



The Book of Revelation

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

Prologue (1:1-3)

1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,² who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.³ Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (NIV)

1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (ESV)

- Revelation begins with a prologue explaining that the message was given by “*God*” to “*Jesus Christ*”, who then sends the message through “*his angel*” in order to make that message known to “*John*” who then, in turn, makes it known to the churches to whom he is writing.
- In other words, the message was communicated through a **chain**: God → Jesus Christ → his angel → John → the churches.
- The book is called a “*revelation*”, meaning an unveiling of God’s plan that people would not have been able to discover on their own.

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- John **describes** this message as “*the word of God*” and “*the testimony of Jesus*”, encouraging believers who face persecution to remain loyal to Christ.
- The book’s message is both **authoritative** and **prophetic**.
- Revelation was meant to be “*read aloud*” in church gatherings and promises a “blessing” to those who read, hear, and obey its message.
- The purpose of the book is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to call believers to faithful obedience, reminding them that Christ will ultimately complete God’s plan for history.
- This “blessing” is the first of **seven** blessings in the book of Revelation. The others are found in 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14.

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- Furthermore, John tells us that the visions he is about to report concern things that “*must soon take place*” and that “*the time* [of their fulfillment] *is near*.”
- I believe these statements were meant to be taken at *face value*.
- John intended his original audience to understand that the events he describes were approaching *rapidly* in their own day.
- The common attempts to *reinterpret* or *soften* this language fail to do justice to the clarity, repetition, and pastoral urgency of John’s words.
- Some scholars argue that “*soon*” means that the events would occur quickly *once they began*, but that would offer *no comfort* to suffering Christians who were just assured that the time at which these events would occur was “*near*”.
- Other scholars argue that “*soon*” reflects *God’s* perspective on time, not *ours*. But John is not giving a theological reflection on divine timelessness; he is giving practical instruction to persecuted believers.

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- Still others argue that these events are always **potentially** imminent, but this empties the term “*soon*” of any chronological content and **contradicts** the **explicit contrast** with Daniel, who was told to “*shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end*” (Dan 12:4).
- John is told the **opposite**: do **not** seal the book (“*blessed are those who hear*”), because “*the time is near*” – making it clear that the **bulk** of Revelation’s prophecies would occur “*soon*” after John wrote them.
- The Greek terms John uses here for “*soon*” (*en tachei* = “in a little while”) and “*the time is near*” (*engus* = “no more delay”) **consistently** refer to temporal nearness when used **elsewhere** in Scripture (e.g., Matt 26:18; 24:32; John 2:13).

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- John places these **exact same terms** at the **beginning and end** of the book, uses them frequently, and employs numerous expressions to reinforce the same point:

At the **beginning** of the book...

*Rev. 1:1 – The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that **must soon take place**. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.*

*Rev. 1:3 – Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for **the time is near**.*

And at the **end** of the book...

*Rev. 22:6 – And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what **must soon take place**.”*

*Rev. 22:10 – And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for **the time is near**.”*

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- John's audience was suffering **persecution** and needed **assurance** that God's judgment and their vindication were **close at hand**.
- This passage parallels Jesus' Olivet Discourse, which, in a similar manner, places its predicted events within the timeframe of "**this generation**".
- The destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, which Jesus describes in the Olivet discourse, fits the **timing** of the events that John describes here.
- A common **objection** to interpreting these terms in this way is that there are **clearly** events in Revelation that are **not** "**soon**" (e.g. a future final judgment).
- But John does not declare that **all** his book's prophecies would occur soon.
- He simply states that Revelation speaks of "**things that must soon take place**", even though, in a **few** places, John sees fit to describe distant **future** events (like the future judgment) or even **past** events (such as in Revelation 12:1–6, where Jesus' birth and ascension are mentioned) that are in some way related to the events that he describes here.

Greetings and Doxology (1:4-8)

1:4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. ⁷ Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. ⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (NIV)

1:4 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, ^{5a} and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (ESV)

- These verses function like the opening of a typical New Testament letter.
- The author, “*John*”, first identifies himself and his readers as “*the seven churches that are in Asia*” mentioned later in the chapter.
- The letter was likely intended as a circulating epistle, meaning it would be read by one church and then passed along to others.
- Several New Testament writings were handled this way, including Paul’s letter to the Galatians and the letters of James and Peter. Some scholars believe Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was originally a circular letter sent to many of the same churches.
- The “*Asia*” mentioned here refers not to the modern continent but to a Roman province in what is now known as Turkey.
- Like most New Testament letters, the book begins with a blessing of “*grace and peace.*”

1:4 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,^{5a} and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (ESV)

- However, **unlike** most letters that mention only the Father and the Son as the source of this blessing, Revelation describes the source in more **elaborate** terms that appear to reference the Father, the **Holy Spirit**, and the Son.
- The Father is described as “*him who is and who was and who is to come.*”
- This language is an echo of God’s self-identification to Moses in Exodus 3:14 (“*I am who I am*”) which emphasizes God’s **eternal existence**.
- The phrase “*the seven spirits who are before his throne*” is one of the more **difficult** expressions in Revelation.
- Many commentators interpret it as a symbolic reference to the Holy Spirit in His fullness or completeness.
- This interpretation is often connected to Isaiah 11:2, where the Spirit of the Lord is described with **seven** attributes: the Spirit of the Lord, wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord.

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- Jesus is then described with **three** titles meant to encourage Christians facing persecution:
- **First**, He is called the “*faithful witness*”, meaning He remained faithful in testifying to the truth even under threat of death.
- His example encourages believers who must bear witness in hostile circumstances.
- Early Christians who died for their faith were therefore often described with the same language of “*faithful witness*”.
- **Second**, Jesus is called “*the firstborn of the dead*”, a title referring to His **resurrection**.
- This idea, also found in Paul’s writings, teaches that Christ’s resurrection **guarantees** the future resurrection of believers.
- His victory over death assures Christians that their faithfulness—even if it leads to death—will **ultimately** be vindicated.

1:4 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, ^{5a} and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (ESV)

- **Third**, Jesus is called “*the ruler of kings on earth*”.
- This title reminds persecuted Christians that earthly rulers who appear powerful are *ultimately* under *Christ’s* authority.
- Though hostile governments may oppress the church, Christ remains sovereign over them all.
- By revealing this heavenly perspective, the book of Revelation seeks to give courage and comfort to believers suffering under the persecution of earthly powers.

1:5b To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (ESV)

- John encourages the churches by reminding them of Jesus' love and what He has already done for them – Jesus' sacrificial death has removed the power that sin has over them.
- The idea of being freed by Jesus' blood is pictured in the Old Testament story of the *Exodus*.
- Just as the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb, Christians are delivered from the slavery of sin through Jesus' death.
- In this sense, Christ's sacrifice is seen as a kind of "second Exodus."

1:5b *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (ESV)*

- Verse 6 describes believers as “*a kingdom, [of] priests* .”
- The idea is that the church now shares a role once given to Israel: representing God to the world.
- Instead of having a special priestly class, the ***whole church now*** serves as God’s priesthood.
- This means believers have ***access*** to God and also help bring ***others*** to God through teaching and spiritual service.
- The passage ends with a short doxology—a statement giving glory and authority to God—similar to several ***longer*** praise statements that appear ***later*** in the book of Revelation.

1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (ESV)

- *“Behold, he is coming with the clouds”* – The futurists (and many others) take this statement somewhat literally, seeing in it a prediction of the Second Coming of Christ in the clouds at the end of the present age.
- And indeed, the scriptures do sometimes use this sort of cloud-coming language to describe Christ’s second coming:
 - *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them **in the clouds** to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1Thes 4:16-17)*
- And as orthodox Christians, we affirm that majestic event.
- But despite first impressions, I believe, given the **context**, there is strong evidence that **this verse** is pointing to a **different** event.

1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (ESV)

- Verse 7 declares that Christ is “*coming with the clouds*,” language that echoes Jesus’ own words in Matthew 24:30 and imagery from Daniel 12:
 - *Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the **buildings of the temple**. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down... So **when you see the abomination of desolation** [= the Roman armies cf. Luke 21:20-21] **spoken of by the prophet Daniel**, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then **let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains**... For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be... Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then **all the tribes of the earth [land] will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven** with power and great glory... Truly, I say to you, **this generation will not pass away until all these things take place** [= “soon”, “the time is near”]. (Mat. 24:1-2, 15-16, 21, 29-30, 34)*

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- This language should not be taken as a literal description of Jesus physically appearing on a visible cloud.
- Instead, it belongs to the symbolic style of apocalyptic literature.
- In the Old Testament, God was often described as “*coming on clouds*” or descending from heaven in poetic language to describe divine action in history. The same type of symbolic language is used here.
 - *An oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, **the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt**; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them. (Isaiah 19:1)*
 - *In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help... Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him, thick **clouds** dark with water. (Psalm 18:6a,7,10-11)*

1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (ESV)

- The phrase “*every eye will see him*” also follows this symbolic style.
- It refers to the dramatic and decisive nature of the event. It does **not** mean that every person on earth will *literally* see the same physical event at the same moment – which would be physically impossible.
- The phrase “*those who pierced him*” comes from Zechariah 12:10.
- Here it mainly refers to the Jewish leaders and people who were responsible for Jesus’ death whom Peter accused of committing that terrible crime (Acts 2:23, 2:36; 5:30), and who had recklessly shouted, “*His blood be on us and on our children*” (Matthew 27:25).
- Jesus himself warned those Jewish leaders that they would see the Son of Man coming in power: “*But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and **coming on the clouds of heaven.***” (Matthew 26:64).

1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth [land] will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (ESV)

- Likewise, the phrase “*all tribes of the earth [land]*” refers to the “*tribes*” of Israel.
- Their “wailing” is connected with the severe suffering and destruction that came upon Jerusalem described in Jesus’ prophecy (Mat. 24:21).
- The “wailing” could represent the deep national sorrow that followed these catastrophic events.
- **Or** it could represent the regret experienced by those who had crucified him when they came to realize the gravity of what they had done:
 - *Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, **this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*** (Act 2:36-37)
- The final “*Even so. Amen*” combines the Greek and Hebrew forms of affirmation (cf. “grace and peace” in 1:4). It is an expression of vigorous approval.

1:8 *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”* (ESV)

- The greeting ends with God describing himself as *“the Alpha and the Omega,”* the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.
- This expression means that God rules over *all of history*—from the beginning to the end—and everything in between.
- His authority is also emphasized by the phrase the one *“who is and who was and who is to come,”* which shows that God reigns over the past, the future, and especially the present.
- The wording highlights *“who is” first* to stress that God is actively ruling right *now* in the circumstances his readers face.
- The purpose is to reassure believers that *“the Almighty”* God is present and in control, and that history will ultimately reach the outcome he has planned

Class Discussion Time

- When we looked at Rev. 1:1-3 we saw where John tells us that the visions he is about to report concern things that “*must soon take place*” and that “*the time* [of their fulfillment] *is near.*”
- I said regarding those statements that I believe these statements were meant to be taken at face value – that John intended his original audience to understand that the vast majority of the events (often symbolically) predicted in the book were approaching rapidly in their own day and that they would live to see them.
- I also mentioned that many Bible interpreters try to **soften** the meaning of these terms and make them mean something else because it doesn't fit with their view of the timing of the events described in the book of Revelation.
- What do **you** think and why?

Class Discussion Time

- Rev. 1:7 reads: *“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”*
- I pointed out that the futurists (and many others) take this statement somewhat literally, seeing in it a prediction of ***the Second Coming of Christ*** in the clouds at the end of the present age (an event that we all affirm will occur).
- But then I told you that I believe, given the ***context***, there is strong evidence that this verse is pointing to a ***different*** event – i.e. the events surrounding the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem – and went on to make a case as to why I think that is so.
- After hearing what I had to say this morning, what do you think of my understanding of this passage?