

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study Guide on Revelation 1—Week 1 (Sunday, Sept. 6)

We are beginning a journey together to discover the message and meaning of the mysterious book of Revelation. Perhaps no other part of the Bible has been the subject of such a myriad of contradictory interpretations. The strange images and confusing debates have led many Christians to conclude the book is indecipherable and irrelevant.

In this study we will use a rather common sense approach to Revelation that lets the book itself provide the keys to understand it. And we'll discover that Revelation has an important message for us. In our worship services we'll focus on the inspiring themes and help unlock the mysterious prophecies. In the chapel class, Rob McRay will teach a more in-depth study of the book. And in our home churches we will focus on how these prophecies apply to our lives today. Beginning next week, our study guides will be written by Dr. Mark Black.

Revelation was written by a prophet named John (1:9—many think he was the apostle John who also wrote the Gospel of John, but we can't know that). He wrote the book to churches in the province of Asia (1:4,11), which was in the western part of the modern country of Turkey.

John saw and wrote the visions of Revelation while he was exiled to the island of Patmos because he preached Jesus. Early Christian sources say John wrote this book around 95 AD, during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. Domitian was the first emperor to demand that he be called "Lord and God" while he was still living. A few years later, during reign of the emperor Trajan, an empire-wide persecution of Christians would begin because they professed that Jesus was "Lord and God," not the emperor. Christians would have to decide whether they would be faithful to God and worship Jesus alone, or whether they would join in the pagan worship of the Roman Empire.

John says the visions of Revelation were given by God to Jesus to reveal to his servants what "must soon take place," because "the time is near" (1:1-3). It is vitally important to remember that those words were written more than 1,900 years ago! The book of Revelation was written to followers of Jesus who were about to face terrible persecution. Any interpretation of the book must make sense as a message to those Christians to whom John was writing.

Revelation was meant to be read aloud in the churches (1:3). It is written in dramatic images intended to have an impact on those who are listening ("Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." 2:7). It was not written for the details to be analyzed, scrutinized, and debated. We should focus on the big picture, themes, and message.

John also says that Revelation is a prophecy to be kept (1:3—the NIV says "take to heart what is written," but the Greek is literally, "keep what is written"). Biblical prophecies are not merely predictions of the future. They are the word of God that should be kept. Prophecies called people to some response in the present because of what was said about the future. Revelation was a call for "the patient endurance" of God's people (14:12) in the persecution that was coming.

John's first vision is of Jesus Christ appearing to him to dictate letters to the churches of Asia. The image of Jesus draws on Daniel's vision of "one like a son of Man" appearing before the throne of God (Daniel 7:9-14). The message of Revelation is from "the Living One" who was dead, and now look he is alive forever and ever! (1:18). Let's pray that we will have ears to hear what he is saying to the churches.

Questions to Discuss:

1. John wrote to Christians living in a world full of idolatry and immorality and rising hostility toward their faith. How is our world like theirs?
2. What kinds of messages might you expect to find in a book written to people about to face persecution?
3. How might the description of Jesus in 1:5 speak to Christians facing Roman persecution? How does it speak to Christians today?
4. How are Christians described in 1:5-6? Do you find anything encouraging in these words? Do you find anything challenging?
5. Read aloud the vision of Jesus (1:12-18). What strikes you about the images described? What feelings are evoked by these images?
6. What is the significance, if any, that Jesus is described here with language used to describe God in Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:9-14)?
7. Why do you think John falls down as though dead (1:17)? How do you think you might react if you had such a vision? How is Jesus' response to John encouraging?
8. Pray that we will have ears to hear what God will say to us through this book.