

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION, PART 1

It is truly an honor to be with you this morning. We are going to begin a very long journey that could potentially take years. We shall endeavor to exegetically study the Book of Revelation. This book is often avoided from the pulpit. In fact, during my whole tenure as a Christian, I only remember a portion of it exegetically preached once. It was many years ago at Tri-City Baptist Church in Conover, North Carolina when Pastor Stan Frye preached through the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3). That's the only time I ever remember this book being given specific attention from the pulpit in a local church. And considering what Jesus Christ says to the churches therein, I find it amazing to see it so ignored. The Book of Revelation has relevance for Christians throughout all of history, but particularly, I believe, for those of us living in last days. And I believe we are living in the last days. We should certainly study this book. It's gonna be a long journey.

Revelation, the last book of the New Testament and the last book of the Bible, forms an interesting bookend to a 66-book love letter that begins with the Law of Moses. It is interesting to compare Genesis with Revelation, and these bookends fittingly sandwich all of God's special revelation between them.

Revelation is an Unveiling of Jesus Christ

Consider the simple phrase found in verse 1: ***“The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”***

There is a lot of truth packaged in this short introductory clause. Here, the *Koine Greek* word translated “revelation” is actually the root of another English word we use today: *apocalypse*. This book is the APOCALYPSE of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have heard or spoken this word, associating it with the end of the world or some kind of terrible Armageddon-like tragedy. But, *apocalupsis* (αποκαλυψις) is just a Greek word that means *unveiling* or an *uncovering*. The Book of Revelation is simply the unveiling or the revealing of Jesus Christ the Messiah in His glory—not as He was revealed at His first coming, the suffering servant portrayed in Isaiah 53. This is as He was revealed to Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, and again, as He is revealed here later to John the Apostle in exile upon the Isle of Patmos.

So first and foremost, Revelation is a revealing or an uncovering of Jesus Christ the Resurrected Messiah. In fact, the reason we use the English word *apocalypse* in an end-of-the-world sense is precisely because of its relationship to the Book of

Revelation. It's one of those biblical allusions in the English language and in American culture that is inextricably tied to the Bible. In regular usage, *apocalupsis* in the common Greek language of the New Testament era had nothing to do with the end of the world. It just meant an unveiling.

There are many biblical allusions in American culture, proving the role of the Bible in the founding and establishing of our nation. Our society may want God out of the schools; we may want God out of our language; we may want God out of our government ... but there are so many allusions to Scripture in our modern English language. We couldn't totally remove God from our culture, even if we wanted to do so. We can kick the *Ten Commandments* out of all classrooms, all government institutions, and off all American lawns, but every one of us have them written upon our hearts and upon our consciences (Romans 2:14-15), so we can't get rid of God's moral laws either.

Let me emphasize again: Revelation is the uncovering or the revealing of Jesus Christ. And if it is a revealing or an uncovering, then by default, it can be understood and properly interpreted. Unfortunately, many Christians have avoided Revelation because they wrongly suppose:

"Oh, it is just a bunch of symbols. Maybe it's something that has already happened. Maybe it is in the future. I just don't know. We just can't understand Revelation. All we need to know is that Jesus is coming back, and I'll just be safe and settled with this."

I know a lot of Christians, solid brethren, who preach the Gospel faithfully in the streets and yet sadly retain this perspective upon the Book of Revelation. And yet, the very TITLE loudly shouts that it can be understood. It can be properly interpreted. Moreover, when one considers the very specific blessing in 1:3 ("**Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy ...**") and the many occurrences therein of "**He that hath an ear, let him hear,**" it is undeniable that these twenty-two chapters at the end of the Bible can be properly apprehended. It's not enough to just believe that Jesus is coming back. He gave us this unveiling of Himself for a purpose, and we need to understand it. We need to preach it!

When I think of that term *unveiling* or the *revelation* of Jesus Christ, I'm reminded of what the Apostle Peter says concerning mockers in the last days:

"Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the

fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (II Peter 3:3-4).

The Book of Revelation is an ANSWER to those same mockers. It is the answer to us, the church of Jesus Christ, in response to these scoffers. Jesus the Messiah is indeed coming back. And when He comes back, He won't be a homeless bum on the streets. He won't be lying in a manger. He will be a glorified King as He is revealed in this book. In the fifth chapter, you will see that Jesus Christ is the only One who is worthy to open a seven-sealed scroll. This sealed book is the TITLE DEED to the earth. Satan is the prince of this world and the prince of the power of the air; and he was able to deceive the First Adam into giving up that title deed. But, the Second Adam purchased it back at the cross. Jesus Christ, the Kinsman Redeemer, is the rightful owner and possessor of this world. He holds the title deed, and He alone is worthy to open it. This Book of Revelation shows us how Jesus Christ takes rightful possession of what is His, rightful possession of what is His and what He purchased through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. So, this book is quite important and more than worthy of our careful attention.

A Revelation, not Revelations

Now, this is the REVELATION of Jesus Christ. It is not a series of revelations. A lot of folks would mistakenly say, “Let’s turn to Revelations,” or “I’m reading from Revelations.” This book is not a string of revelations; it is an inseparable REVELATION that cannot be compartmentalized. If you look at the seven seal judgments, the seventh seal IS the seven trumpet judgments. The seventh trumpet IS the seven vial judgments of God’s wrath. It all runs together in Jesus Christ, in His glory, in His preeminence, in His office as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who brings ultimate judgment. It is all a singular revelation of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most folks do not want to see Jesus as the Judge who wages war in righteousness. They are comfortable with Him lying in the manger, as in Luke 2, but not as He is revealed in the Book of Revelation, the One who will rule with a rod of iron. But alas, it is so written. We need to understand this revelation of Him. We should never speak lightly of Jesus. Even John the Apostle, here in the first chapter, the one who laid upon Christ’s bosom at the Last Supper ... even he falls down on his face as dead before the glorified Christ. If anything, the REVELATION of Jesus Christ, all twenty-two chapters, exhorts the reverence, fear, and awe that we ought to have for our Saviour.

Yes, Revelation is a very interesting book, worthy of the believer's attention, worthy of the preacher's attention, worthy of the attention of the churches, especially in these latter times. The Book of Revelation is an uncovering or unveiling of Jesus Christ, and yet it is often called *The Revelation of John the Apostle*. I understand this sentiment, but this is not John's revelation. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ given to Jesus Christ by God the Father and REVEALED to John while in exile on the Isle of Patmos. It is revealed to John so that he can, in turn, share it with the churches, WITH US. This book is indeed a revelation, an unveiling, of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John & His Writings

John the Apostle outlived all of the other Apostles. Historical tradition says he was the only one of the original twelve disciples who died a natural death and that he lived to be a very old man. Indeed, John suffered persecution. Some say he was once thrown into a pot of boiling oil and somehow miraculously survived. At one point, he was exiled for his Christian testimony to a penal colony on the island of Patmos, a small chunk of land in the Aegean Sea off the coast of modern-day Turkey.

In AD 70, Roman legions marched into Jerusalem under Titus, the military general; and they ransacked the city. The Second Temple was destroyed; the Jews were scattered; there was great persecution. Many Christian Jews living in Jerusalem were therefore scattered abroad. At this time, John migrated north to Ephesus, which had become a center of the Early Church. John apparently lived out his days as an elder and a counselor to the churches of Asia Minor, a wise man who had lived and walked with Jesus Christ and who finished his earthly testimony strong, discipling a new generation of believers. Such was his role in his elder years, and it was in this role that he wrote all of his books found in the New Testament.

The *Gospel of John* was not penned early after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, like Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It was composed under inspiration of the Holy Spirit toward the end of John's life, somewhere around AD 85. We cannot know for sure, but it could have been written while he was on the Isle of Patmos.

Notwithstanding, it was compiled late, with access to the other three Gospels already in circulation, and it gives a true retrospective picture of the life of Christ, highlighting the very same deity revealed to John in the Book of Revelation.

John's Gospel is indeed unique, bringing the other Gospels together into a nice synoptic picture. The Apostle John wrote late, long after Matthew, John Mark, and

Luke the Physician. He was elderly and living at a time near the close of the Apostolic Age (AD 30-100) when apostasy had begun creeping into the churches. Thus, all of John's writings were in some way a direct response to false teaching. We cannot ignore this context. It was a day when Jesus Christ's divinity was under question. It was a day when *Gnosticism* (i.e. the idea that men could acquire secret and special knowledge and therefore develop some sort of "Christ-consciousness" or special relationship with God) was infiltrating the churches, and John confronted it. Thus, the Fourth Gospel is very clear from its opening words:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Consider the Three Epistles of John: they were addressed to local churches and faithful believers facing rising apostasy. *First John* contrasts a true believer with a false believer. *Second John* is written to a faithful church dwelling in the midst of apostasy. *Third John* was written to a faithful believer who was within an apostate church under the leadership of an apostate pastor. Then comes Revelation, revealing to us exactly who Jesus is in response to all the false gnostic teaching that had arisen and called His deity into question.

John was writing in days of apostasy, and we are undoubtedly living in days of apostasy. This makes the Book of Revelation and John's Epistles all the more appropriate, demanding our careful attention.

Persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian

The Apostle John probably wrote Revelation around AD 95. He was persecuted and exiled under the Roman Emperor Domitian. Most Christians are familiar with Nero (AD 37-68). He was the emperor who instituted the first state persecution against Christians, and it was under his tyranny that Peter was killed and Paul beheaded. A lot of the other apostles also met their demise during this time.

After Nero, there was a short time of peace, that is, until Domitian (AD 51-96). He inaugurated a second state persecution against Christians. I find it remarkable that a modern-day online *Wikipedia* article concerning Domitian mentions nothing about his persecution of Christians. That was what most characterized his reign according to sources who lived and wrote at the time. The *Wikipedia* entry notes that Domitian was a "ruthless" leader but that he was also a "good autocrat" and a "good bureaucrat." Be

careful with *Wikipedia* and other such encyclopedic online sources. More often than not, the compilers are godless liberals who seek to indoctrinate through revisionist pictures of history, particularly when it involves the Christian Church. There is a lot of information online, a mark of the times of the end (see Daniel 12:4), and a lot of Christians default to “googling” something for information as if the information revealed is neutral and accurate. Be very careful, it’s not. And remember, the most dangerous kind of lie is one mixed with a little truth.

Domitian was the brother of Titus (AD 39-81), the Roman general who marched with his armies into Jerusalem in AD 70 and destroyed the Second Temple. Titus reigned thereafter as emperor for a short time until he met an untimely death. His brother then came into power. Domitian was a sick, twisted, and paranoid man, much like the femme *Emperor Commodus* played by Joaquin Phoenix in the 2000 film *Gladiator*. Ironically, Domitian was much more like this character than the historical Commodus who didn’t bother Christians. Domitian set himself up as a god. A decree was passed during his reign demanding that he be addressed as “Our Lord and God Emperor Domitian.” The Roman Senate hated him; and he hated Christians. He even instructed the people of the empire to blame the Christians for any earthquake, famine, or natural disaster. “You should blame the Christians,” he proclaimed. Domitian ordered Christians arrested, and if they refused to renounce their faith, they would be put to death right there on the spot. Commonly, he would order suspected Christians “tested,” demanding they take an oath before interrogation. Those who refused to take an oath were immediately put to death, for Domitian knew such wouldn’t renounce their faith.

A few well-known Christians from the New Testament were killed during this second state persecution. In Acts 17, Paul preached atop Mars Hill in Athens to the idol worshippers and the philosophers gathered there. The Scriptures say:

“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Acts 17:32-34).

Dionysius the Areopagite was martyred during Domitian’s reign. His testimony was that of a very wise believer, one who gave good counsel to others. Some say Timothy met his demise during this period. He was living in Ephesus, and the crowds were already

stirred up against the Christians because of the imperial decrees. According to *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, Timothy he out to preach against a pagan festival taking place in the streets. The crowd got angry, and they beat him to death with clubs. A lot of this stuff we cannot know for certain, but it is very interesting.

Domitian reigned as Emperor for about 15 years (AD 81-96). Sometime toward the end this period, the Apostle John was arrested and exiled to the island of Patmos. Historical tradition places this exile around AD 95. The following year, Domitian was assassinated by some people in his own court. Not long thereafter, tradition records that John was released from Patmos and returned to Ephesus to live out the rest of his days. During these last days of relative ease, occasioned by the death of the emperor, it is believed John wrote his three epistles. Thus, the Gospel of John was written before or during his exile to Patmos. Revelation was written while John was exiled on Patmos. First, Second, and Third John were written from Ephesus after John was released from exile. The Book of Revelation is the last book in the New Testament, but it wasn't the last Book of the New Testament to be written.

Patmos is a small island off the coast of modern-day Turkey. It's only about ten miles long and six miles wide; and it was a Roman penal camp. Criminals were sent to Patmos to do hard labor. John, though elderly, was obviously put to work in the mines. He wasn't just sitting around doing nothing when he received this revelation. He was in a penal camp sentenced to some form of hard labor, and it was amidst this unjust tribulation that Jesus Christ was revealed to him again as he had seen him more than a half-century before on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-2).

Revelation's Circulation & Place in the New Testament Canon

John was given Revelation, and he was told to then communicate Revelation "to the churches" (Revelation 22:16). Shortly after its completion, this book was circulated in obedience to this charge throughout Asia Minor and then throughout the entire realm of the Early Church at the end of the Apostolic Age (AD 30-100).

Though circulated early after its completion, Revelation was a bit slow in being accepted by the "Church" as canonical. A reason for this is because of its apocalyptic character and the discussion of Christ's thousand-year reign referenced in Chapter 20. Now, nowhere else in the Scriptures is Jesus' reign as King over Israel and King over the world described in terms of a specific time period. The Millennial Reign of Christ is prophesied throughout the Old Testament: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Micah, Joel,

Zechariah, etc. But in Revelation 20, we are given a specific period of time, a thousand years. A lot of folks way back then couldn't handle this just like a lot of folks today can't handle it.

I know a brother who faithfully preaches the Gospel on the streets, a solid brother who leans more toward a *Covenant Theology* understanding of the Scriptures, this idea that the Church has REPLACED Israel in God's program as opposed to being PLACED with His plan and purpose for the nation of Israel. Read Romans 11. Such a viewpoint is wrong, just plain wrong. It's not a reason for me to cease fellowship with this brother or to refuse to preach the Gospel with him, for he preaches the Gospel message very clearly and boldly. We have discussed such things though, and he has said to me: "I just don't understand how you can build an entire doctrine of the Millennial Reign of Christ on one passage from the Book of Revelation." My first question in response to this question would be, "How many passages do we need for something stated clearly in one passage to be biblical truth?"

Consider for a moment that there is only one clear statement of the Trinity in the entire Bible:

"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (I John 5:7).

Should we question or disbelieve the TRINITY relationship of God because it is only clearly delineated one time in the Scriptures? Oh, it's implied in many places, but only clearly delineated involving all Three Persons of the Godhead in I John 5:7.

The fact is, the Millennial Reign of Messiah is described in many places throughout the Old Testament. It is prophesied in the Torah, in the Prophets, and in the Writings, or what Jesus calls "the psalms":

"And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44).

All the Book of Revelation adds to previous scriptural revelation is a specific time frame. So, that same spirit of discomfort or misunderstanding is what kept the Book of Revelation from being accepted by the "Universal Church" for a time. Orthodox groups

and local church bodies who were actually going out, preaching the Gospel, and copying the Scriptures faithfully ... they accepted it as Bible very early.

If you look back over church history and trace how God has preserved His Word, you won't find it in the Roman Catholic Church. You won't find it necessarily in dead Protestant churches. You'll find that the faithful preservation of God's Word to largely be a history of the work of evangelical Christians. In other words, the Scriptures were copied faithful, preserved, and disseminated best by common disciples who believed in sharing their faith and preaching the Gospel. It was preserved by groups of Christians who were persecuted for their faith. And oftentimes, that line of preservation follows a TRAIL OF BLOOD.

It is the same thing in terms of the acceptance of God's inspired writings into the New Testament canon. Early Christians often lightly esteemed Revelation. Some very prominent Christians in history, like John Calvin and Martin Luther, were uncomfortable with the Book of Revelation. Some today believe that because John Calvin was uncomfortable with this Book, we should likewise be uncomfortable with it. Frankly, that is ridiculous.

In view of the clear exhortations given in Revelation to hear and to understand what is written, it is interesting that it remains one of the most ignored books in all of the Bible. Perhaps this sheds some light on why Jesus suddenly asked this question in Luke 18:8:

“Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”

I want to make it very clear that the authority, the inspiration, or the canonical inclusion of a book in the Bible, is not dependent upon man's acceptance. God's inspiration and preservation of Holy Scripture are not dependent upon an official recognition by some counsel, creed, or official vote. The Holy Spirit is the Author of God's words. He inspires them. He perfectly preserves them down through the centuries.

“The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever” (Psalm 12:6-7).

The acceptance of the Church, the preservation of these inspired writings by the instrumentation of men, the use and the fruit of these inspired writings ... all of this

simply demonstrates and proves what God, the Holy Spirit, has already declared to be. Simply because it took a little time for the Early Church to formally declare the Book of Revelation to be New Testament Canon doesn't mean this book is not the Word of God or that it has no divine authority on par with the rest of Scripture. The churches did eventually accept it, and this is indeed PROOF that the book is what it claims to be.

God governs the inspiration of Scripture. Most of us believe that. We believe He inspired the Scriptures. Some people say,

"Well, the only original manuscripts are inspired and then when these originals were copied, mistakes came into it, this, that, and the other ..."

That makes no sense. If God inspires something, He must by necessity preserve it. I like to use an old *1828 Edition Dictionary* by Noah Webster when I study the Scriptures. This standard English dictionary from the early days of America really sheds light on a lot of old English words no longer in common use or commonly understood. And, it is amazing how many Scriptural allusions are found in that edition first given to the American people. Under the word "Providence" in his 1828 dictionary, a word that refers to God's governing of all things, Noah Webster remarks:

"He that acknowledges a creation and denies a Providence involves himself in a palpable contradiction."

The same applies with regard to our present subject. He who argues or believes in the inspiration of the Holy Ghost upon the original manuscripts of Scripture, but denies a preservation by the Holy Ghost throughout history, involves himself in a palpable contradiction. Of course, this truth begs many questions and forces much to consider in view of modern English Bible versions. I study and preach from the King James Bible. I do it for a reason, not because "I was raised that way" and not because "My daddy used it and his daddy used it" and certainly not because "If it was good enough for Paul, it's good enough for me" ... none of that stuff. I use it and I stick with it because I believe in God's perfect preservation of the Holy Scriptures and can see its marks down through church history. Without divine preservation, there really is no useful divine inspiration.

God the Holy Spirit governs His Word. He inspires it, and He preserves it. He also governs the faith and actions of the True Body of Christ in accepting the authority of the Scriptures; and He governs the very history which demonstrates these things to be

true. Thus, if we rightly understand God to be truly sovereign and that He governs all these things, I don't understand the problem with the Book of Revelation. I don't understand why the same seminary professors and the same pastors, who would say the Holy Spirit led men to put the right books into the Canon, would have a problem believing that the Holy Spirit led men to properly preserve those same canonical Scriptures word-for-word down through the centuries. I just don't get it. Alas, it is one of the great paradoxes of the Church: Believers can be so solid on some issues and so off-base on others. It really all boils down to failure in ***“rightly dividing the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15).***

Athanasius' *Easter Letter* and the Council of Carthage

Around AD 367, there pops up an ancient letter written by Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria. It was an Easter letter sent to the surrounding churches, and this letter lists as Holy Scripture the same 27 books of the New Testament that we have in the canon today. About 30 years later, a council of both eastern and western churches came together to affirm what they we believed. At this Council of Carthage, it was defined and accepted that the consensus in the churches was a 27-book New Testament like we have today. Some naysayers would quip, “Well, the Church didn't accept these books until almost 400 AD.” Uhh, NO ... they affirmed a CONSENSUS that already existed. In any matter, consensus isn't established overnight. It is something that has been established over a long period of time. Thus, the declaration of the Council of Carthage in AD 397 indicates that the New Testament Canon had been accepted for a long period prior.

I do find it interesting that one of the ancient Greek codices containing a big part of the New Testament (a manuscript almost worshiped by a lot of the scholars and preachers who love these modern English Bible versions) is completely missing the Book of Revelation. I'm speaking of the *Codex Vaticanus* in the possession of the Vatican for many years. It contains all sorts of apocryphal writings and other unscriptural books mixed in with biblical text, and yet it is the basis for many of the changes or alterations in modern English Bible versions over and against the text tradition of the King James Bible. In other words, the complete verses missing in your modern English New Testament were also missing in *Codex Vaticanus*, a Catholic manuscript compiled sometime in the 4th Century. *Vaticanus* contains a book called *The Shepherd of Hermas*, but it doesn't contain Revelation. So keep in mind when reading a *New International Version (NIV)* or an *English Standard Version (ESV)*: the differences you see

have a corrupt manuscript tradition behind them, an ancient codex that didn't even include the Book of Revelation. I just find that interesting.

Christians in the Early Church possessed, collected, copied, and distributed the Gospels and Paul's letters. They assimilated the New Testament writings which showed the work and stamp of the inspiration by the Holy Ghost. And up above, God sovereignly governed it all. Believers collected these writings and were carrying complete New Testaments all over the Roman Empire long before Athanasius, long before this Council at Carthage.

It is very similar to what transpired with biblical truth in the Protestant Reformation. Perhaps you know the stories of Martin Luther and John Calvin, how God used Reformers like these to pull people out of the bondage and darkness of the Roman Catholic Church. However, long before Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31st, 1517, there had been Anabaptist groups and persecuted Christians throughout all of Europe sowing the seeds of reformation. And without these, their testimonies mostly awash in blood, there never would have been a Protestant Reformation. In the same Providential fashion, if it weren't for early Christians taking the Gospel throughout the ancient Roman world with New Testament writings that included the Book of Revelation, it never would have been recognized as canonical by believers in the 4th Century.

So rest assured: God, a Sovereign LORD who inspires and preserves His Word and His words, oversaw the Book of Revelation aptly placed and enshrined with Genesis as a bookend to Holy Scripture, fittingly bringing the New Testament to a close and standing forth as a true capstone revealing the Lord Jesus Christ in His great glory, a greatly expanded edition of what Peter, James, and John saw when they stood upon the Mount of Transfiguration. You can trust that the Book of Revelation is God's Word. It agrees with the testimony of the rest of Scripture and doesn't contradict any part of the New Testament. It was accepted by the early Christians in such a way that said acceptance was declared to be church-wide CONSENSUS as early as the 4th Century, long before there were any printing presses. It was included in the Canon and remains preserved there for us today. Perhaps the greatest proof that Revelation is God's Word is that you can turn to it right now in your English Bible, many centuries after it was first copied and circulated.

This Book is God's revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, in His glory. It is inspired. It has been preserved. Therefore, it is IMPORTANT. The Apostle John was living in days of apostasy when He wrote down this vision. We are living in days of apostasy. Thus, it has the same power and the same meaning for us as it had for the believers of those seven churches in Asia Minor.

It's ***"The Revelation of Jesus Christ ..."*** (*Revelation 1:1*)

Revelation for the Common Man

As a further matter of introduction, it behooves me to highlight some specific aspects of faith which shall govern this exegetical study through Revelation, not because I intend to filter Holy Scripture through my own theology or private interpretations, but because many years of study and accountability in the Scriptures have built for me a theological framework, a theology of faith in the simplicity of the Word of God. Consider important truths that must be affirmed before I dig further into this text:

THE SCRIPTURES WERE INSPIRED AND PRESERVED BY GOD FOR THE COMMON MAN AND HIS UNDERSTANDING.

Such was the spirit of William Tyndale's defiance of Roman Catholic tyranny and his motivation for translating the Bible into English for even the plough boy: "I defy the Pope and all his laws . . . if God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the scripture than thou [i.e. the Pope] doest."

The original language of the New Testament, for example, wasn't the hifalutin *Classical Greek* of the sages, the philosophers, and the sophists. It was the common *Koine Greek* of everyday people across the Roman Empire in the first century, a poor man's trade language. Because the Scriptures were given to the common man, they are, by default, meant to be interpreted LITERALLY. In other words, when the plain sense is common sense in the Word of God, there is no other sense. The Holy Scriptures don't hide spiritual and allegorical meanings that only certain educated people, professional people, can understand. Certainly there are symbols, but Scriptural symbols are always defined in the context of their usage or by their use elsewhere in Scripture.

I believe ANYONE can understand and apply the Word of God with the help of the Holy Spirit, apart from any sort of human institution of higher learning or sacerdotal mediation. I believe this precisely because the Scriptures are literal. In other words,

they mean exactly what they say in their discernible historical and grammatical context. By way of example, Jesus said to His disciples in John 14:6:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

It means exactly what it says. There is no other way to God. Jesus Christ is the ONLY WAY. Period.

When Paul affirms in Titus 1:2 that God ***"cannot lie,"*** he means exactly what he says—not God does not lie, but God CANNOT LIE. Yes, there is something that God cannot do.

A Dispensational Approach to Revelation

It's very important when studying the Book of Revelation to approach it like the rest of Scripture, in a plain-sense literal way. For centuries, folks have tried to force all sorts of private interpretations upon this Book and avoid the plain sense meaning of words and sentences. And for that reason, many pastors, teachers, and churches today are afraid to touch it with a ten-mile pointer.

BECAUSE I BELIEVE THE SCRIPTURES ARE TO BE TAKEN LITERALLY IN THEIR PROPER HISTORICAL AND GRAMMATICAL CONTEXT, MY THEOLOGY IS, BY DEFINITION, DISPENSATIONAL.

Now, the words *dispensation* or *dispensational* are misinterpreted regularly. A lot of Christian folks carry wrong presuppositions about such words and completely misunderstand the nature of what is described as *dispensational theology*. What does it mean?

Because I believe the Scriptures were given by God to the common man and for the common man's understanding, I interpret them literally by their plain sense. And because the Scriptures can be interpreted literally, we can be assured that God has laid out His plan for us in an orderly and understandable fashion from beginning to end in those Holy Scriptures. A *dispensational* theology simply acknowledges that God has a plan and a purpose for all of human history and that He carries out this plan ***"decently and in order" (I Corinthians 14:40).***

Dispensational is the essence of II Timothy 2:15, **“rightly dividing the word of truth.”**

A dispensational approach to Holy Scripture affirms its plain interpretation and therefore declares the GLORY OF GOD to be the chief end of all things, not simply the God's plan of redemption for mankind. In other words, the glory of God is more important than the salvation of man. The Creator's foremost purpose is self-glorification, and sinful man's redemption is simply a part of that, not its centerpiece. Many Christians mistakenly think it's all about mankind, that it's all about *us*, that it's all about *me*. That's why our Gospel message has become so man-centered. That's why our interpretation and application of the Scriptures has become so man-centered. That's why our ministries and our Great Commission “strategies” are now so man-centered. And that's precisely why so many professing believers, pastors, and teachers ignore the Book of Revelation. The centerpiece of Revelation is God and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator, not man the creature.

The primary purpose of the Scriptures isn't to reveal a heavenly home for believers. It's purpose is to reveal and glorify the Creator God, to reveal and glorify His anointed, the Messiah. God and the Messiah are certainly glorified through the redemption of men. The Lord is glorified by the eternal state in which believers live and reign with Him. But He's also glorified by the judgment of the wicked, their ultimate downfall and eternal damnation.

When I go out to preach the Gospel in the streets, I must be reminded of this, especially when folks mock and when they reject the good news of Jesus Christ. God is glorified in all of that; for on the Day of Judgment, when the excuses are made and the accusations are thrown out, God knows that these folks heard the truth and had opportunity by it. None of the excuses of the mockers and scoffers will stand, and in this, the Judge will be glorified. In fact, I've often said to mockers who stop their ears and spew all sorts of blasphemy about the Lord Jesus Christ: “There's coming a day when God is going to judge you and your words. And He is going to cast you into a Lake of Fire for all of eternity. And on that day, the righteous will APPLAUD. They will applaud the judgment of a holy and righteous Lord.”

Some fellow believers might exclaim, “Wow, how could you say such a thing?” Others might respond, “That is so very harsh.” Well, my friends: God exists to be glorified in all things, and the centerpiece of Scriptural revelation is HIS GLORY. And a big part of that glory is His judgment upon those who reject Him and His salvation.

Dispensational theology simply affirms that the Bible is laid out in an orderly fashion and that its centerpiece or central theme is the glory of God.

Naturally and logically, this demands that we recognize a **DISTINCTION** between God's plan and purpose for Israel as a nation and God's plan and purpose for the New Testament Church. Israel is a nation of people and of the earth. The Church is a peculiar called-out people, a heavenly program, Jew and Gentile together in the Body of Christ, a great mystery.

Some believers would argue the Church to be some sort of replacement for Israel. In other words, the nation of Israel rejected God, and therefore, the earthly promises made to that nation are to now be spiritually applied to the New Testament Church. What God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, some say, is fulfilled only in the Church. Such is the essence of *Covenant Theology* or *Replacement Theology* (i.e. as opposed to a *dispensational* theology). It's almost comical: Those who say such things about the Church spiritually appropriating the earthly blessings promised to Israel never seem to mention all the earthly curses promised to Israel as a consequence for rejecting the LORD. You can't have those blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1-14) without those curses (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Are those spiritually applied to the Church as well? Has the Church likewise "replaced" Israel in those cursings too.

Ignoring the distinction between Israel and the Church in God's plan and program for the ages clearly runs amuck of the Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans 9-11. Israel is the adulterous wife of Jehovah. The Church is the spotless virgin bride of Christ. How can these two be the same? They clearly are not. These are two distinct programs in the plan and purpose of God in human history. Now, the dispensational affirmation of this biblical distinction in no way implies or suggests that all Jewish people are saved. There will be a whole lot of wicked, rebellious, and Messiah-rejecting Jewish folks in hell, right there with Korah's rebels of Numbers 26 and a huge mess of Gentiles. And yet, God maintains a plan and purpose for the **NATION** of Israel here on earth according to His unconditional promises to the Jewish Patriarchs. And, He will most assuredly keep His Word and fulfill these things. Jesus Christ will one day reign as King of Israel in Jerusalem, physically and bodily upon the throne of His father David (Luke 1:32). The Jewish Messiah will govern the whole world from Jerusalem as the rightful heir in the lineage of David and a true descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord will fulfill these promises quite literally, as all the promises concerning the First Advent of Christ were fulfilled quite literally.

There will thus come a day in human history when the nation of Israel living at that time, like Saul on the road to Damascus, will experience a sudden awakening and realize that Jesus Christ is indeed the Messiah. The nation will be to be brought nearly to its bitter end to realize it (Jeremiah 30), and we are gonna see that in the Book of Revelation.

The New Testament Church, on the other hand, is a special program. Israel rejected Jesus Christ as its Messiah, even after given a chance for national repentance following the Resurrection and Ascension. That formal rejection happened when Stephen preached to the people and religious leaders in Jerusalem. Thus, God began a special program in history, an intervening program between Israel's formal rejection and her future spiritual awakening (see Romans 11:25-26). The Church in this Church Age is God's special act in which He calls out a people, both Jews and Gentiles ... out of their cultures, out of their idolatries, out of their false religions ... and makes them a peculiar people ... a people that crosses ethnic bounds, a people that crosses political boundaries ... and uses them to take the Gospel message to the end of the world so that the Gentiles might receive the blessings given through Abraham, all in fulfillment of prophecy (see Isaiah 49:6). When the fulness of the Gentiles is come in, then all Israel living at that time, the nation, shall awaken and be saved.

In this exegetical study on the Book of Revelation, I acknowledge and affirm these biblical truths, and therefore, my handling of the text will be *dispensational*. My mode of handling isn't built first and then forced upon the Scriptures. It is the plain-sense reading of the Scriptures that determines my theological understanding, the way it should be for any preacher or teacher of the Word of God.

A Pre-Millennial Approach to Revelation

Because my theological approach to Revelation is *dispensational*, it must also be *pre-millennial*. Well, what do you mean by that? A *pre-millennial theology* rightly understands that this world is diving and down-spiraling into sin and iniquity. The only way true peace can come to this world is if the Messiah Himself returns PHYSICALLY and BODILY to earth, splits the Mount of Olives, and sets up a literal kingdom as earth's literal King. In other words, manmade effort or government cannot bring peace to earth. *Post-millennial theology* (i.e. as opposed to *pre-millennial*) would interpret all of Revelation to be spiritual and some kind of symbolic picture of the Church growing and growing and growing, and getting better and better and better, so as to finally

usher in a millennium of peace by its own morality and worldwide influence. I reject this as contrary to the Scriptures.

Mankind is fallen and wicked. The professing Church over time will apostasize and fall away (II Thessalonians 2:3). Jesus Christ will always reserve to Himself a faithful Remnant, the genuine Body of Christ, but the professing Church will go down, down, down, down, and down: a great falling away, a great APOSTASY. The only cure, the only remedy for this falling away, is Jesus Christ Himself. We are going to learn this and see this clearly in the Book of Revelation. Jesus Christ's coming isn't fulfilled in a State Church, or professing Church, getting bigger and better and assuming control over governments. That's Catholic theology, and it's bad theology, unbiblical theology. A lot of the Reformers in the Protestant Reformation came boldly out of the Roman Catholic Church but sadly continued clinging to some traits of their Catholic mother. When it came to eschatology or the doctrines of end times, they never could seem to let go of the Roman Catholic Church's private interpretations. That is why a lot of these Protestant denominations born out of the Protestant Reformation became *post-millennial* or *a-millennial* in their approach to the Scriptures, maintaining that a Millennial reign of Christ on earth is not literal. I believe it is.

A Pre-Tribulational Approach to Revelation

Because my theological approach to the Book of Revelation is *pre-millennial*, I would argue that it must also be *pre-tribulational*. What does that mean? As I believe that Jesus Christ will set up a literal millennial kingdom here on earth, in which He will fulfill all the promises made to the nation of Israel, I therefore believe that the Church is a special program distinct from the nation of Israel. And when God is finished with His work for the Church in this Church Age, He will at that time turn again to Israel, call out witnesses from among them, and begin to fulfill His promises to the nation, culminating in a national spiritual awakening at Messiah's second coming.

Since the church is not Israel, since the Church is not appointed to God's judgment and wrath, I believe that God will take out the Church before the great majority of the apocalyptic events of Revelation take place. It is interesting to note that the Church isn't mentioned in the Book of Revelation anywhere between 3:22 and 22:16.

Now, I'm not suggesting that our study of the Book of Revelation should be filtered through a theological framework. What I am suggesting, by way of introduction, is that this exegetical study will develop upon theological convictions learned and embraced

over many years of studying the Scriptures. And yet, we should always be ready for the Scriptures, and their Great Illuminator, the Holy Spirit, to teach us. Our theology must ultimately be subject to the Scriptures.

Revelation is Apocalyptic

There are some characteristics of Revelation that must be kept in mind throughout this study, from 1:1 to 22:21. This book is APOCALYPTIC. It deals with apocalyptic times, the culmination of God's plan and purpose for the ages. Revelation is not about the past; it's future prophecy. That's exactly what John calls it (1:3). These twenty-two chapters are about the culmination, the revealing of Christ, the bringing together of all things that God began in the Garden of Eden when He promised Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. Revelation is the bringing together of all that and a fitting close to the Bible. It's apocalyptic.

There are apocalyptic books in the Old Testament also primarily concerned with the future from beginning to end: Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Isaiah, Zechariah. These books are apocalyptic literature. Like Revelation, they focus upon the culmination or the climax of all things; they contain divine revelation of the conclusion of God's great program. The apocalyptic writings in Scripture are not dealing with insignificant events or specific situations in history. They address history written in advance that will greatly affect, not only Israel, but all the Gentile nations of the world. It is therefore important to read and understand these inspired and preserved writings.

The Book of Revelation is indeed apocalyptic, but it's based upon apocalyptic truth that had already been penned in the Old Testament, scriptural writings with which John, the other apostles, and the earliest Christians were certainly familiar. Therefore, what John sees in Revelation isn't something new. The particular audience for whom He writes may be different, but the apocalyptic truth revealed is the same that was revealed to Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah, Daniel, David and others. And some of these prophecies, including various prophetic Psalms, had been given a thousand years before John was exiled to Patmos. So, Revelation is built upon these in the same way that the New Testament is constructed upon the foundation of the whole of the Old Testament. In other words, the Book of Revelation cannot be properly understood apart from Old Testament prophecy relating to Israel and the Day of the Lord. We cannot properly understand John's visions outside of what has already been revealed in terms of the Apocalypse.

As with any other portion of Scripture, Revelation cannot be interpreted by itself. Just like no other scripture should be interpreted by itself. II Timothy 2:15 exhorts:

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH.”

My friends, the reason people get into trouble misinterpreting the Book of Revelation and other difficult passages in the Bible is precisely because they fail to let Scripture interpret Scripture. If Revelation says something that could have several possible interpretations, but the Bible elsewhere declares with clarity a proper interpretation, then we are going to understand how to properly interpret the relevant passage in Revelation. It's pretty simple.

One must also be careful not to deny or overlook the particular relationship between Revelation and the Book of Daniel. Daniel prophecies to the people of Israel about the last days in terms of the nation of Israel. Revelation is written to the churches about the last days in terms of the whole world. They go together, and they do not contradict one another. Each of these prophetic and apocalyptic books is key to understanding the other.

Revelation is Christ-Centered

Something else important to remember is that the Book of Revelation is not man-centered, it's CHRIST-CENTERED. It is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It's not about us. It's not about the Church. In fact, after Chapter 5, the church is not mentioned again until the end of the prophecy. That's a strange absence considering what is described as transpiring on the earth at that time. And in this study, we shall see why.

This book is not simply a prophetic program. It's certainly not some symbolic reference to a historical period of time. It is a Christ-centered painting. It's an artist's rendering of Jesus Christ, and that Artist is Almighty God. It's all about Jesus Christ, my friends. Our faith is all about Jesus Christ. It's not about church attendance. It's not about being a good person. It's not about earning favor with God through our own merit. It's about Jesus Christ the Messiah, His death, His burial, His resurrection, and His reign and rule that shall be for all eternity.

In fact, I would argue that the subject matter of this book is an integral component of the Gospel message. If we preach the Gospel and ignore the return of Christ to set up

His Kingdom, I believe our message is incomplete, for it all goes together. When Paul preached to the Greek philosophers atop Mars Hill in Athens, he preached the Gospel affirming:

“Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Christ’s coming Kingdom was a part of Paul's preaching. It should be a part of our ours. Therefore, if the Gospel message inevitably involves the coming of Christ again, it is important for us to understand what the Scriptures have to say about that Second Coming.

Revelation is an Open Book

The Book of Revelation is also an OPEN BOOK. What do I mean by that? In 22:10, John was told:

“Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.”

Don't seal it up. It's open. It needs to be revealed. But in Daniel, written nearly 600 years before, the Prophet was told to seal the book until the time of the end.

“But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book ... And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end” (Daniel 12:4,9).

Revelation is open, for Revelation is the time of the end. Daniel can only be properly understood in view of Revelation and vice-versa. That's why the prophet was told to seal the book. Now, it's open because Revelation is open. We can understand it. We can be prepared. We can be edified.

As I have already declared, the books of Daniel and Revelation are so inextricably tied together that one cannot be properly understood without the other. I would encourage you in your daily devotional time, as we study Revelation together, to read through the Book of Daniel, time and time again. Neither Daniel nor Revelation are a collection of enigmatic sayings or ramblings like the Quran. The Quran is full of “prophetic” Suras and statements that can be interpreted in thousand different ways. Nobody can be

sure what they really mean, and it's all a giant mystery. That, my friend, is not the Bible; it's not biblical prophecy; and it's certainly not the Book of Revelation.

Revelation is a reasonable unveiling of Christ in his glory and the culmination of God's plan and purpose for the ages. It fittingly closes the Canon of Scripture. It is indeed a perfect closing to the Holy Bible. How could anyone add anything more? Many have tried. Some people have foolishly asserted that one or more of the letters written by Martin Luther King, Jr. while he was in prison should be added to the New Testament. LOL, can you believe that? There were actually people who lobbied for such a thing. But, nothing can add to what Revelation fittingly closes. It's an open book that closes God's special revelation found in the Holy Scriptures.

Revelation is Symbolic

The Book of Revelation is SYMBOLIC. It has a literal meaning, but one cannot deny the presence and use of symbols. In the very first verse, it is written that this revelation was "sent and signified" by God's angel to John, God's servant. *Signified* means that it possesses a symbolic character and uses signs and symbols. My friends, we shouldn't be afraid of signs and symbols. They are often explained right in the biblical text. If they are left unexplained in the immediate context, they are explained elsewhere in the Bible. There are plenty of Old Testament parallels which shed further understanding on the symbols found in Revelation. And we must not forget that symbols always speak of reality. If they didn't speak of reality or to reality, then they would not make any sense as symbols.

If you remember Peter's vision in Acts 10, God used it to teach him that He was calling both Jews and Gentiles, that the Gentiles were not unclean but also partakers of the Abrahamic Covenant in Christ. What did God use as a symbol to teach this important truth to Peter? It was a sheet full of animals, meat, food. God said to Peter, "**Rise, Peter; kill, and eat**" (Acts 10:13). Some folks would say, "Well, that vision had nothing to do with food." If it had nothing to do with food, even though meat wasn't the primary purpose, then the symbol has no meaning. God was also saying, as confirmed later in 1 Timothy 4:4-5:

"For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."

So, Peter's vision does have something to say about food, even though that's not the primary meaning. Symbols speak of reality and to reality, or they wouldn't be symbols.

Consider the American flag. It has thirteen stripes. Those stripes are a symbol that speak to the original thirteen colonies that first declared and fought for independence from Great Britain and formed the United States. The stars are symbols that speak to the individual states that have come into the union. These symbols inextricably are tied to reality in America's flag. There is nothing confusing, deep, dark, or mysterious about it. It makes sense. Like the stars and stripes, symbols speak to reality, and we shouldn't be afraid of them. And we'll find that most of the symbolic language in Revelation is explained right there in the surrounding text, and if not, explained in Old Testament parallels.

Revelation is Universal

Revelation is different from Daniel in that it is UNIVERSAL. Daniel focuses upon God's dealings with the nation of Israel in the Last Days. Revelation focuses upon God's dealings with the entire world in the Last Days. Daniel primarily relates to the Jewish people. Revelation primarily relates to the Gentiles. It covers the whole world. No one is exempt. There won't be local outpourings of God's judgments, nor will there be a local return of the Messiah. Every eye shall see Him on that day. It's universal.

Revelation is Climactic

Finally, the Book of Revelation is CLIMACTIC. This refers back to its apocalyptic character. Revelation is the climax and fulfillment of what began in Genesis. That beginning is completed in Revelation. It's a return to an unblemished and untainted Creation where God sees everything, that it is good. Thus, it is for the edification, encouragement, and comfort of the churches. Thus, it is for us our edification, our encouragement, and our comfort as we live and endure in a wicked, wicked world ... as we live in it but are not of it.

Revelation and its climax is written for us. We ought to love this book and not avoid it. Shame on churches and Christians who avoid this book and its prophecies. We ought to love them, especially in view of what Paul says in II Timothy 4.8:

“Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

There's a crown reserved for those who love the REVELATION or appearing of Jesus Christ.

The REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST—this is just an introduction. Next week, I want to talk about the four different ways people have typically interpreted this Book. Three of them, in my opinion, are ridiculous. One of them is the plain sense way. But, I don't want to get into that today. What I do desire is for you to have this framework as we begin this study, this long journey through the Bible's last book.

I believe the time is at hand. I believe we are nearing those days when God will wrap up His program with the Church, and then He shall turn to fulfill Daniel's 70th week and culminate His plan and purpose with the Jews, pouring out His judgment upon the earth and ushering in the reign of Christ and the eternal state. These are things for which we can lift up our heads and rejoice, knowing that they are our ultimate redemption. So when the world throws everything at you—the decadent state of our society, the American government talking about taking away your guns, the tax rates going up, people shooting up the schools, all the corrupt politicians on both sides of the aisle—None of this should stay us from loving the appearing of Christ and daily watching for it.

The day is going to come, Christian, when His appearing is all we have shall have to hold. If the Lord tarries, we are going to lose our liberties, our freedoms, even our homes. We are gonna to lose our funds. Our dollar is not going to be worth anything. And if we are holding onto these things, we are going to find ourselves in big trouble. But, if we simply see these things as a means to live in the world, a means to share the Gospel and bring glory to God as we are watching and waiting for Christ's appearing, all this other stuff shouldn't phase us. It shouldn't phase us when Obama gets elected to a second term. It shouldn't phase us or change anything about our outlook. It shouldn't phase us when government officials show up at our door and say, "Give me your guns." It shouldn't phase us. And that's why this study is so timely. Amen.