



As we start this series this morning here and in Millbrae, I want to ask you a question: When you think of the book of Revelation, what do you think of? What images come to mind when you think of this book?

Maybe you think of a seven-headed beast or a dragon.

Or you think of seven years of tribulation.

Maybe you think of a great battle.

Or you think of a great throne of judgment.

Maybe you think of raptured Christians.

Or you think of martyred saints.

Maybe you think of 1,000 years of heaven on earth.

Or you think of the New Jerusalem.

Maybe you don't know what to think. Maybe you've tried to read this book and it leaves you confused. It's like you're trying to read a map full of symbols but there is no key to tell you what the symbols mean. As a pastor, I must tell you I've avoided preaching through this book for 25 years. Part of the reason is I wasn't always sure what to do with it! I'm not alone. John Calvin wrote a commentary of every book of the Bible except this one. In the 4th century, church leaders argued against including Revelation in the New Testament because they worried people would abuse it. Martin Luther initially considered Revelation to be "neither apostolic nor prophetic" and said "Christ is neither taught nor known in it." But this book is part of the word of God, and it **can** be understood, even though it takes some effort because it's written in a style of literature, called *apocalyptic*, we're not accustomed to today.

This morning we're going to look at Revelation 1. This first chapter is important because it leaves us with an vision that's unmistakable. It's the first vision or image in the book for a reason. I believe it's meant to be the controlling image of the entire book. If we understand this image everything else in this book will make a lot more sense. This morning I want that vision stamped on your mind.

But before we look at it we need to look at the introduction. Verses 1–8 are what scholars call the prologue and they orient us to what this book is. *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to*

the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood--and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father--to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the (Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"

What is the book of Revelation?

A revelation. These verses tell us three things about what this book is. First, they tell us it's a revelation. It's a revelation that started with God. Everything in Genesis and Revelation starts with God. Genesis says, "In the beginning, God..." Revelation starts with God, too. Notice it says God gave this revelation to Jesus, and then Jesus gave it to his angel, and then the angel gave it to John, and then John was to show it to the bondservants of Jesus. So John is a witness to everything he saw. He calls it *"the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."*

The Greek word for **revelation** means *apocalypse*. An apocalypse is an uncovering or revealing of things otherwise hidden. He says this revelation concerns *"what must soon take place."* Most people assume therefore that this revelation is a detailed timetable of future events—the end times. Sorry to disappoint you, but there is no such timetable in the book. Revelation does indeed concern events that will soon take place, but there is a lot of disagreement about how soon is soon. Some say most of the things in Revelation took place within a generation of when this book was written. So when John said "soon" he meant real soon. Others say they took place over the course of church history. In both cases these things would have been future for John but in the past for us. But there are also people who say everything in Revelation after chapter 3 is still yet to take place. They remind us that "soon" to us is not "soon" to God because God doesn't measure time like we do; with God a thousand years is like one day (1 Pt 3:8).

A prophecy. The second thing this prologue tells us about this book is that it's a prophecy. A prophecy isn't only a prediction of future events, although it may include that. It's first and foremost the word of God to people in the present. And because this is a prophecy it's very important people listen up. So important is it John pronounces a blessing on the one who reads it as well as the ones who hear it and heed it. This is the first of seven blessings in the book. *"Blessed are both the reader and the hearers."* When he mentions the reader he's not thinking of taking this book and reading by yourself at home. He's talking about the one who would stand and read it out loud to God's people who gathered together for worship much like we're doing now. Imagine the early believers, huddled together in a home on a Sunday. One stands up and reads this whole book. You think I preach for a long time! But notice there is a sense of urgency in hearing and heeding this prophecy. People are on the edge of their seat because he says *"the time is near."* Later, he says, *"Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him..."* Then God speaks, *"I am the Alpha and Omega...who is and was and is to come."* It's like you can't put this off; you can't think, "Well, this doesn't really apply to us today." As prophecy, Revelation wasn't meant to be the object of our fascination; it was meant to be an urgent word from the eternal God for us to heed.

A letter. But that's not all. This book is a revelation, a prophecy, but it's also a letter. He says in v.4, *"John, to the seven churches that are in Asia."* He greets them as was the custom in letters of that day, *"Grace to you and peace..."* He goes on and baptizes this customary greeting in distinctively Christian terms. In essence, he says, *"Greetings from the Trinity. Grace and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come."* That's God the Father. *"And from the seven spirits who are before his throne."* That's the Holy Spirit. *"And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth."* That's the Son.

We know this is a letter because later in v.11 he's told to *"write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches."* Each of those churches is named. They were real churches in the province of Asia Minor, what we know of today as Turkey. It's interesting he mentions only seven churches because we know there were more than seven churches in Asia. The New Testament tells us also of churches in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Troas. But like many of the numbers in this book, seven is symbolic. The number seven is symbolic of completion, fulfillment and perfection. In Revelation there are also seven spirits, seven lampstands, seven stars, seven angels, seven trumpets, seven blessings, a seven-headed beast, and many more sevens. Here seven churches point to the complete number of churches, not only of John's day but throughout the ages. This is meant as a letter for all churches at all times. It spoke specifically to the church of John's day, addressing very real problems they faced, but it also speaks to issues

we face because the world doesn't change that much. The issues we as believers deal with today are in large part the same issues they dealt with then and believers have always dealt with.

So this book is a revelation, a prophecy and a letter. Do you know what I love about this? Each of these things reminds us of one thing: God speaks to his people. God is a communicator. God doesn't want us left in the dark. God isn't silent; he's not trying to hide something from us. In Genesis 1 God creates Adam and Eve and one of the first things he does is he speaks to them (Gen. 1:28). Later, when Adam and Eve are hiding from God because of their shame, he calls out to them, "Where are you?" As if he didn't know! It's all about connecting and we connect by speaking. We take this for granted, but we shouldn't. Have you ever been in a relationship where someone shuts down? You know something is wrong but you can't get them to talk? That's the end of the relationship, until they start talking again. God speaks to his people because he wants to be in relationship to us.

Who wrote the book of Revelation?

Every letter has a writer and we've already seen who the writer of this letter is—John. Tradition has always held this is the apostle John, the brother of James. Jesus called them from their fishing boats to follow him. At this point, James had already been put to death for his faith. John has written the Gospel of John and the letters we call 1, 2 and 3 John. But none of that seems to matter to him here. He simply calls himself a *"bond servant"* of Jesus. He's no different than the bond servants he was writing to.

He tells us more about his situation in verses 9–11. *"I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, 'Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea..."*

Again, John sees himself as their brother. He says he was on the island of Patmos because of his preaching the word of God and his testimony about Jesus. Patmos was a small island off the coast of Ephesus. John most likely had lived and ministered in Ephesus. It was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire, the capital of Asia and very prosperous port city and thoroughfare to the eastern part of the empire. Ephesus was famous as the home of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. It was full of temples; some of these temples were built for the worship of the Roman emperor. Around A.D. 90, a temple was built in Ephesus for the emperor Domitian. The citizens of Ephesus were expected to go to his temple and offer a pinch of incense on the altar, calling him Lord and God. For most citizens this was no problem. They worshiped many gods,

why not include one more? But for the Christian, these titles belonged to God alone. No doubt John's refusal to take part in this offended the authorities, especially since he was a church leader. So he was exiled to Patmos. It's only 40 miles from Ephesus, but it might as well be 1000. Though he's isolated from the church in Ephesus and other churches in Asia, he's concerned for them. You see, they're facing the same pressure to compromise John had faced. How will he encourage them to stand firm?

So John says, "*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.*" That means he was worshipping the Lord on Sunday like he would have with other believers if he were still in Ephesus, only now he's alone. You can worship the Lord at any time in any place and even in the hardest circumstances. As he worships, he hears behind him a loud voice, sounding like a trumpet. Before he can turn he hears the command to write in a book all that he saw and send it to these seven churches. And, really, the rest of the book is a record of what he saw. You have to wonder if John ever would have had this revelation if he hadn't been exiled to Patmos. Isn't it often true that our greatest insights and moments of revelation come in the hardest times? Isn't it true that sometimes God has to get us alone in what we think is a godforsaken place just to get our full attention and speak to us?

A vision for the ages

Finally, John turns to see the voice speaking to him. What John saw there is the vision we should have stamped in our mind as we begin this book. A few minutes ago you heard verses 12–20 read where John recorded what he saw. This vision of the exalted Jesus is the controlling vision of the book. Recall these people are facing tremendous pressure to cave into the world around them. Everything that makes sense from a human perspective tells them to compromise their faith. They know if they don't they could lose their homes, jobs, children, and even lives. They feel so small in comparison to the Roman Empire. How can they possibly stand up to something as large as that?

What do they need to know? What do they need to see? They don't need a bunch of information. They don't need charts and diagrams and stuff to figure out like a crossword puzzle. What they need and what we need is a vision of Jesus; a vision of who he is and who we are in relationship to him. That's what this vision and this entire chapter is all about.

Many of you are feeling pressure to cave in. It's a different kind of pressure they felt back then; it's far more subtle, but it's there. The world is constantly trying to shape us into its mold; trying to get us to bow down to something other than Jesus. Don't you struggle with that? Aren't you sometimes attracted to what the world holds out for you if you'll only compromise your faith? Aren't you sometimes envious of those who **do** bow down to Caesar and seem to have so much going for them as a result?

Perhaps you're suffering. Many are struggling financially. You just can't ever seem to get on top of it. Maybe your marriage is on the rocks and your spouse wants out. Maybe you're single and tired of waiting on God for the right person to come along. Maybe you're dealing with health issues. Sometimes when we're suffering the enemy comes along and holds something right in front of our face we can have if we just compromise a little. He says, "You know, you need to loosen up. God wants you to be happy. You've taken this obedience thing way too far. You can have it all. You can have God and you can have the world as well." That's what he said to the people John was writing to. He said, "Loosen up. Don't be so narrow. Throw a little pinch on the altar for Domitian, but keep Jesus in your back pocket, too. What harm can it do?" So to people like that, people like you and me, Jesus says several things in this vision. Since seven is such a perfect number, I'm going to give you seven things.

First, God says there is nothing going on around you that I don't rule over. We saw this loud and clear up in v.5 where John describes Jesus as "*the ruler of the Kings of the earth.*" Domitian is not the ruler; Jesus is. You think your life is under the control of earthly rulers, of Presidents and Supreme Court justices, of CEOs and bosses and whoever else occupies positions of authority in your life? Look again. Did you notice in v.4 John mentions "*the seven spirits before His throne.*" You know, God is rarely called God in this book? He's usually called "*the one seated upon the throne.*" That says something about God. Once again in v.8 this comes out when God calls himself "*the Almighty.*" The Greek word is *Pantokrator*, which means universality of rule, not of power. He calls him that just to remind us who is really in charge. God is the ruler of all.

Second, God says there is nothing going on around you that will outlast me. The folks John wrote to probably felt like the Roman empire would last forever. John says, look again. He says God is the one "*who was and is and is to come.*" And when God speaks he says "*I am the Alpha and the Omega...*" These are the first and last words of the Greek alphabet. This is a way of saying I'm Lord of the beginning and the end and everything in between. Here's the real mind blower. In v.17 Jesus says of himself, "*Do not be afraid. I'm the first and the last.*" He's saying, "I'm God and your history can't be written until I, Jesus, have the last word. I'm the Creator and the consummator of all things. Between the start and the end of your life I'm Lord of whatever you're going through. I'm the A to Z, the first to last, and wherever you are in the middle of that it's not the end of the story. I'm going to write the end of the story. I'm going to write it my way no matter what the circumstance is, and if you're joined to me you won't be the loser.

Third, God says there is nothing around you that can separate you from my love. After John sent greetings from the Trinity he couldn't help himself; he just kind of broke out into spontaneous

praise. He said in verses 5b–6, *“To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”* Look how he uses the present tense: he loves us. Right now! Wherever we’re at, he loves us. You see, John was experiencing this very thing. He’s out there in Patmos. He’s learning you can never be in so forsaken a place that his love won’t seek and find you. God’s love wasn’t a memory, but a present experience. You may feel you’re in a place called confusion or despair or you’re isolated on an island called rejection, but John is saying wherever you’re at he loves you. You know that because he freed you from your sins by shedding his own blood and made you a kingdom of priests.

Fourth, God says there is nothing going on around you that I can’t help you figure out. In v.14 John says his head and his hair were white like wool, like snow, and his eyes were like a flame of fire. White hair, of course, is a symbol of the accumulated wisdom of years of experience. We should respect people with gray hair! His piercing eyes reveal an insight that penetrates to the core of our situation. This can be a little scary because we also know he sees everything; he sees what we want to hide from him. But some of us need his wisdom. We’re having a hard time figuring out what he’s up to. We have no idea what to do next. We lack wisdom and experience. But look again at Jesus with hair as white as snow and eyes as piercing as fiery darts. You may not have all of the answers, but you can trust him. He’s the Ancient of Days. He’s wise.

Fifth, God says there is nothing going on around you that I can’t take you through. It’s one thing to know he rules over all things, but quite another to know he has the strength to carry us through. Notice in v.5 he’s called *“the faithful witness.”* He went through it all. He stayed true to the Father and he can give us the strength to do the same. In v.15 it says *“his feet were like burnished bronze when it has been made to glow in the furnace.”* The figure of brass in the Scripture denotes strength, as the tempering effect of the fire causes the metal to be made into a shield for warfare. Brazen gates describe the defense of a city. In that time nothing would depict strength more than the concept of brass that’s been fired in the furnace. Those feet that had been pierced are now like brass. As we walk in the trail of the One who has gone through the fire we’ll discover his strength for our own feet. Of course, the greatest demonstration of his strength was his power over death. That’s why he’s called *“the firstborn of the dead”* and later he says *“I am the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”* If he can unlock the gates to death and Hell, what can’t he do.

Sixth, God says there is nothing going on around you that I won’t judge in the end. He says loud and clear in v.7 that he’s

coming with the clouds. This is the central declaration of the book: he’s coming. We don’t know when he’s coming. This book won’t tell us that. It just says he’s coming soon and we need to be prepared. Notice this coming isn’t described as something secret. He says *“every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him.”* Why would they mourn? Because some won’t be prepared. He comes not just to save but to judge. Those who pierced him include all who oppose him right down to this day. So the people of John’s day could look at the powers of the Roman empire and know the day would come when they themselves would have to answer before the judge of all the earth. In one sense, all of us should mourn because we all had a part in him being pierced. But when that mourning produces repentance and we turn to him for salvation then our mourning will turn to rejoicing and the prospect of his coming will bring us comfort.

Finally, God says there is nothing going on around you that can remove you from my care and protection. In v.20 John is given the key to interpret the symbols he sees. The seven lampstands are the seven churches and the seven stars are their angels or possibly messengers or church leaders. But what I want you to see here is how he holds the seven stars in his right hand; the symbol of power and authority. Not only does he possess these churches but he protects them; he cares for them. Imagine the comfort that would bring believers in Asia Minor being faced with the threat of death or imprisonment. Today, whatever you may have to face in standing for Christ, know that he holds you in his strong right hand.

That’s the vision; that’s what we need to know; that’s what will get us through as faithful witnesses to the testimony of Jesus. It’s not information we need, it’s not a timetable; it’s a vision of him as the one who rules over all the kings of the earth, the one who writes the last chapter of our story, the one who loves us, the one who is stronger than anything we might have to face, the one who is coming to save and judge, and the one who holds us in his strong right hand.

I love how it says in v.12 that when John heard the sound of the trumpet *“he turned.”* He turned from seeing the rocky, barren landscape of Patmos to seeing Jesus. It strikes me that’s why we gather together on Sundays. We gather to turn. During the week we tend to be turned towards the world; turned towards the barren landscape of our Patmos. Our vision of Jesus grows dim. But on Sunday we gather for a revelation and together we turn to see it. It’s not a revelation of information or a timetable for the end of the world, but a revelation of Jesus.

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