

“Revelation Simplified”
Revelation 1
Sherwood Oaks CC, 4-27-25

Good morning. It’s great to be with you today. Thank you for the invitation.

I had the good pleasure of meeting Shawn several years ago in a Johnson University classroom. I was impressed immediately with Shawn’s giftedness and character. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, but you have a wonderful lead minister.

And I’m blessed to call him a friend. I’m also blessed to have crossed paths with Quentin in recent years. I had the good fortune of serving at the Rockville CC with Quentin’s mother Ronna. Like her son, Ronna is also very gifted musician and worship leader.

I’m excited that you are studying the book of Revelation over the next six weeks. Shawn asked me to provide a foundation and overview of Revelation this morning. And as we begin, **let me offer two initial principles for studying Revelation**. These principles involve our spirit and attitude.

The first principle is simply – be humble. It’s wise to study the Bible, and certainly Revelation, with humility. Thoughtful, godly Christians understand and interpret the book differently. (my experience)

There are no Revelation “experts” or problem-free interpretations. And that’s okay. Revelation defies easy interpretation. As we embark on this study of the Bible’s most misunderstood book, it’s important to remember that Christians aren’t commanded to agree on all the details of Revelation, but we are commanded to love one another.

The second principle is related - keep an open mind and heart.

In my experience, many people bring “stuff” to Revelation (baggage if you will). This baggage can undermine our study of Revelation. For example, I know people who are afraid of the book and avoid it at all costs. “No one can understand it anyway, so why bother?!”

And I know some who are too confident in their interpretation, believing Revelation to be a literal play-by-play description of the final events of human history. Consequently, we should read Revelation side-by-side with today's news headlines, anxiously watching for signs that the end of the age is arriving soon.

I humbly suggest that neither approach to Revelation is helpful. This baggage can impair and cloud our ability to discover Revelation's timeless message for our lives today. So, keep an open mind and, as much as possible, approach the book with a blank slate.

And as we approach the book, we discover that Revelation *is not like* any other book in the Bible – four horsemen bringing chaos to the earth, demon locusts from hell, a dragon persecuting a pregnant woman crowned with the stars, and a monster rising from the sea!

Revelation doesn't exactly make for a good Vacation Bible School theme! Let's just say it – Revelation *is* weird! Did John eat pizza too late the night before he wrote his strange book?! And if you don't know how to interpret the book's unusual imagery, then Revelation can be scary. So yes, Revelation is not like any other book in the Bible.

But there is another sense in which Revelation *is like* every other book of the Bible. What do I mean? Revelation contains a message from God/Jesus, given to a human author, who in turn shares it with an original audience for a specific purpose.

Revelation shares this in common with the other sixty-five books of the Bible. And so, like other biblical books, the key to making sense of Revelation is learning about its author, its first-century audience and the life challenges they were facing.

We need to learn something about the book's historical and cultural context. We need to learn about its literary style – how it communicates. We need to learn something about how it's structured.

This is what I mean by "Revelation Simplified" – we simplify Revelation – we make it understandable – by approaching and studying it like we would Romans or 1 Peter or any other biblical book.

We could call this a commonsense approach to Revelation. And commonsense tells us that a wise and responsible place to begin our study of the Bible's most mysterious book is chapter 1. In fact, I suggest that all the *clues* we need to make sense of this weird and wonderful book are found in chapter 1. (open and read)

There's a lot here. We don't have time to cover everything. Again, my goal is to give you a foundation for this series and for your future study of Revelation. So, for the rest of our time, I would like to briefly touch on five clues from chapter 1 that show us how Revelation can be simplified.

Here's the first clue: Revelation begins with a promise of blessing!

Revelation 1:3 – "*Blessed* is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it."

Revelation doesn't begin – Frightened is the one, or confused is the one, or even anxious is the one. No, the Bible's strangest book begins with a promise of blessing for those who study and obey it.

We might get discouraged and think to ourselves – "Why bother with Revelation?! It's too confusing. It's too controversial. It's too demanding to study."

I want to caution you about this type of attitude. Keep in mind -Revelation is God's word. It's in the Bible for a reason.

God has given us this book to bless us – to invigorate our faith, to encourage our discipleship, and to strengthen our hope.

Studying Revelation is worth the time and effort. Don't be intimidated. Don't be disheartened. Expect a blessing.

The second clue for simplifying Revelation is this – Revelation is a letter.

Revelation 1:4 – "John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you..."

What's that sound like? It sounds like a letter, doesn't? Revelation begins and ends as a letter.

What do we know about letter writing? (lost art) A letter has an author, a recipient (audience), and a purpose/occasion for writing. And this is true for Revelation.

Like the other NT letters, Revelation has a first-century author, audience, and purpose. Grasping these three components of this unusual letter is a big step in understanding how Revelation speaks to us today.

Verse 4 introduces us to the first-century author and audience of Revelation – “John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia.”

Revelation tells us very little about John. It’s possible this is the Apostle John, though he is never described in this way. Revelation 1 simply describes John as a servant of Jesus.

Verse 9 informs us that John is a “brother and companion with” the Christians in the seven churches. We are also told that he is exiled on the island of Patmos because of his preaching about Jesus. This is what chapter 1 tells us about John. From the rest of the book, we can conclude that John is a prophet and visionary.

But I think the best word to describe John’s relationship with the seven churches is – *pastor*. John writes to these seven congregations as their pastor and shepherd.

You have wonderful pastors here at Sherwood Oaks (podcast). Shawn, Matt, Maggie, and others share God’s word with you, love and support you, encourage you, and challenge you when needed. That’s what pastors are called to do.

Think about that – John wrote Revelation for the practical pastoral purposes of discipleship and spiritual transformation. Yes, Revelation gives us glimpses of the future, but what the book tells us about the future is designed to form Christ within us in the present.

John is the pastor-author of this prophetic letter. Chapter 1 also introduces us to Revelation’s original first-century audience. In verse 11 John is told to write down the visions he sees in the form of a letter and send it to seven city churches that were part of the Roman province of Asia Minor (western coast of modern-day Turkey).

These congregations were in the ancient cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. (map)

These were busy, growing cities around AD 95 when John wrote Revelation. Many of these cities are still in existence today, but now with different names.

Now I believe that numbers in Revelation are symbols. The numbers in Revelation are not math problems to solve but symbols to discern. And most often, seven is a symbol for completeness. So, by addressing his letter to seven churches, John is hinting that the message of Revelation is for all churches, past and present.

But before we understand how Revelation speaks to our world and the world that is to come, we must first grasp how John's letter spoke to seven small faith communities existing on the margins of the Roman Empire at the end of the first century.

An essential lesson for simplifying Revelation is this – Before we can understand the meaning of Revelation for our lives, we must first understand what John's letter meant to the seven churches under his pastoral care. In other words, **the meaning of Revelation can't be divorced from its first-century historical occasion and cultural setting.**

So why did John write this visionary letter to the seven churches? What situation was he addressing? What problems was he confronting? In other words, what's the purpose of the letter?

This brings us to clue #3. Now, next week you are going to dig deeper into the purpose of Revelation. Revelation 2-3 provide more detail about what was taking place in the seven churches and the challenges they were facing.

But for today, I want to focus on one key word that sheds light on why John wrote Revelation – and that word is *suffering*. **Revelation 1:9 – “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering... and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus...”**

Clue #3 is that Revelation is written to/for Christians who are suffering and struggling to endure in the faith.

Have you ever suffered so much that you felt like giving up? Have you felt like throwing in the towel? Have you questioned whether following Jesus is really worth it? Have you been tempted to blunt your faith so you could fit into the world around you?

If so, then you have insight into the difficult situation the seven churches were facing. The Christians in these seven cities lived in the Roman Empire at the end of the first century. What was life like for them? (Roman Empire imagery)

And the answer is – it wasn't easy. They were a small religious minority that worshipped a crucified criminal as God. The Roman Empire was polytheistic – there were many gods to choose from. And citizens of the empire were free to worship whoever they wanted to as long as Caesar received their supreme devotion.

The Roman emperor at the time of the writing of Revelation was Domitian. We don't know a lot about Domitian, but one thing we do know is this – he had an enormous ego. In fact, the Roman historian Suetonius records that Domitian's favorite title was "Lord and God." Good Roman citizens would support their emperor by participating in the cult devoted to him – the civic religion of the day.

In fact, citizens of the empire, if they wanted to remain in good community standing, were expected to offer sacrifices to Caesar as a god on special occasions, such as his birthday or after a military victory. Now I could go on about the historical context that led to the writing of Revelation, but I imagine you are beginning to get the point – the seven churches were in a tough spot.

They were struggling to know how to answer some difficult questions (very contemporary): How much of the culture around them could they participate in without losing their Christian identity? (relate?) Could they go through the motions of worshipping the emperor if it allowed them to fit into society and avoid persecution?

In short, can a true Christ-follower confess Caesar as "Lord and God"? And to this final summary question Revelation provides a very direct answer – NO! There is only one Lord and God. There is only One who deserves and demands our highest loyalty – and his name isn't Domitian, or the name of our favorite celebrity or politician. His name is Jesus!

If we could summarize the historical setting of Revelation in one word it would be – *conflict*. Revelation portrays a conflict between two kingdoms with competing values and loyalties.

Revelation describes a conflict for the throne of the world and for the throne of our lives. A conflict between two kings who demand total allegiance.

And ultimately, Revelation unveils a deeper spiritual conflict between God and Christ and Satan and the forces of darkness. The battles we fight each day in this world over decisions, commitments, and priorities are the visible evidence of the cosmic battle being waged for our souls and worship in the invisible world.

Revelation 12-15 describes this great spiritual conflict. But our focus today is not the battle between God and the Lamb and the Dragon and his two beasts. In a few weeks Shawn can explain all of this for you! He's got it all figured out!

Let's return now to the third clue and the theme of suffering. Revelation reveals to us that the Christians in the seven cities were responding to this conflict in two primary ways – one way was to face suffering, and the other way was to avoid it.

Two churches – the congregations in Smyrna and Philadelphia - resisted cultural pressure and refused to give their highest loyalty to Ceasar. They ruggedly followed Jesus and were persecuted as a result.

By contrast, the five other churches – the congregations in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea - compromised with the surrounding culture to varying degrees (engaging in various forms of idolatry) in order to fit in and avoid suffering. As a result, these five congregations were in danger of having their lampstand removed; that is, they were in danger of losing their Christian identity and salvation.

Here's an essential lesson for understanding how Revelation works – The visions of Revelation address these two situations/types of churches (repeat).

Christians, past or present, who are suffering for their faith need comfort, hope, a reason to persevere, and assurance that God is in control. So, for example, the visions of the dead in Christ worshipping around God's throne in Revelation 7 or the New Jerusalem descending from heaven in Revelation 21 are designed to comfort and encourage God's weary people.

And... Christians, past or present, who are being seduced by culture and are compromising their faith to avoid suffering need to be challenged, warned, and encouraged to repent and return to the pure worship of God. Again, for example, the judgement visions of the bowls of wrath in Revelation 16 and the lake of fire in Revelation 20 are intended to convict and motivate repentance in the hearts of Christians who have become too at home in the world.

Key – Notice that both types of visions have the *same* goal = Visions of judgement and visions of salvation in Revelation’s symbolic world are designed to motivate faithfulness to God and Christ in the real world.

This leads naturally to clue #4 – Revelation communicates its message of comfort and warning through symbols (pictures).

As modern people, we can appreciate communicating with pictures. In our text messages and emails, we include symbols (emojis). An emoji communicates an idea, mood, or feeling. So, for example, my favorite emoji is the “thinking person” emoji. I love dad jokes (any fans?!).

I love to include the thinking emoji when I randomly send my wife and daughters dad jokes. (which they really appreciate!) A couple of weeks ago I sent this question with my favorite emoji – “Did you hear about the two spiders that got engaged?” I waited a few moments and then sent a follow-up text which said, “They met on the web!” The symbol enhanced the communication!

Revelation uses images and pictures to enhance communication. Revelation is *visual* theology. According to chapter 1, Revelation’s message is shown (v.1) and seen (v.11). Again, in verse 1, the NIV says that Jesus “made known” to John his Revelation. This phrase “made it known” literally in the Greek means “he signified it” (KJV).

Revelation’s message was signified by Jesus – that is, it was communicated through signs, through pictures. A sign is not the reality itself – a sign points to a greater reality. The images of Revelation are signs pointing to deeper spiritual truth. And the reality behind the symbol, is always greater (more glorious or more frightening) than the symbol itself.

Revelation can be simplified if we learn to speak its language – the language of symbol. A foundational principle for interpreting the Bible is this – let the Bible interpret the Bible. In the case of Revelation, let Revelation interpret Revelation. In other words, follow the clues that John provides.

And John provides a big interpretive clue in Revelation 1:20 – “The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

How should we interpret Revelation? John shows us in verse 20 = stars signify angels and lampstands symbolize churches. And what John does here in Revelation 1:20 he does throughout the book – he interprets the imagery and shows us that the images are signs which point beyond to greater eternal truth and significance.

So, why did John use symbols to communicate his message? I believe the most basic reason is this – **symbols express the inexpressible**. Revelation is an unveiling. Chapter 1 begins this way – “The revelation from Jesus Christ.” The term “revelation” in the Greek is “apocalypse.” The term “apocalypse” literally means, “unveiling.”

Revelation is an unveiling. And what does it unveil? Revelation pulls back the curtain and unveils *ultimate reality* – the spiritual world now and the future world that is to come.

Words can only take us so far in describing heavenly and eternal reality. For example, we sense this in chapter 1 as John struggles to put his vision of the cosmic Jesus into words. And when words fall short, we need symbols...we need art. Revelation is not like reading a textbook, a blog post, or a newspaper. Rather, reading Revelation is like a walk through an art gallery.

Revelation’s images and symbols are not like photographs, rather they are more like impressionistic paintings which move us, stir our emotions, and invite thoughtful reflection.

If Revelation’s visual paintings convict us and move us to action, then we’re reading Revelation correctly. And as you walk through Revelation’s art gallery, I encourage you to step back and to see the big picture. Don’t get lost in all the details. Don’t get lost in the weeds. Some of the details are just there for effect.

Instead of focusing on the individual brush strokes, focus on the full canvas. In other words, **focus on what is most obvious, even timeless, about the symbol.**

So, for example, in Revelation:

- The church is portrayed as a **lampstand** (1-3) – conveying light and mission
- God is represented by the **throne** (4) – communicating his sovereignty and authority

- Jesus is symbolized as a slain **Lamb** (5) – sacrificial love, victory through sacrifice
- Satan is depicted as a **Dragon** (12) – the sinister, stealthy nature of evil
- Governments and religions that persecute and deceive the church are portrayed as sea and land monsters/**beasts** (13)
- Cultures which tempt and seduce God's people are represented as a drunken **harlot** (17)
- God's judgement against evildoers is dramatically painted as a **lake of fire** (20)
- (One more example) Christian hope is envisioned as an eternal city and garden = **New Heaven and Earth** (21-22)

Now the Revelation art gallery brings all these paintings together to form a visionary world – a symbolic world. And this is how Revelation works – We enter this symbolic world, and this experience changes the way we see our everyday world. The journey through Revelation's symbolic universe affects us, causing us to view our lives, trials, and struggles from the perspectives of heaven and God's future.

Let me close with this final thought (clue) – When reading and studying Revelation, don't miss Jesus.

Revelation 1 **sets the tone for the entire book**. In Revelation 1, Jesus is:

- The Giver of the Revelation to John (1)
- He is the Faithful Witness, the Firstborn from the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth (subtle allusion to Jesus' - death, resurrection, and glorification) (5)
- Jesus is the Lamb who has freed us from our sins by his blood (5)
- He is the Son of Man who is coming in the clouds in judgement (7)

- He is the Glorified Jesus who walks among the lampstands (13f)
- And according to verse 18, Jesus is the Living One. The One who was dead who now lives forever and ever. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords who holds the keys of death and hades.

Revelation 1 sets the tone for the entire book. Above all, Revelation is about – not Armageddon, 666, or the millennium – but Jesus Christ.

If our study of the Bible's final book leads us to worship Jesus with all our hearts and to follow him as disciples wherever he leads, then we have truly simplified Revelation.

The words of the classic hymn convey Revelation's essential message for our lives today – “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.”

Do you want to live an unshakable life? – Revelation invites us to turn our eyes to Jesus...

