

“Reading Revelation” Revelation 1

My early discipleship occurred in the heady days of the early 1990’s

where for a few short years end-times fervour and fever was in the air. An evangelist by the name of Barry Smith was in full swing touring New Zealand and packing out churches as he went.

The first Gulf War erupted when Iraq invaded Kuwait and for a few short weeks it seemed that the fulfilment of end-times predications was in sight.

A cashless society was on the horizon, the antichrist was shortly to rise to power and the rapture was imminent, all of which meant there would people needed to be ready to run to the hills.

Then as the year 2000 approached there were fears around the Y2K bug that would wreak havoc across the world. Then 9/11 struck...

So the book of Revelation loomed large. There seemed to be those who understood it completely and could point to events happening right now or at the very least, in the very near future. They did this with such confidence.

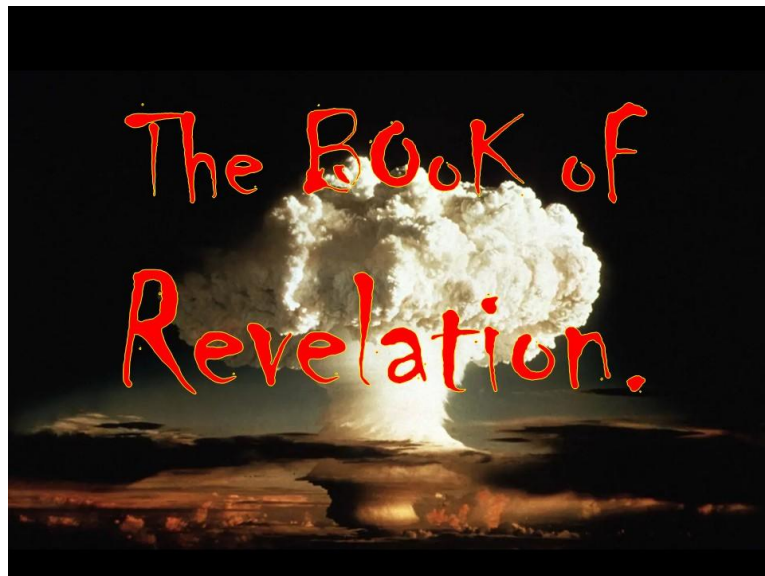
It was very hard not to be caught up in the excitement of the times.

But it was also scary for many people.

Were you ready or would you be left behind to experience hell on earth?

Revelation then for a lot of Western Christians has a lot of baggage that comes with it.

To talk about Revelation meant having a heading like this:



So let me put this multi-choice question before you:

Revelation is...

- a) forewarning of nuclear Armageddon**
- b) a post-Rapture guide book**
- c) A “dark” book at the end of the Bible that I don’t like to read**
- d) all of the above**
- e) none of the above**

Revelation has always been a challenge to read.

John Calvin, one of the keenest minds in church history, wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible bar one – Revelation.

One lady commented, “My own bible might as well have omitted Revelation for all the attention I’ve given it.”

With all the fear, darkness and confusion, it’s not surprising that with that fewer and fewer Christians read Revelation for themselves anymore.

Some would say, “You know, let’s leave that to the Chuck Missler’s and Hal Linsey’s and Tim Lahaye’s of this world.” (Some would say that if you haven’t been influenced by their writing, you are blessed ☺).

After 9/11 there was a lot of talk about its meaning, about why it had happened. One morning soon after a woman came to the office where I was an assistant pastor at the time. We began talking about the traumatic events of the last few days when she said, “Doesn’t the Book

of Revelation talk about two towers falling as a sign of the end?" (It doesn't by the way).

She assumed that it *must* be in there even though she hadn't read it for herself.

Poor Revelation – badly mistreated, maligned and terribly misunderstood, especially in the last 150 years

So my question this morning is this:

***"How would you explain the book of Revelation?
What's the book of Revelation about?"***

The challenge is letting Revelation speak on its own terms.

To let Revelation speak on its own terms, to read it correctly, we have to ask two questions: what kind of book is it and who's being addressed?

Revelation is bit of mix.

For thing we're told it is "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this *prophecy*..."

It is a ***prophecy*** but not in the sense of simply predicting future events.

The prophets in the Old Testament didn't just tell people the future; they primarily called people back to God and reminded them of His faithfulness, and in turn called the people to be faithful.

The prophet speaks words of comfort and/or challenge, on behalf of God, to the people of God in their concrete situations.

Revelation is the same.

The Lord commands John write "both what is now and what will take place later" but more that there is a call to be those who overcome.

With that we have this vivid imagery.

Golden lampstands, stars, trumpets, bowls, angels, creatures that look like many winged animals, fire from heaven, a red dragon, a beast with seven heads and ten horns, the mysterious number 666, horses with heads like lions, and the list could go on.

How do we begin to make sense of it all, and can we?

Or is it a book God intended to be undecipherable?

Well “yes” and “no”.

Revelation was written according to a specific genre.

Does anyone know what that genre is?

The book of Revelation was written in a style known as “*apocalyptic*”.

What was “apocalyptic” writing all about?.

Apocalyptic literature is filled with vivid and extreme imagery.

It speaks in grand cosmic terms of the battle between good and evil.

Behind the oppressive Roman Empire or any oppressive power the *real* battle is being fought.

Apocalyptic writing was full of symbolism.

If you recognised the images and symbolism then it made sense.

These images are meant to stir the imagination but also listen to the different cues it gives us.

For example Revelation chapter 12 talks a lot about a red dragon that is at war with God.

Who or what is this dragon?

We are told in verse 9 of chapter twelve that it is “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.”

And thirdly it’s **a letter**.

It is a letter like Paul or Peter’s various letters to different churches.

Revelation is a letter like the other letters in the New Testament.

We have letters to Corinth, Ephesus and so on.

It is **a letter** – all of it.

Like any letter it has an audience in mind.

Who is being addressed? Is it primarily:

- **Christians in the Western world at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st Century?**

This is what many Christians assume. It is a book that provides a blueprint in the form of a puzzle of the end of the world.

The problem with this view is that Revelation is that Revelation has very little meaning for Christians in first 19 centuries.

This view is also hugely Western-Centric, that is, Revelation is primarily addressing Christians in the Western World – the United States, UK and

of course New Zealand. We forget however the main areas of Christian growth are Asia, Africa and South America.

Reading it this way has led to wild interpretations.

Take Revelation 6 verses 12 – 14:

“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the *stars in the sky fell to earth*, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”

About these verses one end times author wrote:

“The opening of the sixth seal begins what all nations fear – nuclear war. Apparently warfare had been fought conventionally up to this point... I believe this that this is forecasting a nuclear exchange between the Soviet Union, Europe, United States and China.”

(And of course, the Soviet Union no longer exists...)

So no, I don't think it speaks primarily to Western Christians at the beginning of the 21st century.

- I will contend this: ***Revelation was written to seven real churches in seven real locations addressing real challenges, problems and pressures.***

In fact, that's what we read:

Verse 4:

“John,
To the seven churches in the province of Asia...”

Verse 10:

“On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

Verse 20:

“...the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”



Why was it so important to write to the seven churches in the province of Asia?

An elderly John is on the penal island of Patmos “because of the word of God testified to by Jesus”; he is imprisoned by Rome for sharing the Gospel. He is suffering for obedience.

But he is not alone.

He writes that he is a “companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” (Revelation 1:9)

The churches he writes to are facing troubled times.

History and Scripture tells us that these churches were under all kinds of threats, from persecution and oppression from without to false teaching from within.

Within three decades of Jesus’ death and resurrection the Roman Empire carried out intensive persecution of the Church.

During the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero Christians crucified, torn to pieces by wild animals and were covered with flammable liquid and set alight.

Within twenty years later Domitian carried on the extreme brutality and exalted himself as “God the Lord” and “Lord of the Earth”.

It was these threats that placed the churches very existence in doubt.

The thing is, these are not just real churches, they are representative churches. They embody every major issue with which the church has struggled in every age in every cultural setting.

And facing what it did, at this point Christ comes dazzlingly into view.

“And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”

And hear again what he says:

“Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”

It is Jesus, crucified and “alive for ever and ever” – not Armageddon, not a supposed rapture or a cashless society or the identity of the anti-Christ – who is the central figure of Revelation.

It is the same Jesus who spoke into the lives of His followers some twenty centuries ago who speaks to us today, this morning.

To His oppressed, suffering followers, Jesus speaks.

To disappointed, broken, hurting people – people at the mercy of circumstances and forces we can’t comprehend or understand – Jesus speaks.

He is the One who says “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.”

Jesus speaks into our fears this morning.

We may have fears about our health or employment or family or future.
Nothing is outside of Christ's reach or power.
He is Lord and as Lord He will keep us safe to share in his assured victory.
Our beginning is grounded in who Jesus is, and so is our end.

It is Jesus who says,

"I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!

Death, the darkest valley anyone can ever walk through, is not walked alone.
Death that rips us away from those we love; death that leaves a hole in our lives that can never be filled, is have been overcome by Jesus.

Jesus wins!

And we are invited to share in this victory.

But we are not saying death is an illusion. We are not playing pretend.
What we are saying is that death is real, but Jesus is *more* real.

It is Jesus who says,

"And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

Not to imprison people but to set them free – freeing people from captivity to sin and its consequences.

And people are so bound up today.

People are bound up by fears, by worries, by anxieties, by addictions, by cultural expectations and pressures, and even by despair.

They are bound up by forces that cannot control let alone overcome.

But we know Him who holds the keys to His freedom in His hands.