

# **The All-Conquering Lamb**

**A Comprehensive and Devotional  
Exposition of the Book of Revelation**

Brian A. Russell





## Contents

Introduction	7
1. The opening curtain rises (1:1–8)	21
2. The all-majestic Judge overseeing His church (1:9–20)	35
3. Christ's letters to Ephesus and Smyrna (2:1–11)	49
4. Christ's letters to Pergamum and Thyatira (2:12–29)	63
5. Christ's letters to Sardis and Philadelphia (3:1–13)	77
6. Christ's letter to Laodicea (3:14–22)	93
7. Is the church raptured before chapter 4?	103
8. God enthroned supreme as Creator (4:1–11)	111
9. Christ enthroned supreme as Redeemer (5:1–14)	123
10. The Lamb opens the seals (6:1–17)	139
11. The sealing, security and bliss of believers (7:1–17)	155
12. God's trumpet blasts of warning (8:1–9:21)	171
13. The little book and the two witnesses (10:1–11:14)	189
14. War in heaven and on earth (11:15–12:17)	207

15. Satan's agents in his war on the church (13:1-18)	225
16. The Lamb, the 144,000 and the harvest (14:1-20)	241
17. The seven bowls of God's wrath (15:1-16:21)	257
18. The mystery of Babylon the great (17:1-18)	273
19. The destruction of Babylon the great (18:1-19:5)	287
20. The church's Bridegroom and Victor Emmanuel (19:6-21)	303
21. Satan bound for a thousand years (20:1-6)	319
22. Satan destroyed and the last judgment (20:7-15)	337
23. A new heaven and a new earth (21:1-22:5)	351
24. The final curtain falls (22:6-21)	371
Notes	387



## 1 The opening curtain rises

<sup>1</sup>The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, <sup>2</sup>who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw. <sup>3</sup>Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.

<sup>4</sup>John, to the seven churches which are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, <sup>6</sup>and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

<sup>7</sup>Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.

<sup>8</sup>'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,' says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'

(Revelation 1:1–8)

The book of Revelation is also known as *The Apocalypse*, a name taken from the Greek word *apokalupsis* which is translated in the very first verse as 'revelation' (literally, unveiling). For the Apocalypse is an unveiling by God of the central players in the history of the world, particularly the history that spans the entire period from the first to the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who is the Chief Player. It is like a highly dramatised play in which, to quote the famous lines of the bard, Shakespeare:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances.<sup>1</sup>

In Revelation 1:1–8 the curtain rises for the opening scene of Act One (or, if you like, Vision One), which serves as a backdrop for all the scenes and visions to come. All will be filled with images and symbols and words which disclose God's absolute control of history: past, present and future. History is His-story. What happens in the world is not by chance, but by divine decree. What God has willed in His infinite goodness and inscrutable wisdom will be done, not somehow, but triumphantly. The theme of the drama of Revelation is: The Lamb wins!

The invincibility of God and of the Lamb who shares His throne will be the focus of our attention as we take up the difficult but rewarding task of studying the book of Revelation. It is the last book in the canon of the Bible and the last book of Scripture to be written. It is not, however, a mere appendix to the collection of books which make up God's word. It is in fact as relevant to the modern world as any of the other books in the Bible. Indeed, the book ends with this warning from Jesus Christ, its divine author, 'For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and

from the things which are written in this book. He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (22:18–20).

This is a warning to everyone that the book of Revelation is not to be tampered with. *Nothing is to be added*, because there is nothing missing that God meant should be there; and *nothing is to be taken away*, because there is nothing there that God did not put there or that is no longer true. When taken in conjunction with chapter 1:1, no book in the Scriptures opens and closes with such an uncompromising statement of its own direct inspiration.

### The superscription to the letter

Verses 1–3 form the opening statement that gives us the *title, origin* and *purpose* of this last book of the New Testament canon. The book begins in verse 1 with its *title*, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." The word *revelation* comes from the Latin word *revelatio*, the title given to the book in the *Vulgate*, the Latin version of the Bible. The word in the original Greek text is *apokalupsis* and both the Latin word and the Greek word simply mean 'the unveiling.' Thus the book is known either as the Revelation or the Apocalypse. The Greek word, *apokalupsis* is used in Scripture of the unveiling by God of hidden or partially hidden truths which would otherwise remain unknown to man (Romans 16:25; Galatians 1:12; Ephesians 1:17; 3:3).

However, the title makes it clear that the book is not just an unveiling of things in general, but 'the Revelation of Jesus Christ.' The phrase 'of Jesus Christ' could mean *from* Jesus Christ, but that cannot be its primary sense, for the verse goes on to say 'which God gave Him.' It is from God the Father that this revelation ultimately comes. He is its source and originator. So it is best to take the preposition *of* as an objective genitive meaning 'about Jesus Christ.' For Jesus Christ is the central figure of this book and the clue to its true meaning. The unveiling of Jesus Christ implies the veiling He underwent in His

incarnation, when the full glory of His divine majesty was veiled in His humanity, suffering and penal substitutionary death for sinners.

But since His resurrection and ascension, the glorious unveiling of the Son of God and the Son of Man has begun. He is the One 'who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood' (1:5, ESV). He is the eternal God, 'the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last' (1:11). He is the Conqueror of Death who 'was dead', but can say: 'behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and death' (1:18). He is the supreme Head of the church 'who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands' (1:20). He is worshipped in heaven by saints and angels who cry out, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing' (5:12). He is the One who overcomes all His enemies, for 'He is Lord of lords and King of kings' (17:14). He is our returning Judge who says, 'Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to His work' (22:12). How that should whet our spiritual appetites! Nobody can read the Apocalypse without gaining a clearer view of Jesus Christ and His ultimate triumph over evil.

So God the Father is the *origin* of this revelation, and He gave it to Jesus Christ, His incarnate Son, because, being one with God and one with us, He is the only Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Not only that, because He is at the Father's right hand, He is now able to lift the curtain (or veil) of time and reveal the glory which His redeemed people are destined to share. So verse 1 says that the purpose for which John is given the revelation, is 'to show His servants.' Although the revelation was sent in particular to the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (v. 4), here in verse 1 it is addressed to all who love and serve Christ without distinction.

This is true of all the books of the New Testament. Luke, for example, compiled his gospel and the book of Acts for a single individual named Theophilus, yet what he wrote was copied by the

church for readers in every age. There are, however, two other links in the chain of communication, if we can skip the next phrase for a moment. 'And He (that is, Jesus) sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.' There is no further identification of the angel. Whoever he was, he was simply doing what he was created to do. He was a *messenger* (which is the meaning of the term 'angel') and he was sent by Jesus 'to minister for those who will inherit salvation' (Revelation 22:16; Hebrews 1:14). This is the only book in the Bible that was entirely communicated by an angel.

Moreover, the *method* of communication was by means of signs or symbols conveyed through a series of visions. That is the meaning of the phrase, 'and signified it by His angel', for to signify means to communicate a message by means of signs or to explain the meaning of the signs, either by the context or by the addition of some words of explanation. For example, 'the seven candlesticks' are defined as 'seven churches' (1:20). To understand the message of Revelation, then, we must grasp the significance of these signs or symbols, not only by considering the clues that are given, but also by seeking light from the context of Scripture as a whole. This was the way the angel communicated Christ's message to John who in turn recorded it in writing for the seven churches of Asia and for all the servants of God in every generation.

We must now go back to the clause we temporarily skipped: 'to show ... things which must shortly take place' (v. 1). The *revelation* about Jesus Christ is also a *prophecy* about 'things which must shortly (i.e. soon, ESV) take place' concerning Christ and the consummation of His kingdom. This note of urgency is reinforced by the further warning that 'the time is near' (v. 3). The fact that these two warnings are addressed to people in John's day, should discourage *futurist* views of events in the book that place them all in the last generation of world history before Christ returns. These warnings were meant to be relevant for the churches in John's day (c. AD 95). It is true that the



word 'shortly' could also be translated 'suddenly'. But to give it that meaning would rob the book of its relevance to the people in John's day. Besides, to translate the word 'shortly' or 'soon' agrees better with the pronouncement that 'the time is near.'

The fearful judgments that are going to be so graphically depicted in John's prophecy are real and impending. Our Lord Himself also spoke repeatedly of the *imminence* of His return, for He will come unexpectedly. No one can read all the signs of His second coming with pinpoint accuracy. So His warning to the church in the first generation is just as relevant to the church in every generation: 'Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming ... therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect' (Matthew 24:42,44). Now if the objection is raised that the prophecies of the book of Revelation have not taken place 'soon', for nearly two thousand years have passed and still Christ has not returned, we need to remember two important facts: first, history is advancing in accordance with God's timetable, not man's, and 'that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day' (2 Peter 3:8). There has been, and there will be no failure in the fulfilment of the promise of Christ's return. Revelation is about 'things which *must* come to pass.' There can be no escaping them.

The second important thing to remember is that the word 'shortly' and the phrase 'the time is near' are also saying what the rest of the New Testament says; namely, that we are living in 'the last days' (Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:2). The first coming of Christ was the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth (Mark 1:14-15). Already, everything is moving by divine appointment towards its consummation. And so as soon as John's letter reaches its destination in the churches of Asia, his readers will be able to say, "The time is indeed near. These things are happening now. They are in the process of being fulfilled, the length of which is in God's hands." Every Christian in every generation who reads the book of Revelation should

have this sense of immediacy. We are not waiting for the process of consummation to start. It has already begun and its climax will come unexpectedly and suddenly.

Verse 2 tells us that John not only received this revelation from and about Jesus Christ, but also faithfully reported it for all God's servants. Through the five stages of its transmission from God the Father to God the Son to the angel to John to those he wrote to, he 'bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony [lit., witness] of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.' John was already suffering in exile on the island of Patmos 'for the word of God and for the witness of Jesus Christ' (v. 9), for this witness is borne by life and conduct, no less than by preaching or writing. But here John says that the word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ which he saw and heard was duly recorded in writing (v. 3) and sent to the churches of Asia to be read aloud in church meetings like the other inspired, apostolic Scriptures (Colossians 4:16; 2 Peter 3:15-16). This, however, was to be the last time that God would directly, visually and verbally communicate His truth to a man, and He was to do so with even greater power and splendour than He had done with Moses on Mount Sinai.

That brings us to verse 3, 'Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.' John is inspired by the Holy Spirit to send forth his prophecy with a *beatitude* promising blessing on the reader and the hearers of the words of this prophecy. The reader is *singular* while the hearers are *plural*, because John intends that the book will be read aloud by one of the elders to the congregation of each church when it arrives. Obviously, several copies had to be made so that each church to which the messenger was sent, could have their own copy of the prophecy. The beatitude, moreover, is pronounced not merely on those who read and hear the prophecy, but in particular on those who 'keep those things which are written in it.' The reading and hearing, of course, is a preliminary necessity. But to heed its

warnings and obey its commands is the main response required, apart from which all reading and hearing is futile. Revelation contains moral instruction and not just prophetic predictions.

### **The apostolic greeting**

Verse 4, 'John, to the seven churches which are in Asia.' We have already dealt in our introduction to the book with the questions of *who* this John is, and *where* these churches were situated. It is the same John who was one of the apostles of Jesus and the writer of the fourth Gospel and the three letters that bear his name. The prophecy of Revelation was written in the form of a letter addressed to seven specific churches in the Roman province of Asia (the western, central portion of modern Turkey). Although in chapters 2 and 3 seven letters are addressed to seven particular churches in different towns, there were other churches, including Troas (Acts 20:5ff), Colossae (Colossians 1:2) and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13) which were of equal importance in Asia when John wrote Revelation. The reason for limiting the number to seven is symbolic. In Scripture the number seven signifies divine activity and appointment. Thus we have the seven days of creation, the seven Spirits of God, the seven bowls of wrath and so on. These seven churches then stand for all Christ's churches in every place and in every century. Indeed, that is why each letter ends with the declaration: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (i.e. to all churches, not just these particular ones).

To come back to the form of the letter, verses 4–8 contain the usual *salutation* and the last verse in Revelation contains the usual *benediction* found in most of the New Testament letters. The rest of the book, however, is utterly unlike any other letter in the New Testament, and can hardly be classified as such, yet it is. The greeting continues with the words, 'Grace to you and peace.' Grace is God's love showing mercy and favour to sinners who not only do not deserve such kindness, but instead deserve His wrath and condemnation.

The words are addressed to Christians because our need of God's grace does not stop after we have been converted. We need grace every day for cleansing from current sin and power to walk with God (1 John 1:5–10). 'Peace' is the fruit of God's grace that calms our fears and anxieties with the assurance that we are right with God and He has given us more than enough resources to see us safely to glory (Philippians 4:6–7).

John now goes on to more fully describe the source from which all grace and peace flows. They come from the Triune God: 'Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come.' This paraphrase of the divine name ('I AM', Exodus 3:14–15), calls attention to the eternal self-existence of God the Father, but it is equally true of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Secondly, grace and peace come 'from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.' Again, the number seven is symbolic. It refers to the completeness of the Holy Spirit's ministry to every church in every place and in every age. His sevenfold fullness (Isaiah 11:2) are equally present in the universal body of Christ's church. Michael Wilcock suggests that 'the unusual order of the Trinity here (Father, Spirit, Son) corresponds to the plan of the earthly sanctuary, where the ark in the Holy of Holies represents the throne of God, the seven-branched lampstand in the Holy Place before it represents the Spirit, and in the courtyard before that stands the altar, with its priest and its sacrifice both representing the redeeming work of Christ.'<sup>2</sup>

In verse 5 the second member of the Trinity is now given the fullest description: 'Grace and peace ... from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness', because He is the living Word of God and the embodiment of truth (John 14:6). He is, furthermore, 'the firstborn from the dead.' Others have been resuscitated, only to do their dying all over again at a later time. Jesus Christ, however, was the first to be raised with a glorified, immortal body. Furthermore, the firstborn implies later-born children; namely, Christians whom He will raise from the dead

when He returns (John 6:44; 1 Corinthians 15:20–26). Thirdly, as the firstborn and heir (Romans 8:17; Galatians 4:7), the Son is also described as ‘the ruler over the kings of the earth’ (Psalm 89:27). For the rulers of the world will try their hardest to destroy His church, but they will never succeed (Matthew 16:18). He rules supreme, and on the last day He will destroy all His enemies (17:14; 19:16).

### **A most fitting doxology**

Such a wonderful Saviour deserves the praise of His people. So John bursts spontaneously into this doxology: ‘To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings [lit. a kingdom] and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen’ (vv. 5b–6). Some manuscripts have ‘to Him who loves us’ (present tense), for although He has washed or ‘freed us’ (ESV) once for all from our sins by His blood shed on the cross as an atonement (Matthew 26:28; 1 John 1:7), Christ’s love for us is eternal. It preceded the cross and it continues after the cross as He allows us to reign with Him in His kingdom and serve as priests offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Him (1 Peter 2:5). This concept of God’s people constituting a kingdom of priests is found in Exodus 19:6 where God says to the Jews, ‘You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ It is also mentioned in 1 Peter 2:9, ‘But you are a chosen generation, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light’ (*italics added*).

Our royal and priestly activity is something we already enjoy on earth. Indeed as Philip Edgcumbe Hughes correctly points out: ‘The ascription proper that now follows, “to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen”, is itself an outpouring of priestly praise, for, since we owe everything to God, the blessing of our creation, the grace of our redemption, and His providential care of our every need, all the praise and glory is due to Him and

none at all to ourselves. Our glorying is always and only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:30).<sup>3</sup>

## **The grand theme of Revelation**

The grand theme of the Apocalypse is the absolute triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ over evil and His judgment of it. This long-awaited climax of history will only take place at the promised return (John 14:1–3; Acts 1:10–11) of God our Saviour which John now affirms. Verse 7, ‘Behold, He is coming with clouds [Daniel 7:13; Matthew 24:30], and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him’ (v. 7). This is a very important verse. It tells us that the second coming of Christ is not going to be secret, witnessed only by the Christians who on that day will be caught up alive to heaven. John says, ‘every eye will see Him’ including the wicked who are living at the time. This is supported by the words that follow, ‘and all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him.’ Those who all their lives looked upon Jesus with contempt and repudiation, will now look upon Him with terror and sorrow; not the godly sorrow that leads to repentance, but with the self-pity and mourning of those who have been found out, yet remain impenitent. The weeping and wailing will be *universal* for ‘all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him.’ At His coming every impenitent member of the human race will see their culpability in the rejection and execution of Jesus Christ. Moreover, there will be no hiding from the resplendent glory of His sudden appearance, and no escaping the fierce anger of His divine judgment on all who have persisted in unbelief and impenitence. It will be the ultimate fulfilment of the prophecy in Zechariah 12:10 (see John 19:37).

But while the wicked who pierced Him will bewail the misery of their lot, Christ’s own penitent people whose sins also nailed Him to the cross will joyfully welcome Him. That is the force of John’s exclamation, ‘Even so, Amen.’ It is just two words, *nai* and *amen*, the Greek and Hebrews words for expressing affirmation and

approval: 'Yes, indeed! So let it be!' Now it will not be vindictive for Christians to welcome the Judge of all the earth. We do not rejoice in the judgment of the wicked, but we do wholeheartedly approve the vindication of Christ in the overthrow of all His enemies at His return.

### **The divine authentication of Christ's triumph**

Only here and in chapter 21:5 does God, the Father, Himself speak to make us absolutely confident about this vindication of Christ. He declares that He is 'the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End' (v. 8). *Alpha* is the first letter, and *Omega* the last letter of the Greek alphabet. The title tells us that God is 'the First, the Beginning' in the sense that He brought the whole created order into existence; and He is 'the Last, the End' in the sense that after He has destroyed His enemies, He will bring heaven and earth to the glorious end or purpose for which it was originally created. For He alone is 'the Almighty'. That is brought out in the relative clause that follows: 'says the Lord, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.' In other words, although He has a past (the God who was) and a future (the God who is to come), He is first and foremost *eternal* (the God who is). He is the God who is eternally present; no one has preceded Him and no one will survive Him. Therefore none can resist His power and none can thwart His purposes. He alone can designate Himself 'the Almighty'. The contemplation of such a glorious God should evoke unshakable faith in the triumph of His Son, and unending worship to the praise of His glory.

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation;  
 Oh my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation:  
     All ye who hear,  
     Brothers and sisters, draw near,  
 Praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,  
 Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth:

Hast thou not seen?  
All that is needful hath been  
Granted in what He ordaineth.

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work, and defend thee!  
Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:

Ponder anew  
What the Almighty can do,  
Who with His love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore Him!  
All that hath life and breath come now with praises before Him!

Let the amen  
Sound from His people again;  
Gladly for aye we adore Him.

*(Joachim Neander, 1650–80)*