he's gone.

One of them's gone. And it's like, it's ugly, right? It's a spooky song. There you go. So that's, um, so this approach says that that's, it's right. What's good. Let me tell you what's good about this approach. It's right in saying there are some things in revelation which have not happened yet, but that's not the whole book. Mostly this book is about how to live now. Mostly revelation is about discipleship. It is not a timeline for the end of the world, but many people think it is. And they pour over it looking for clues of, of when things are going to happen. Uh, I remember like a year ago watching a tele-evangelist, which I like to watch sometimes every now and then. And this tele-evangelist was saying, um, it was this obscure thing. He sort of talked about troop movements in Turkey. He goes, there's these movement of troops that have been moved from here to here. And, and then he quotes revelation. He goes, this is, this verse in revelation is talking about this minor movement of troops. And then he asked for 49.95 from, from all the, all the people watching the show to, to, to, I guess, thank him for his information. I guess, I don't know, but it's, it's not a, it's not a great strategy, folks. It's not a timeline.

The fourth major strategy of interpretation is called the idealist approach. And this one says that revelation is only timeless truths. It denies any specific historic meaning. So it's true that there are timeless truths in revelation. Of course there are. Absolutely. But you can't ignore the fact that John was writing to real people in a real historic situation. And we've got to understand the historic situation first, what it meant to those first hearers before we can apply it to ourselves. So that's not a great strategy. So how are we going to approach it? Really a medley of, of them all.

[20 : 29] Revelation is talking about the future. It is, but not as much as sort of pop culture, Christian end of days writers think it is. It is talking about the past. Absolutely it is. So we need to take the historical context very, very seriously, but we've got to realize what was true for them. These are timeless truths as well. Okay. So let's move on. I told you this is going to be like a shotgun of information. Okay. So we've had a look at these first sort of four or five verses, and there's been some helpful ideas on how to interpret the book as a whole. Symbols, important.

Numbers are important. It is not a timeline. It's mostly about discipleship. But what is the major idea right here in the first half of this text? What is the major idea right here? Let me read out some words which I think will clue us in from the text, some individual words here. Revelation, gave, show, made it known, sending, the word, reads aloud, prophecy. There is a big communication theme here in these first four verses. God is speaking to us. That's what John's trying to say. God is speaking to us. He is reaching out to us. In this act of incredible grace, he is reaching out to us. And are we going to listen? That's the question. Are we going to listen? If we listen to it, what's about to happen over the next 20 or so chapters, it will be a great blessing to us. And if we reject it, if we disobey what it's calling us to, this book will be a curse to us. And I think this is a great word at the start of our book study, our start of looking at Revelation. Because we're going to be, it's calling us here to do the hard work of trying to understand this quite difficult book. And we should be praying, God help us, God help us to translate these symbols and these numbers and these pictures and these truths into a way of living, into a way of following Jesus. So that's the first half of it.

It's a call. God is talking to us. Are you going to listen? The second comes from, the second major point, I think, of these first eight chapters is from verses four to eight. Three times it says Christ is coming again in verse four, verse seven, and verse eight. It's very interesting. The tense, the grammatical tense of the phrase Christ is to come, who was and is and is to come, is not future, it's present. So the Greek is saying, God is coming, he's come. God is coming, he's come.

Saying the same, saying that both of those things at the same time. God has come through Christ, through the Holy Spirit. He has inaugurated his kingdom, but he will come again and he will bring judgment and he will bring salvation. Now why is that a really good message for these seven churches in Turkey that John is writing to? Let's talk about the historical context here. Again, this is a helpful thing for us moving forward. The book is written somewhere between 60 and 90. People differ on it.

A lot of people are sort of more towards the 90, but it could be anywhere from 60 AD to 90 AD. There's evidence that suggests that these Churchills were either under the Roman rule of Nero or Domitian. Nero, who you probably have heard about, he was a crazy man. He was a megalomaniac.

[23 : 52] He was accused of starting the great fire of Rome. And so what did he do? It was a great strategy. He just blamed it on the Christians and which inaugurated this time of huge persecution against Christians. He was known for burning Christians alive at his garden parties with regularity. A few decades later, you've got this guy called Domitian, Emperor Domitian. He was the guy that was huge on the imperial cult, which means that he wanted everyone to know that him and his family were gods.

So he made people call him Domitian, Lord and God. He made Christians. He asked Christians to choose between him and Jesus. And if they chose Jesus, it just didn't go well for them.

So either way, whenever this letter was written under one of these guys, it was a very tough time to be a Christian. And what do they need to hear from God?

The second half of our passage here. That God is with them now. God is with them. And God will come again. God is with them now. And God will come again. And he will make all things right. So, and here's one of the big themes of Revelation. Stay the course. Keep the faith.

Keep going. One of the big things of Revelation here that's going to keep coming out each week. God is with you. God is coming. Stay the course, people. But there is a cost to staying the course, the passage hints at. We see in verse 2 and verse 5, the word witness there. John is called a witness.

[25 : 34] Jesus Christ is called the faithful witness. What's this word in Greek? It's the word martis, from where we get the English word, martyr. And we'll find out as we go in Revelation that the witnesses tend to die, which is where we get that word from, why it has that meaning. There is a great cost to remaining faithful in the face of persecution. And we'll learn more about that over the next few weeks. Now, let me finish up here, okay? Again, I apologize. This has been such a shotgun of information, but it's good stuff to get under our belts when next week we can have a bit more of a traditional sermon here. So, slightly unusual, but lots of groundwork here. Right, to summarize. Revelation.

It is not a timeline to the end of the world. It is far more interested in discipleship. This book is a letter. It's a letter written by a guy called John to persecuted churches.

Churches that are being tempted to compromise because they're living under immense pressure from society. And Revelation says to them, don't compromise. Don't go cold. Keep the faith despite the cost. And the book does that by revealing to us God's perspective on history and God's view of what's going on. And it paints the picture of that in vivid, in these unforgettable colors. So, you hear Revelation with your eyes. That's probably a good way of thinking about it.

You hear the book of Revelation with your eyes. It's a book of great encouragement, but it is a book of warning. And it's not a subtle book at all. You can almost feel as if the book is sort of coming at you. And it's grabbing you with these images. And it's saying, what are you going to do about this stuff?

It demands a lot of us morally. It demands a lot of us spiritually. And if you will not obey it, it will be a curse to you, this book, but also a source of great encouragement and blessing if you heed these words. Folks, that is the book of Revelation we'll be looking at over these next five months. Amen.