

## **Buckle Up Tight!**

### **An Introduction to the Book of Revelation**

By [Rev. Tommy Allen](#)

*Rev. Tommy Allen is the Senior Pastor of New Hope Presbyterian Church in Kent, Washington.*

We've spent weeks on introductory material because, in much the same way, most of the problems people have with the book of Revelation come from entering the book unprepared. They jump in without sharpening a few basic skills. What I want to give you this morning is simply the product of basic Bible-study techniques. And honestly, if you just do the basic work at the front of Revelation, the rest of the book makes far more sense. The problem is that most people don't do that. They approach the whole Bible one way, and then, for some reason, when they get to Revelation, they throw all their normal guardrails aside and dive in.

We're not going to do that. We're going to lay the foundation by way of introduction. And the bottom line is this: we're going to look at the first three or four words of Revelation. If you understand those first few words — certainly the first four verses — you've essentially got the whole thing in hand.

Now, you may think that sounds like an oversimplification. In one sense, it is. But in another sense, it really isn't. If you grasp what's happening in the opening verses, the rest of the book becomes much clearer. That's our task this morning.

Before we get there, though, there are two presuppositions I want to lay out. If you've ever been in a class with me, you already know what they are. These two assumptions will not only make Revelation easier to learn, they'll make our relationship in this study a lot smoother.

First presupposition: Deuteronomy 29:29.

Let me read it to you:

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

Moses has just read the covenant law to Israel. He tells them: the things revealed — the things he has just read — belong to us to obey. But the secret things belong to the Lord. In other words, God has given us some things that are clear,

and those are ours to follow. But there are other things He has not given us, and we may never know them.

So when we study Revelation, there will be moments when we simply say, “I don’t know,” or “I’m not sure,” or “Perhaps this is one of the secret things of the Lord.” Some of you have been told that when we die and go to heaven, all our questions will be answered. I’m not convinced that’s true. If God is infinite and we are finite, there will always be more to learn. So we need to enter this study with the humility to say: if God hasn’t told us something, it doesn’t help to fight about it or force an answer.

Second presupposition: the Burger King Principle.

Why is it called that? I have no idea. My teacher, Richard Pratt, named it, and I’m sure he had a great reason. But you’ll remember it because it’s odd. The principle is this:

You can’t say everything every time you try to say something, or you’ll end up saying nothing at all.

Why does that matter for Revelation? Because people come to this book from all sorts of traditions and angles. And I’m not going to be able to address every angle every Sunday. There are at least four major approaches to Revelation, and I can’t cover all of them in every sermon.

And just so you know, in the handshaking line after church, a good number of people feel it’s their duty to tell me what I got wrong — grammatical mistakes, theological omissions, you name it. I appreciate it. After giving this whole speech in the first service, only one person did it, so that was a win.

But here’s the point: if something you think should have been said wasn’t said, just ask me. I’m not here to fight about it. I’ll say what I can say in the time we have, and that’s what it will be.

With all that said, as we enter Revelation, we’re going to answer these basic questions today:

What kind of book is it?

The Bible contains many genres — history, poetry, wisdom, letters, and so on. Genre determines how you read a book. So what genre is Revelation?

To whom was it written?

Who was the original audience, and what issues were they facing?

Why was it written?

Was there a specific purpose behind it?

By the time you leave today, I hope you'll know the answers to all of these.

So first: what kind of book is Revelation? It's a hybrid. That's one reason people struggle with it. Revelation blends three types of biblical literature:

Apocalypse

Prophecy

Epistle (a letter)

And you see all three right in the opening verses.

Verse 1: "The revelation of Jesus Christ..." The word revelation is apokalypsis — apocalypse.

Verse 3: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy..."

So is it apocalypse or prophecy?

Verse 4: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia..."

That's a letter.

So Revelation is not some strange, alien genre. It's a combination of three familiar biblical forms, woven together for a purpose. And you've got to take all three of those genres into account if you want to read Revelation well. So let's start with the first one: apocalypse.

When you hear the word apocalypse, don't answer out loud — we're too big a group for that — but what comes to mind? If you're a modern American, you probably think of something like The Hunger Games, where some massive nuclear war has wiped everything out and now there are twelve districts left, some people have high-tech weapons, others have bows and arrows, and everything is bleak and chaotic.

Or maybe you think of The Book of Eli, where the movie just drops you into a wasteland with no explanation. In our modern imagination, "apocalypse" usually means this:

A mushroom cloud.

Nuclear devastation.

Gloom and doom.

Movies advertise themselves as taking place “in a post-apocalyptic world,” and we know exactly what they mean. But in the first century, would they have thought gloom and doom when they heard the word apocalypse? Not at all. If they had access to it, they would have pictured something more like this: The Wizard of Oz. Why? Look at the faces of Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion when she opens the door for the first time. They’re in awe.

If you want to understand what an apocalypse is — what apocalyptic literature is meant to do — think of that moment. Everything in Kansas is dark and dingy, and then Dorothy opens the door and is overwhelmed by the beauty, the clarity, the color of the world as it really is.

That’s what an apocalypse does: It reveals the world as it truly is — a world most people never get to see. And there’s another Wizard-of-Oz moment: when Toto pulls back the curtain and exposes the “great and powerful Oz” as a mild-mannered man.

Revelation does the same thing, but in reverse. Most people look at Jesus and see only an out-of-work carpenter who was crucified — a man down on his luck. But when the curtain is pulled back, you see Jesus the Great and Terrible — “terrible” in the old sense: awesome, glorious, ruling the universe. That’s who is actually behind the curtain.

And that leads us to the meaning of the word apocalypse. In Greek it can mean “to break through,” “to show forth,” “to reveal,” but its primary meaning is this:

To unveil.

An unveiling.

I told my wife — unwisely — that I couldn’t wait for my next wedding, because when the groom lifts the veil I was going to say, “Behold your apocalypse.” Being a good pastor’s wife, she said, “I wouldn’t do that.” But then I explained: if apocalypse means “behold the most glorious, beautiful thing you’ve ever seen,” wouldn’t that be appropriate? If that’s what the word meant to us, it would be the most honoring thing you could say. “Lift the veil, son — behold the glory.”

So the first word in Revelation is apokalypsis — unveiling.

And here’s what that presumes: We are not seeing something as clearly as we ought. Something that should be obvious is not obvious. It needs to be unveiled.

So what is Revelation unveiling? The answer is right there: Jesus. Jesus Christ.

Notice what the text does not say. It does not say:

“The revelation of the end times.”

“The revelation of the end of the world.”

“The revelation of everything you ever wanted to know about Apache helicopters and the European Union.”

It says: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” And it’s even bigger than that. The first three Greek words are apokalypsis Iēsou Christou — with no preposition. English supplies “of,” but the Greek leaves it open. You can legitimately supply several prepositions, and each one highlights something true: The revelation of Jesus Christ — an unveiling of who He is. The revelation by Jesus Christ He is the one doing the unveiling.

\*\*The revelation about Jesus Christ He is the content of the unveiling.

And all of them point to the same truth: We do not see Jesus as clearly as we ought. If we did, our lives would look different — more joy, more struggle, more courage, more repentance, more hope. Revelation is going to stretch all of us. If you fear change, it will stretch you. If you crave change, it will stretch you. It stretches everyone, because the clearer you see Jesus, the clearer you see yourself.

And that’s the apocalypse — the unveiling — that Revelation begins with. And we see that lived out in the text — Jesus is the one who gives this information. And finally, it could be the revelation about Jesus Christ.

So the bottom line is this: when you read the word apocalypse in Revelation, here’s what you should think. If someone asks you, “So what’s the book of Revelation about?” the answer is not “Oh, it’s about the end times.” Whenever someone says that to me, I want to say, “You know what other book in the Bible is about the end times? Genesis. And Exodus. And Leviticus. And Deuteronomy. Joshua. Judges. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans...”

You get the idea. Every book of the Bible is about the end of the world in some sense — and every book of the Bible is about Jesus. So Revelation, as the last book of the Bible, is almost as if God is saying, “If you haven’t gotten it by now, let me pull back the curtain and show you what you should have been seeing for the last sixty-five books: this whole thing is about Jesus.”

It’s of Him.

It's by Him.

It's about Him.

And that language should sound familiar, because Paul says the same thing in Colossians: all creation was made through Him, by Him, for Him, and to Him. Revelation is doing the same thing — it is primarily about the person and work of Jesus.

## **Prophecy**

That leads to the next point: John also calls this book a prophecy. And we need to ask: if we misunderstood the word apocalypse, have we also misunderstood the word prophecy? From a biblical point of view, what is the primary purpose of prophecy?

Most of us — especially if we've watched religious television — assume prophecy is mainly about predicting the future. Predicting the stock market. Predicting geopolitical events. Predicting when to buy canned goods. And yes, there are prophetic passages in Scripture that predict future events. But the vast majority of biblical prophecy — Old Testament and New — is aimed at one thing:

Persuasion.

A moral summons.

A call to change.

The prophets didn't show up in Israel to give trivia about the future. They came saying, "You have sinned against the Lord. Repent." And when Israel didn't get it, the prophets painted vivid pictures, acted out symbolic actions, and pleaded with them — all to persuade them toward repentance, faith, and obedience. So when John calls Revelation a prophecy, he is telling us: this book is meant to change you. It is meant to call you to endurance, repentance, courage, and faith.

So by verse 3, we already know two things:

Revelation unveils Jesus.

Revelation calls us to moral and spiritual change.

## **Epistle (Letter)**

And that brings us to the third genre: Revelation is also an epistle, a letter.

Verse 4: “John to the seven churches that are in Asia...” That’s standard epistolary form. Here’s where many people go wrong. They read Revelation through the lens of apocalypse and prophecy, but they forget it is also a letter — and not just seven letters, but one letter sent to seven churches.

This matters. I was reading the little three-sentence introduction in my ESV this morning, and it broke my heart. It said something like: “Revelation begins with letters from Christ to the churches. Then comes a long series of visions of judgment...”

As if the book stops being a letter after chapter 3. But that’s not true at all. Revelation begins as a letter — “John to the seven churches” — and it ends as a letter:

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.” (22:21) That’s how letters end. John has taken away a major argument from those who say chapters 4–22 have nothing to do with the original audience. He expected the churches to receive the whole thing — from beginning to end — as a single letter applying the finished work of Jesus to their lives.

Someone on the radio this week said, “The first four chapters are about the churches, and the rest is all about the future.” But John didn’t think that way. He expected the churches to read and apply the entire book.

So what is the purpose of a letter? Letters in the New Testament are written to specific churches facing specific problems, applying the finished work of Christ to their real lives.

Think of Romans or Colossians. Paul spends the first half teaching the gospel — what Christ accomplished — and the second half applying it to marriage, conflict, church life, and daily obedience.

John is doing the same thing. He writes one letter to seven churches, expecting them all to read each other’s mail. He didn’t send one part to Ephesus and another to Sardis. He sent one letter, and he expected all seven churches to read all of it — including chapters 4–22.

## **The Setting**

Just to orient you geographically: the seven churches — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea — were all located in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. John wrote from the island of Patmos, that little white dot in the Aegean Sea.

And here's the key historical point: every single place on that map was part of the Roman Empire when Revelation was written. The Roman Empire stretched across most of the known world at the time, and that reality shapes the entire book of Revelation. One of the things that makes Revelation both more challenging and more rewarding to study is that we have a wealth of extra-biblical sources from that era — writers like Eusebius, Josephus, and Pliny the Younger. Their accounts help us understand what was happening on the ground for these seven churches.

So what was the sit-rep — the situation report? What was going on that would lead John to write a letter that is also a prophecy and also an apocalypse?

To set the stage, you have to understand the world around A.D. 95. The statue you see — that's the emperor Domitian, who commissioned it for himself. Roman emperors were generally narcissistic, but some were more so than others, and Domitian was one of those. Throughout Roman history, people assumed the emperor was divine, but every now and then an emperor would say, "No, really — I am divine."

So when you entered a temple, you were expected to take a pinch of incense, throw it on the fire, and say, "Caesar is Lord." There's no evidence Domitian personally rode around persecuting Christians, but if you refused to render what was "due" to him, you could end up in serious trouble — anything from losing your livelihood to being thrown to the lions.

Then add another layer: the pagan trade guilds. In the Roman Empire, much like certain industries today, you couldn't work without being part of a guild. And these guilds wanted to curry favor with the emperor. So they threw feasts and festivals in his honor. At these gatherings, everyone was expected to participate in the ritual: toss the incense, say "Caesar is Lord," and show loyalty.

Christians were in these guilds because they needed to work. And up to this point, they had a loophole. When someone said, "Are you going to worship Caesar?" they could shrug and say, "Well... Jesus was Jewish."

Why did that matter? Because Judaism was the only religion in the empire exempt from emperor worship. They had legal religious status — much like the way churches in the U.S. today have tax-exempt status. And Christians, early on, were seen as a sect of Judaism. So they could slide by under that umbrella.

But around this time — likely because of the missionary work of the apostles — Jewish leaders grew tired of Christians claiming their exemption. So imagine a Christian saying, "I'm not worshipping Caesar; Jesus was Jewish." And the Jewish neighbor saying, "Oh no he's not. They follow that Jesus fellow. They're not with us."

Suddenly Christians were exposed. They had to decide what to do. Pliny records that Christians responded in three ways:

Some renounced Jesus. Faced with losing their job, their guild membership, or even their life, they said, “Jesus is out. Caesar is in.”

Some compromised and rationalized. They’d say at home, “Look, I’ll throw the pinch and say the words, but Jesus knows my heart.” They blended in so thoroughly that eventually there was no difference at all.

Some refused to compromise. They said, “I can’t do that. I belong to Christ,” and they paid the price.

This is the world John is writing into. Seven churches in Asia — and their spiritual health varied. Two were on the verge of shutting down. Two were struggling but hanging on. Three could go either way. And honestly, when you look at these seven churches, you know who they remind me of? They remind me of this church. They remind me of every church I’ve ever been in. Because the core struggle is the same:

They were failing to be gospel-driven and outward-facing. Faced with the threat of persecution — not even active persecution, just the threat of it — they were tempted to retreat. “Let’s just stay inside. Let’s keep our heads down. As long as it’s just us in here, we won’t have any problems.” But that’s not what Jesus calls His church to be. Everyone said that — except, of course, the pastor or the elders.

I remember when Judy and I first started attending this church. I was just a member then, long before I came on staff. I asked someone — I can’t even remember who — a question about why we did something a certain way. This was ten years ago. I don’t remember the issue, but I remember the answer, and I’ll remember it for the rest of my life. The person said, “Why would we not? It’s just us. As long as it’s just us, why would we change anything?”

That mindset — it’s just us — was exactly the problem in the churches of Revelation. And what John is going to do, through shock and awe if necessary, is turn them outward again. He wants them to re-engage the world with the gospel.

You know that famous picture of Jesus knocking on the door of someone’s heart? Besides the questionable theology — since that passage is actually about churches, not individuals — the whole point of the picture is: Jesus knocks, will you open the door? But what the picture doesn’t show, though it’s theologically true, is this: sometimes Jesus sets a fire in the basement. Sometimes He lights a fire under you to drive you out of the house. And in a sense, the whole book of Revelation is Jesus setting a fire in your basement. Because it’s not just us. When you get into Revelation, you discover that all of creation is involved.

This morning, when I drove in around 6:30 or 7:00, it was still dark. One thing you may not know about me is that I absolutely loathe Canadian geese. I mean, with every fiber of my being. And when I got out of my truck, the noise coming from that cow pond behind the church was overwhelming — it sounded like millions of them. But instead of being annoyed, I put my stuff down and just listened.

Today we're talking about all creation crying out and praising Jesus. How do you know that's not what those geese were doing? Leave them alone.

So as we step into Revelation, we need to understand John's purpose — the macro-purpose, because there are many smaller ones. John writes this book to remind the church of three things about Jesus:

1. Jesus has won.

He has already achieved victory over sin and death. By His death and resurrection, He has conquered. He has ascended. He rules the world even now. There is nothing left for Him to accomplish in terms of redemption. And everything you see in Revelation, you've already seen somewhere else in Scripture.

2. Jesus will win.

There is coming a day when His victory will be visible to every eye. Revelation 1:7 says, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him." One day, in blazing glory, Jesus will return and make all things right.

3. Jesus is winning right now.

This is the hardest truth for us to grasp. Most Christians spend their lives reminding themselves of what Jesus has done — He forgave me, He justified me — or what He will do — He will return, He will make things right.

But Revelation insists on this: Jesus is winning right now. All the hard things you're going through — ultimately, they are under His sovereign hand. Maybe He is working the same pattern in your life that He worked in His own: Jesus wins by losing. Maybe that's what He's shaping in you.

Look around the world: Jesus is winning every tribe, tongue, and nation to Himself. He is pressing His kingdom into the world, and the world often resists it — but He is winning. And the question for the seven churches — and for our church — is this:

Are we going to be part of that? Are we going to engage? Because John is clear: you can stay inside and slowly go out of business, or you can go outside and face the world with a gospel bigger, better, and more glorious than anything you've ever seen. We'll explore more of that next week. Think about that.

*This text is based upon a verbatim transcription of a sermon by Rev. Allen. It has been edited by Copilot AI, as well as by the editorial staff at Third Millennium Ministries.*

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