

"Revelation: Growing Radical Faith"

Revelation 1:1-8

Introduction

Today I want to begin a new series on the last book of the Bible, the book of **Revelation**. If you have every read Revelation, or heard portions of it read, you will know that many of its dramatic sights and sounds give one the feel of entering into a very different world than he or she is used to (e.g. **Rev. 12¹⁻³**).

F.F. Bruce used to tell the story of a university student of his who, having been persuaded to buy a copy of the New Testament, read through it for the first time in his life. He found it most interesting, “but”, he remarked to a friend, “I couldn’t make much of that bit of science fiction at the end”.¹ It was actually a very perceptive comment in that he was trying to identify its literary type or genre, and then read it through those lenses.

After all, Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy and his history of “Middle Earth”, for example, needs to be read very differently than a book on African or European history. We listen to a news report by Peter Mansbridge differently than we do a news report by Rick Mercer (at least I hope we do). When we read a story that begins “Once upon a time,” we automatically recognize that we are reading a nursery rhyme and not a book of history or science. Somehow reading about a wolf that can huff and puff and blow houses down, or about three bears that eat porridge and live in a house does not disturb us or distract us from the main story line when our opening literary cue is “Once upon a time”.

In Revelation John gives us three key literary cues right up front (**Read vv.1-8**). This is a “revelation”^{v.1} and “prophecy”^{v.3} and letter^{v.4}. use **SLIDES2-6** to explain *apocalypse* with images & Rom. 8¹⁹; cf. Rom. 16²⁵; 2 Thess. 1⁷; 1 Pet. 4¹³)

People in the first century who read or heard Revelation with John’s opening cues (“apocalypse”^{v.1} and “prophecy”^{v.3} and letter^{v.4}) would have instantly recognized what kind of document they were reading and automatically adjusted

¹ Story told by F.F. Bruce.

their “reading glasses” and expectations (positive anticipations) in a way that was consistent with its genre. They would have caught and understood most of its symbolic images and the powerful messages and truths being conveyed in it. But since we don’t get John’s literary cues as automatically as his first century readers did we will need to spend some time this morning getting cued up. After all, I want us to be able to read this document, this “apocalypse” and “prophecy” and “letter” the way John expected it to be read so that we hear what God said and says so powerfully through it.

And friends, it has incredibly powerful and practical messages and truths for us. (e.g. Dr. David Ewert’s admission & discovery)² John wasn’t overstating things when he wrote, “*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy.*” (N.B. people did not read silently^{Ewert, HTUTB, 16} and reading aloud implies *public reading* since that is how the recipients—“the seven churches in the province of Asia”—would have received the message) And “*blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*” If John wrote the Revelation as a **letter** for ordinary Christians in Asia Minor,^{1:4,11} then I am inclined to believe that this book and its message are not nearly as obscure as some have made it out to be.

Revelation As “Apocalyptic” Literature (SYMBOLS & NUMBERS)

Apocalyptic literature in general, and Revelation in particular, is full of **symbols and images**, which are striking—to say the least—and are used to convey broader ideas and truths. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. We still use symbols and images to convey ideas today in economics and politics (e.g. “Timothy Geithner and the Bear” **SLIDE7** ...The dish being served = “the bailout plan”; **SLIDE8** huge dragon swallowing up a large city...What does it say? A city is being threatened by some kind of evil force. Does it help if I tell you, first that the cartoon was published July 1, 1997 and the caption read **SLIDE9** “Today, Hong Kong...?”)

² “For the first twenty years of my Christian life I avoided the book of Revelation. It was not because I disliked the book or questioned its inspiration, but I had the distinct impression that [it] was for experts only.” Yet when he finally immersed himself in a guided study of the book he found himself “upon occasion reduced to tears [by] the message. More and more I came to realize that John wrote Revelation for ordinary Christians in Asia Minor, and....that the message of Revelation can be understood.” David Ewert, Revelation: The Church Under Fire, preface.

The use of symbols & images was even more common in the first century.

Apocalyptic literature also made frequent use of **numbers**. We need to ask ourselves, are they statistics (e.g. 144,000^{ch.7,14})? Or are they symbols (e.g. the “seven Spirits of God”^{ch.1}...Are their seven separate Spirits of God **or** is John speaking of the seven-fold-ness of the one Spirit of God?)? As a working hypothesis, I suggest that reading the numbers statistically is not what John intended and will distract us from the wonderful reality John is conveying symbolically. The most common numbers used in Revelation are 3, 4, 7, 10, 12 (or groupings)—see back of sermon outline for guide.³ (they didn’t need a “cue” card but many people today...Look at the number **7** on the cue card) **SLIDE10**

Seven represents perfection and completeness. The seven churches are actual churches but since “There were other churches in Asia (Troas^{Acts20:5ff.}; Colossae^{Col.1:2}; Hierapolis^{Col.4:13}) which were of equal importance”⁴ they are also probably representative of the church as a whole. And the reference to the “seven spirits” in verse 4 is also seen by most commentators as a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit (alluded to in Isa. 11² & Zech. 4²⁻⁶).⁵

- **SLIDE11** Coin from the reign of Emperor Domitian portraying the “divine” son of the emperor seated on a globe, surrounded by seven stars.⁶

Revelation as Prophetic Literature - SLIDE12

Just like many people in our day who hear John’s cue “apocalypse” very differently than people in his day, so too many hear John’s 2nd cue “prophecy” and assume that revelation is primarily a prophetic forecast of the future that gives us a timeline of when and how the world will end. They miss the fact that “prophecy” in the Bible was not primarily prediction. In modern English we often use the terms “prophecy” and “prediction” interchangeably. But, as commentator Nelson Kraybill wisely explains,

³ Gleaned from Darrell Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, p. 390.

⁴ Robert Mounce, Revelation (NICNT), p.67.

⁵ For details see Gordon D. Fee, Revelation (New Covenant Commentary Series), p. 6.

⁶ J. Nelson Kraybill, A & A, p. 38.

“biblical prophecy often has more to do with spiritual insight into the writer’s immediate circumstances than with forecasts of the distant future. John’s vision gave insight into ‘what must soon take place,’ in his era (1¹).”⁷

In other words, this is a prophetic book in the biblical sense of the word, like the other prophetic books we have in the Bible (some *foresight* but mainly *insight*). This “revelation” from^{subjective} Jesus^{1:9-20} and about^{objective} Jesus^{v.1,11} (both)⁸ is firmly rooted in the OT. (404 verses, 278 have allusions to OT = 69%)

Most of the biblical prophets’ messages did not major on *foresight* of the future but *insight* into the present (**Turn to 2 Kings 6**¹⁷—Elisha & his servant—as a vivid example of a prophetic “reality check”...God exposes another dimension of reality, far more vivid and real than HD or 4K the true nature of reality). Prophets are given, and in turn give, a God’s-eye-view of the present (or near future...and distant future on occasion) so people will wake up and get their hearts and minds back in sync with God and His ways. (cf. John the Baptist—Lk. 3⁷⁻⁹)

The opening verse tells us that this “revelation from Jesus Christ” was given by God “to show his servants what must soon take place” (cf. v.3 “because the time is near”). Unfortunately, these brief clauses have served as the source of a lot of speculations about the end-times. However, as Revelation unfolds it becomes pretty clear that he is talking mainly about the somber events awaiting the churches of John’s day. What the imprisoned^{v.9} prophet & pastor John had come to see so clearly was the church’s coming collision with the Empire over who should rightly be proclaimed as “Lord and Savior”—the Roman emperors or the humble Galilean whom they had crucified, but who his followers claimed had been raised from the dead.⁹ (Some were beginning to literally take a beating for it, and facing economic and political pressure to be socially and politically correct)

So this apocalypse/prophecy/letter **SLIDE13** from and about Jesus Christ

⁷ J. Nelson Kraybill, Apocalypse and Allegiance, p. 22

⁸ Does the entire phrase mean “the revelation about Jesus Christ” (a Greek construction called an “objective genitive”) or “the revelation from Jesus Christ” (a “subjective genitive”), or both? If it means the former, Jesus will be the subject of the book of Revelation from start to finish; if the latter, then other issues may be central in the book. See Keener, p. 53.

⁹ Gordon Fee, Revelation, pp. 2-3.

had a very immediate and practical purpose. “Jesus lifts the cover, pulls back the curtain and lets John in on the most important unseen reality of the present. And it changed the way John coped with what was going on in the world and in his personal life.”^{Johnson,38} That is why Darrell Johnson entitled his book on Revelation Discipleship on the Edge because, as he says, **SLIDE14**

“Revelation is not a crystal ball revealing esoteric secrets that enable one to escape the harsh realities of life on earth, but a down-to-earth manual on how to be a *disciple* of Jesus facing the harsh realities of life on the earth; in particular, how to do this the way Jesus did and does. And *edge* because...that is the “place” where we are called to be Jesus’ disciples.”¹⁰

- See John’s context & experience in 1⁹ **SLIDE15** (“suffering” = *thlipsis* which means “hard pressed” “pressure point”...Like the tectonic plates or razor’s edge)
 - Living on the edge of the final in-breaking of the kingdom of God.
 - Living on the edge where the values of the world & God’s kingdom collide.
 - Living on the edge of the sword of truth that cuts to the heart of things.

Look at the key descriptions of Jesus Christ in verse 5: *faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

- John will repeatedly see things from two perspectives: from the earthly perspective *and* from the heavenly perspective (cf. the disciples glimpse into a heavenly perspective of Jesus on the Mount of transfiguration)
- Notice what King Jesus has done for us in verses 5-6: *To him who loves us and [has expressed and displayed this love to us for he] has freed us from our sins* (the ultimate oppression!) *by his blood,*⁶ *and has made us [nobodies and rejects of the empire] to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.*”
- He is the great one truly worthy of our allegiance so “*to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*”

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 15.

Revelation is a letter like the rest of the letters we have in the NT in that it was prompted by a specific occasion and need by a particular group of people whom John was still trying to pastor when he were not able to be with them in person (e.g. Paul's letters from prison, John's letters from Patmos). But John doesn't write an ordinary letter. He writes with the heart of a pastor but the mind of a prophet and poet. That is why reading Revelation re-awakes and revitalizes our faith. As Eugene Peterson puts it,

"I do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle. Everything [most things?] in the Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the Bible. The Revelation adds nothing [little] of substance to what we already know. The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it. I read the Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination ...in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived."¹¹

"A few paragraphs into the Revelation, the adrenalin starts rushing through the arteries of my faith...The Revelation is a gift—a work of intense imagination that pulls its reader into a world...in which children are instinctively at home and in which adults, by becoming as 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."¹²

Darrell Johnson actually says in the preface of commentary on Revelation that,

"If it ever became illegal in my part of the world, as it actually is in other places at this very moment, to own a complete copy of the Bible—and if the authorities, as an act of mercy, allowed me to possess just one book of the Bible for "personal" use—I would, without hesitation, keep the last. I would keep the book of Revelation.

"Why? Because no other book of the Bible presents the gospel as powerfully as the last book does. No other book of the Bible, in the face of all that threatens to undo us, proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ the way the last book does.

"More particularly, in no other book of the Bible do we see Jesus as clearly and compellingly as we do in the last book....I am convinced that no other book helps us see Jesus as he is right now as clearly and compellingly as the last book

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, pp. ix-x.

¹² Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, p. x.

John wrote. *No other book helps us see him in a way that overcomes our fears and frees us for radical faith.*¹³

Friends, Revelation is not a book for speculation but a book for growing radical, deep, strong, bold, faith. That is why I have felt compelled to have us soak ourselves in it. In our church's mission statement (printed on your bulletin each week) we aim to be a congregation that is actively *showing love, sharing hope, and strengthening faith*. In fall we focused on the aspect of "sharing hope" by "Becoming Good News People". This year we want to focus on practical ways of "*strengthening faith*": **discipleship / apprentices**^{Mt.28:19-20} (the focus of our denominational fall 2017 Study Conference in Abbotsford). While most series on discipleship use the gospels or NT letters as their primary text, I hope you can see why I have chosen Revelation.

Implications – SLIDES 16-18

- 1) Jesus **prepares** his people – for what is happening and what is coming down the pipe (success, failure, trouble, etc.).
 - Puts biblical words & wisdom in our path to prepare us (e.g. verses, songs)
 - Puts us into personal training (e.g. exercising our praying muscles, our patience muscles, building our persistence & perseverance)
 - Puts us into community with people who will stand with us
- 2) Jesus **protects** his people – from or through adversity (e.g. puts limits on evil, or limits on the time or extent of the temptations and trials, provides miracles at "Wits End")
- 3) Jesus **places** his people where he needs them to be (his "servants"...called to do his priestly and kingdom work—v.6 (cf. Eph. 2¹⁰)
 - In prison? (look what we have because John was forced to pastor from prison)
 - In a wheel chair? (e.g. story of Mary) In a cancer ward? In a lion's den?

PRAY

¹³ Darrell Johnson, Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation, p. 13.

Numbers In Revelation¹⁴

One of the decisions we need to make as we read the last book of the Bible is what to do with the numbers. Are they statistics? Or are they symbols? I believe that reading them as symbols is what it means to read John on his own terms; this is how to read the book “literally.”

In Revelation 5 we met Jesus Christ portrayed as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. Were we to read those numbers as statistics we would end up with a grotesque picture of the risen Lord. But when we read them as symbols we end up with a powerful statement of who Jesus is for humanity. In Revelation 1 we meet the “seven Spirits of God.” Are there seven separate Spirits of God? Or is John speaking of the seven-fold-ness of the one Spirit of God? Reading the number statistically leads us away from the wonderful reality John is conveying symbolically.

The following is a listing of the meanings of the numbers in Revelation:

2—the symbol for witness—11:3, see Deuteronomy 19:15, etc.

3—the symbol for completeness—1:4-5; 16:19, etc.

4—the symbol of natural completeness, universality (4 winds, 4 corners of the earth)—4:6; 7:1,4; etc.

7—the symbol for completeness, perfection (7 colors of the rainbow, 7 days of creation)—1:4,12; 4:5; 5:1,6; 12:3; etc.

10—the symbol for completeness as fullness (10 toes, 10 fingers, 10 commandments)—2:10; 17:12; etc.

12—the symbol for completeness as in “unity in diversity” (12 tribes, 12 apostles, etc.)—21:12; etc.

24—the symbol for the church (12 + 12, tribes + apostles)

666—the symbol for less than perfection (three times less!)—13:18

1,260 days—This is the equivalent of 42 months = 3 ½ years—11:3, 11; 12:14; etc.

1,000—the symbol for largeness, hugeness = $10 \times 10 \times 10$ —20: 1-6

144,000—the symbol for countlessness = $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$ —7:4, 9; 14:1

Finally, here are some interesting facts about how John uses multiples of seven:

- There are four sets of seven judgments—seals, trumpets, peals of thunder, bowls.
- There are seven references of the phrase—“every tribe, tongue, people/nation”
- “Lord God Almighty”—7 times.
- “One who sits on the throne”—7 times.
- “Christ”—7 times.
- “Jesus”—14 times (= 7 x 2).
- “Lamb”—28 times (= 7 x 4)

¹⁴ Darrell Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, p. 390.