

Last Things First

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[0 : 0 0] So there's no getting around the fact that Revelation is a tricky and often controversial book. It's probably a bit of an understatement, actually. And I think G.K. Chesterton put it best when he said, though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators. And this is the reality, isn't it?

There's a lot of views about Revelation. A lot of them are held very strongly. Not all of them are right. Many of them, I think, are actively unhelpful or misleading. So why is this book the final word of Scripture? Why has God organized things so that this seemingly indecipherable book is his last word to humanity until Jesus returns? The answer is because Revelation is not a code to decipher, nor is it a narrative to unpick, nor is it a blueprint for how future events are going to pan out. The temptation, I think, is to read this book on our terms rather than on its terms. And even I find in my preparation for this series, looking at the first few chapters of Revelation, I find myself reading it on my terms and having to correct myself. It's a really easy thing to do.

And the reason for this is that we don't really know what to do with this kind of literature. It's not a genre that we're used to reading. Most of what we read in our spare time is probably prose fiction or prose non-fiction. Some of us might even venture into poetry or drama.

But very few of us, I think, will make a habit of reading apocalypses. And when I say that, I don't mean reading stories about zombie apocalypses. I mean the technical genre of apocalypse, the main genre that Revelation fits into. There isn't an apocalypse section in your nearest waterstones. It's not a genre of writing that's done now. But it's a genre that's rooted in the context of the first century Jewish and Roman cultures that John was a part of. And so naturally, we can struggle to know how we're supposed to read it. Every kind of writing has rules, rules which govern how we're supposed to understand the point being made by the writer. So Revelation has its own rules. And when we know what they are, reading it and applying it becomes an awful lot easier. And so this afternoon sermon is an introduction to the revelation of Jesus Christ, the last book of the Bible. We're going to look at the first eight verses, and they act as something of an introduction or a prologue to the entire book. And we'll hopefully start to get a sense of how this book works, what this book is doing, what this book is about, and how actually it is intensely practical for Christ's church today. We'll cover all that under three introductions, an introduction to the book, an introduction to the book's focus, and an introduction to how the book presents the future. So introducing the book. It's written by John, John who was one of Jesus' closest disciples.

And he begins his prologue with an introduction to this strange and powerful book as a whole. Setting the scene, telling us how it came to be, and instructing us on how to read it and receive it.

[3 : 3 9] Here's how he starts. The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who testifies to everything he saw, that is the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

So the first thing to note is that this comes from God. It's a vision and a message that the father gives the son, and the son sends his angel to John, who then writes down all he sees as our witness.

There's a sense of gravity here in these opening words, because this comes from the highest authority. And it's called a revelation, or as it's sometimes translated, an apocalypse. Same word. Apocalypse or revelation, it literally means that which has been revealed or uncovered. When John was using the word, it didn't have the modern connotations of the end of the world that it now has, which should tell us that though this book is about the future, after all, John does tell us that it was given to show us the things that must soon take place. It's not only about the future, and even when it is speaking about those things which are to come, its focus isn't squarely on just the very end. The goal of this book is to reveal. Asher and I went to see *My Fair Lady* at the Edinburgh Playhouse on Boxing Day this year, and this particular production, it was great. There's a lot of fairly elaborate scene changes that happened.

It all looked very, very impressive. But to make that happen, there has to be a lot of things going on behind the curtain, and in the wings, and up on the rafters. What we saw on stage was determined by what was actually happening in the background that we weren't able to see. Revelation works kind of in a similar way. What we see on earth as history marches along is only one side of the story. Everything that happens on earth is determined by things that are also happening in heaven. But how do you communicate that?

How can you get people like us to understand mysteries like that which are too great for the human mindfully? How can we understand what's going on in heaven? Well, the answer is given to us in the way that this book pans out. We see the heavenly reality in vision and in song and in poetry. This is not a narrative laying out the future. It's much closer to a poem or a series of paintings, if you like, each capturing something of God's glory and his purpose and his plan for his people. Because this book is for God's people, all of them. It's not supposed to be an impossible book which only academics and pastors can understand. It's addressed to the church. In fact, in its original context, it's addressed to seven particular churches. I think that helps us to understand how to approach the book. Because if this was initially addressed to seven particular churches in the first century, then everything that is in it must have been applicable to them. Everything in this book must have been useful to Christians in that time and place. So clearly it can't be a book or compendium of signs about when the end is coming because those Christians never saw the end. Rather, it's a book about spiritual realities, drawing upon a wealth of images that we find in the preceding 65 books of the Bible, presenting them in imaginative poetry, reorganizing them in creative and powerful ways to show us to show us where the future is heading and what the present will be in order to equip and to encourage the church to live for Jesus in confidence until he returns. That's my thesis statement, if you like, for what this book is doing and how we should approach it. Reading Revelation is not an easy task, but it is a worthwhile task, which is why we're undertaking it together this morning or this afternoon and across this year in potted installments. And I think it was put really helpfully by the late pastor and writer Eugene Peterson. He put it like this when he conveyed why revelation is worth the effort. He writes, the revelation is a gift, a work of intense imagination that pulls its reader, into a world of sky battles between angels and beasts, lurid punishments and glorious salvations, kaleidoscopic vision and cosmic song. It is a world in which children are instinctively at home and in which adults, by becoming little children, recapture an elemental involvement in the basic conflicts and struggles that permeate moral existence, and then go on to discover again the soaring adoration and primal affirmations for which God made us. I think that's great. I think it's really helpful and it just captures what this book is about and why it's so, so helpful. And so with all this in mind, as we enter John's great vision, John gives us some encouragement as we do. Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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. As we read and listen and reflect on the words and pictures that we have here, we will be blessed. That's a promise from God, and an impetus to spend time learning from the riches of this book, because when we do, we will be blessed. And if we keep what is written in it by

[9 : 53] letting it shape us and guide us, we will be blessed. And if we understand it, we will find it useful, because as John says, the time is near. Basically, John starts by calling us to listen up, because what is written in here concerns us, and indeed everyone who believes that Jesus is the risen Lord. Actually, in fact, it's broader than that. It concerns all people. So even if you maybe wouldn't call yourself a Christian, this is directed to you as well, because it's a claim to lay out God's plans and purposes for his people, for all people, and for this world in which we all live. And so, I mean, it's the challenges of reading this book. The best start that we can make is to humbly listen, because God says, this is for us, all of us together. So we've now introduced the book and how we might approach it.

Let's follow John's lead and start getting into the actual content. What is the focus of this book? Amidst the many powerful images of beasts and angels, dragons and thrones, thunder and silence, there is a central focus, a main character, the real MVP, if you like, the one John wants our eyes to be upon. And that focus is God. Interesting fact, the Bible never uses the word Trinity to describe God, but the idea of a triune God, God as one being in three persons, permeates all of scripture.

It's part of the Bible's DNA, if you like. But there are some places where it becomes really, really clear. And here in Revelation 1, I think is a prime example. John's presentation of the one God who made and upholds the universe is strongly what we might call Trinitarian. It points to him as being three in one. He shows us God as the eternal father, as the sevenfold spirit and as the incarnate son.

So he writes, 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 firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

In many ways, this introduction is quite similar to other New Testament letters. Paul, for example, will often offer grace and peace from God to those churches that he's writing to. The interesting thing here is the way in which John speaks of God and the space that he devotes to exploring God's nature and character as he writes on God's behalf as his apostle and his witness. And God the Father is described as the one who is, who was, and who is to come. The point being, he is eternal. He was before there was anything. There never was a time when he wasn't. And this is what it means when God elsewhere calls himself, I am. This is the meaning of his divine name, Yahweh. I'm often translated in our Old Testament as Lord in capital letters. He is the one who is in the present. He is the one who always was in the past and even before the past. And he is the one who is to come. Notice it's interesting

[13 : 39] John. John doesn't call God the one who will be, as we maybe might expect in that formula. He is the one who is to come. It's worth holding that thought because this is key to the message of Revelation.

This is a book about God coming to his people. God is the I am. He is, but he's not static. God is the eternal I am, but he is, he's dynamic. He's not frozen. God is coming.

It's very much like when, when the Pevensie children arrive in Narnia and hear for the first time about the king of Narnia, Aslan, the great lion. And they're told Aslan is on the move.

There's this sense of mystery and expectation. The king is coming. God is on the move. That's what we're seeing here. And before his throne, there are the seven spirits. This phrase only appears in this book and it refers to the Holy Spirit. And it derives from an image we find in the Old Testament book of Zechariah. Seven is a very important number in Revelation. In Revelation, numbers are often used symbolically to make particular points. And seven conveys a sense of fullness and completeness. After all, God made the world in seven days. And so the seven spirits are a way of speaking of the divine Holy Spirit. God's spirit in all of his fullness. And it further helps to identify the Holy Spirit with the seven churches that this is written to. That there are seven churches is not accidental. And one, it ties them to the work of the Holy Spirit. But also it shows, given the significance of the number seven, that they are, in a sense, representative of all of

Christ's churches across history. And the Spirit is present in each and every one. And throughout Scripture, the role of the Spirit is to point to Jesus, the Son of God.

[15 : 52] John describes him here as the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. The faithful witness, because he came to earth and took on flesh to bring and proclaim the gospel. The firstborn of the dead, because he died and defeated death in his resurrection.

And the ruler of the kings of the earth, because he is now sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and has been given all authority. And he will come again as king in all his power and glory.

Notice what John does after giving this message of grace and peace from the triune God. He writes, To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father. To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

His response is praise and worship. It's almost like he's tried to start writing this letter, but he's felt compelled to digress and just worship God after writing about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In particular, as he reflects on the work of Christ to save and redeem a people for himself, he's propelled into worship. And isn't that how it should be? As God's people, because we are God's people, we should be compelled to worship. It's why the Westminster Shorter Catechism, a helpful little book which teaches the core tenets of the Christian faith, it begins by saying that man's chief end, the reason we were created, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

However, we were made for worship. God has loved us, says John. Christ has set us free, says John. He has broken the shackles of our sin. We are no longer enslaved to our sinful desires or condemned by our failures. Jesus died and his blood has released us. This is the message of the gospel and the reason for the cross. And Christ has made his people a kingdom, a kingdom of priests to serve God and worship him.

[18 : 09] And as we reflect on these wonderful truths, it should just propel us in adoration. To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. So what comes across here is that God sits right at the center of what John is writing. The Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit is at the heart of Revelation, just as he is at the heart of Christianity, just as he is at the heart of the universe which he has made and history which he has set in order. And he wants us to worship him because that is what we were made for. The Christian claim is that we are more truly human when we do. Worshiping God is, perhaps surprisingly, the most human thing that we can do. We do it because of who God is, because of what he has done, and because of what he will do when he comes, because he is on the move. And this leads us to our final introduction, the future. Books and films are always trying to predict or imagine what the future is going to look like. In the 1960s, Star Trek imagined a fairly hopeful future where humanity was united.

I think that most others have predicted slightly more miserable and dystopian futures, which perhaps gives us some insight into how people view the present, that actually people think it's heading for catastrophe. Few have thought to have a look at what the Bible says about the future.

Now, Revelation is not, as we've said, a blueprint for future developments. It's just not how the book works. But it does speak about the future, and its goal is that Christians, knowing where history is going, will have confidence to live for Christ in the present. And that's why this book has been useful and practical in every century since it has been written. And the key moment in the future which history is heading towards is the return of Christ. God is coming. Christ is on the move.

Much as we might love an interesting science fiction vision of what the future might be like, if we know Christ, we do actually know where the future is heading. Jesus is coming back.

And this is what John sees. Look, he's coming on the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the peoples on earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be. Amen.

[20 : 55] This is the great day in the future that everything is building up to. And John here, he's building on images that have appeared earlier in the Bible story. Daniel, he saw a vision of the Son of Man, Jesus, coming with the clouds and being given an everlasting kingdom by the Ancient of Days, God the Father. Zachariah saw a vision of God coming in judgment, saying, they will look on me, the one they have pierced. And after Jesus had ascended on the clouds, angels told his disciples that he would one day come back the same way. All these things are wrapped up here in what John says right here. Jesus, the Son of Man, who has been given an everlasting kingdom by his Father, because he has won the victory over sin and death, will come again on the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who've pierced him. And that doesn't just mean those who literally pierced him on the cross, but all those who have rejected him. And people will mourn because God's patience will have run out. Other parts of the Bible call this day the day of the Lord, and it is a necessary day.

The reason storytellers so often present the future in ways that are hopeless and grim, I think, is because they look at the world as it is now, and they can't see any other option but for the future to be bleak. They may be stories, but they capture what people really think. People don't have a hope for the future, not really. And actually, in some ways, they're right not to have a hope, because humanity is not going to fix things. But Jesus will, and that's why the Christian hope for the future is so important. If you'll allow me to quote from C.S. Lewis once more, he captures the Christian hope of the return of Christ when the inhabitants of Narnia speak of Aslan's coming.

Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more. When he bears his teeth, winter meets its death. And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

When Jesus comes, sin and death and evil will be no more. But he will judge all who have rejected him.

And so John's words lay a choice before us. We can ignore Jesus and put our hope in hopeless humanity. Or we can know Jesus, know his love and his compassion. We can know the one who died for us.

[23 : 54] Or we can find hope in his coming. Jesus is on the move. His return is absolutely cast iron certain. If you don't know where you stand with him. If you don't know where you stand with him, I'd really encourage you to think deeply about it.

When he came at first, he came in love. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to redeem a people for himself and to die for those who believe in him.

But when he comes again, he will bear his teeth and ask why you didn't believe if you have heard his gospel. Jesus is the future. The future is all about him.

And this should come as no surprise because God is the one who has been forever, is now, and is to come. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

As a summary of who God is, that's a pretty succinct and clear one. He is the Alpha, the first, and the Omega, the last.

[25 : 05] He is sovereign. He is preeminent. He is all-powerful. God is not the God that we might imagine in our heads. He can't be fit into a box. He can't be constrained or completely understood.

He's God. And we are not. God wants all the earth to respond to Jesus, his son, in worship.

Now, we all look ahead to the future. We all have dreams that we want to fulfill. We all have hopes of how things are going to turn out. We all have ambitions and plans and ideas that we want to come to see fruition.

There's nothing wrong with that. But here's where the prologue of Revelation should shape our imaginations and our perspective on the future. Is the future we hope for centered on Jesus?

Are our hopes rooted in the God who is, who was, and is to come? We're thinking in terms of last things first. We are shaped by what we hope and expect the future to be.

[26 : 19] This is why John begins with such a clear focus on the future. If Christ is your hope, that's inevitably going to shape the decisions that you make and the way that you live.

It's going to determine whether you worship Jesus or worship something else. Not all of our dreams are going to come to pass. And one day, if Jesus hasn't returned, the time will run out for us.

Just like everyone who's gone before, we have a limited time. And none of us knows exactly how long. What John does here is he gives us the right perspective on everything.

As he takes us behind the curtain, into the wings. He roots us in scripture because that is where God has spoken. He focuses our gaze on God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

And he sets our expectations for the future firmly on the return of Jesus. And so the question is, will our lives be spent avoiding Jesus and keeping our eyes fixed on the ground?

[27 : 28] Or will we worship him and have our eyes fixed on him? Will we long for Jesus to come and bring an end to the winter of the world?

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