

Can We Really Understand the Book of Revelation?
Revelation 1:1-20
#1 in a Series from the Book of Revelation
Faith Community Church, July 15, 2007

Introduction

In the opening paragraphs of his book, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, Dr. John Stott writes:

To start reading the Revelation is to step into a strange, unfamiliar world of angels and demons, of lambs, lions, horses and dragons. Seals are broken, trumpets blown, and the contents of seven bowls poured out on the earth. Two particularly malicious beasts appear, one emerging out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads, and the other rising from the earth with a lamb's horns and a dragon's voice. There is thunder, lightning, hail, fire, blood and smoke. The whole book appears at first sight to contain a chaotic profusion of weird and mysterious visions.¹

I think that most Christians hear something like that and ask two questions: 1) "How on earth can I understand that?" and 2) "What does that have to do with me?"

And those are understandable questions. In the first place, Revelation seems pretty obscure, and if you've been a Christian for awhile you probably know that there isn't even a consensus among Christians on how to best understand it. And when it comes to the question of its relevance to us, if the book is really about dragons and trumpets and fire and beasts, it may seem far-removed from our lives.

My intent is to lead us through a study of the first three chapters, focusing on the letters in chapters 2 and 3. But we may go on and finish the rest of the book through the fall. Regardless of whether we look at just a section or at the whole, I want to assure you that the book can be understood and that is actually highly relevant to our lives today, despite what things may seem at first glance. I'd like to look this morning at what we need to know in order to understand the book. Let's read chapter 1.

What Should We Know About the Book of Revelation?

1. First, we should know that Revelation was written for our motivation, not our fascination. I believe that getting that right will help us better grasp the meaning of the book.
 - a. The popular approach to Revelation over the last century has been based on the assumption that Christ's return is very near. As a result we look into the book to try to see how the events described might be finding fulfillment in our day.

¹ Stott: *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 1958. Page 11.

- b. As a result, the focus often is more on trying to understand the details at the expense of the message. This has led to people confidently asserting that 8:10 refers to nuclear weapons, and that 9:1-10 describes tanks with incredible power. It has led to numerous attempts to identify the Antichrist. One of the more memorable “might be’s” of the recent past was the identification of Mikhail Gorbachev as the antichrist, in part because of the birth-mark on his head. That was the mark of the beast described in 13:11-18.
- c. That is one reason why I am not entirely comfortable with the *Left Behind* series of books – or books like them. By trying to put the details of Revelation into our particular setting, we create the impression that “this is what it’s going to be like” and have a hard time separating fact from fiction.
- d. The impact of predictions that don’t come true and changes in the world order only end up contributing to the impression that this book is really beyond us. But look at 1:1-3 again. While clearly there is an intent that we have some understanding of the future, the main emphasis is that blessing comes from reading it (aloud) and from obeying it. Therefore, we need to focus more on what the book tells us about how we live and less on speculations about what the details may refer to.

Which leads to the second thing we should know:

- 2. The second thing we should know that it was written to real people at the close of the first century, who were expected to understand what it was about.
 - a. John identifies the specific recipients of this book as “the seven churches that are in Asia” (vs. 3). These seven churches are further identified in verse 11. While there were other churches in Asia (an area now known as modern Turkey), these seven churches are listed in the order in which they would be visited if John could come ashore at Ephesus and follow a commonly traveled road that circled through the province.
 - b. If you scan through chapters two and three, you will find that these seven churches were in varying conditions. Some were healthy, some were not. They faced, to varying degrees, serious challenges to their faith. These early Christians faced challenges in three areas:
 - i. First, they faced challenges to their allegiance to Christ.
 - ii. Second, they faced challenges to their faith – what they believed.
 - iii. Finally, they face challenges to their moral purity.
 - c. It doesn’t require much more than being awake to realize that those challenges are our challenges, which makes what Jesus said to the churches incredibly relevant to us. Their world was no different than our world.
- 3. Finally, and most importantly, this is a book about Jesus Christ.

- a. Read Revelation 1:9-20 again.
- b. You can go to most religious bookstores and buy pictures of Jesus that range from him looking like a nice guy to looking very mild, maybe even a slight be effeminate. You get none of that here. While drawing on symbolism, this description that John provides us with is hardly that. This is a Jesus of power, of authority. He is imposing, impressive, maybe even frightening.
- c. And therein lies the point of the book. He is: the firstborn from the dead (5), the ruler of kings on the earth (5), the first and the last (17), the living one (18), the one who died, but who is alive forevermore (18), the one who holds the keys of Death and Hades (19), and, the one who walks among the churches (20), taking note of their faithfulness and their deficiencies, giving words of encouragement, but expecting repentance where it is needed, and giving warning if his words are not heeded – to individual churches as well as to the people who make up those churches.
- d. He is to be listened to and obeyed, because he is the fearsome King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Are you listening? Are we as a church listening? Do we measure up? Will we be faithful? Are we those who “read aloud the words of this prophecy,” those “who hear,” and those “who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”

Responding to God’s Word

The book of Revelation is about the ultimate victory of God through Jesus Christ, and is a call to us to live faithfully in the midst of a culture that does so much to draw us away.

Do you know this Jesus of Revelation? To those who do, he is the one “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father. . .” (6). But to those who do not are among “all the tribes of the earth [who] will wail on account of him” (7).

We come to know Christ by acknowledging that we stand guilty before a holy and just God because of our sin, and by renouncing that sin and trusting in the death of Jesus as the full and sole payment for our sins. And then our response is to live our lives for his glory, to listen to him, and to follow.