

Good morning, everyone! I am so, so excited about this new sermon series that we are kicking off today. We spent the summer in a series called “Show Me Your Glory,” in which we asked God to reveal his character, his splendor, his majesty, and his power to us. It was an inspiring and faith-building series. Today, continuing in that theme, continuing with that same request, we kick off a brand-new series that I am so excited about. We are going to take the next three months to dive into the book of Revelation. Let me tell you, when we open the pages of Revelation, we are going to see the glory of God. We are going to get a glimpse into heaven, seeing God seated on a throne, sovereign over the universe, ruling over history, worshiped and adored by the angels, honored by every creature in creation. This is going to be an exciting series! Don’t just take my word for that. I don’t usually use AI to help write my sermons, but this week I got on Chat GPT, and I asked it a few questions. I began by asking, “What is the most controversial book in the Bible?” Revelation was at the top of the list. I asked, “What is the most fascinating book in the Bible? What is the most worshipful book in the Bible?” Revelation was at the top of the list. This is going to be such a wonderful time in God’s Word together. Let’s go ahead and crack open Revelation 1. We are going to read the first eight verses together.

The revelation from 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, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 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, because the time is near.

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, 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, 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. “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

In these opening words, we learn a great deal about this book. Let’s look at just the first few lines. First, we learn: **This is a revelation.** The Greek word is *apocalypse*. When we hear the word “apocalypse,” we think the seams of the universe are going to unravel; we think of world wars and nuclear bombs and stars falling. But that is not what “apocalypse” means in Greek. Its meaning is much more simple and benign. It means **to pull back the curtain, to unveil something.** How many of you have been to a Broadway show? When you go to a big theater and everyone is moving around and grabbing their seats, all you see on stage is a big curtain. Behind that is the stage, the actors, maybe the director giving cues. All the moving parts are actively taking place, but you can’t see it until the curtain is pulled back and then you discover everything that is going on. In a very real way, that is what the world is like. As we go about our lives, interact with family, go to school, go to work, hang out with our friends, watch the news, we see all the physical realms all around us, but there is a spiritual realm at work, too—good and evil, God and Satan, heaven and hell—these realities are at work behind the curtain, but we just don’t have the eyes to see it. Revelation pulls back the veil on the spiritual realms, so we can see what is really going on behind the scenes in the world all around us. Some people unhelpfully read Revelation and think it tells us how we are going to escape the world and get to heaven. What it really shows us is how heaven is at work all around us, we just need the eyes to see.

For example, think about the story of the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph, after riding on a donkey to Bethlehem, found there was no room in the inn, so they went to a manger. There are shepherds and Magi and a star that guides them. And you have Herod, the king, who thinks that Jesus will be a threat to his throne, so he issues an order to try to kill him. This is how we typically think of a nativity scene, but that's only what's happening in the physical realms. Now look at how Revelation pulls back the veil in 12:1-5:

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.

This wasn't just a baby boy who was born; this was the one who would be king of kings and lord of lords. It wasn't just Herod trying to protect his throne; Satan was at work through Herod, trying to kill Jesus the moment he came into the world. If we want to be accurate when we put on our nativity scenes, we need in the manger a red dragon who is trying to kill Jesus. When we read Matthew and Luke, we read about Herod trying to protect his throne, but Revelation pulls back the curtain and tells us what really happened in the nativity scene. Matthew and Luke are telling the truth, but Revelation gives us eyes to see the spiritual realities by pulling back the veil.

In Revelation, we'll see how good and evil, God and Satan, heaven and hell are at work around us. We'll see how the evil one uses things like oppressive governments, war, seductive culture, false religion, and materialism to lure people away from God, to ruin God's good plans for his creation and his children. Once you see behind the curtain, you have discernment and insight to know how to live faithful and godly lives.

**This is a revelation from Jesus Christ.** If I could tell you one thing to hold on today it is this: this Revelation is from Jesus. Sometimes Revelation is seen as a scary book, or an intimidating book, or a weird, confusing book. But let's strip away the hysteria of the 1970s and 1980s and see that this is a book that is from Jesus. This is him speaking to us. This is a message Jesus wanted to give to his church; when you read this book, you are hearing his words. It is from Jesus to draw you closer to him. This is not only the last book in pages of the Bible that we have bound in front of us, but this was also the final book in the Bible to be written. These were the final words Jesus sent us, so we know they are very valuable.

**This is a revelation from Jesus Christ given to John.** The John who wrote Revelation is the same John who wrote the gospel of John and 1, 2, 3 John. He was likely a teenager when Jesus called him to become a disciple, then he spent three years with Jesus learning about the kingdom of God. Not only was he an apostle, but he was one of the inner three, those who enjoyed the greatest access to Jesus. Not only that, but he was called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." After everyone else had fled, John was the only disciple who was at the cross when Jesus died, and Jesus trusted him to care for his mother Mary after he was gone. John became one of the five most prominent leaders in the early church, not only writing several books of the Bible, but also experiencing intense persecution because of his devotion to Jesus. By this time he was in his 80s, the last living apostle and the only remaining living link to the earthly ministry of Jesus.

There are early traditions (that can't be verified) that tell us he was made to drink poison in an attempt to kill him, but the poison caused him no harm. Then he was lowered into a large cauldron of boiling oil, but like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the book of Daniel, he was unscathed. The authorities were

rather alarmed by all of this, and figured divine favor was on him and didn't want to upset the gods, so instead of trying to kill John, they exiled him, sending him to a deserted island called Patmos where he would live out the rest of his days, in their minds unable to do anything further to advance the cause of the church. We don't know for certain that those execution attempts happened, but we do know for sure that he was exiled to the island, and that is where Jesus appeared to him and he wrote this book. [See the online message to see a Google map flyover of the location of Patmos.]

This is where John wrote Revelation, and the Bible tells us he wrote this book **to the seven churches in the Province of Asia**. When we turn to page to Revelation 2-3, we learn the seven churches John wrote to: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea [see the end of this document for a map of all the churches]. Ephesus was the major city where John had teaching and preaching, serving as a pastor, and the others are various cities in the region over which he had influence. They are within a 50-60 miles radius of each other. This would be like someone writing a letter to Christians in central Indiana, so they begin by talking to the church in Indianapolis, but then they mention the churches in Columbus, Shelbyville, Greenfield, Anderson, Martinsville, etc. John would have had relationships with people in each of these churches. He would have had faces in mind when he was writing. Now he's writing a revelation Jesus gave him to bless these churches.

We'll learn something about each of these cities as we study this book together, but a key principle for us to hold onto is that this book was originally written to them, which means, as we interpret it, instead of trying to superimpose Revelation onto our modern landscape and figure out what it says about Russia and Ukraine, China and North Korea, or the COVID vaccine, we need to ask what did this mean to the original audience. When people living in Ephesus or Pergamum in around the year 95 AD read this letter, how did they understand it? What did it mean to them? It must first have made sense to them before we try to make it make sense to us. It was written to real people at a real time in a real place in history and it was supposed to make sense to them. We want to be good students of the Bible. We want to do the work of history, the work of discovering the original meaning of a passage, and then be able to appropriately apply it to our world today.

With some of the background being laid, I want to focus in on the promise given to us in Revelation 1:3, where John writes: "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, because the time is near." Twice in this verse we are promised that a blessing will be given to those who read this book, listen to it, and take to heart what is written in it. God says that we will be blessed as we read, study, and apply this book! And that begs the question, how? How and in what ways does God bless the people who read this book? I think the blessings come in several ways:

**Revelation blesses us with awe and wonder.** In our world, we are far too easily amused and impressed. We sing the praises of Simone Biles because she can do an impressive floor routine; we sing the praise of Steph Curry because he can put a basketball through the hoop from far away; we sing the praises of people who are smart and creative and beautiful. Revelation shakes us to our senses and makes us realize there is only one who is worthy of praise—the one who created the world, the one who gave his life on the cross to save the world, the one who reigns sovereign over history and will one day bring all things together in a climactic, redemptive, glorious end. All throughout the book our attention is drawn to the glory, the majesty, the power, the wisdom, and the love of God. Listen to John describe the one who stood before him in chapter 1:14-16:

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.

This is not the meek and mild, gentle and lowly Jesus of Galilee; this is Jesus whose eyes are on fire, whose voice reverberates with Niagara thunder. After John had this vision, he said, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17). We need awe like that. We need to be reminded of the glory, the majesty, the power, the greatness, and the splendor of Jesus. Often we treat Jesus as our older brother, our friend, a good example, a guide, a moral authority—but we need to have the veil pulled back so we can see Jesus as he truly is and fall down at his feet in worship.

**Revelation blesses us with courage and resilience.** The believers in the first century endured unbelievable persecution for their faith. Of the original twelve apostles, every single one of them besides John had been executed for their faith:

James the brother of John — beheaded  
Peter, Andrew and Philip — crucified  
Bartholomew — skinned alive  
Matthew — killed with a sword  
Thomas — impaled by a spear  
James, son of Alpheus — stoned  
Jude — clubbed to death  
Simon the zealot— sawed in two

Can you imagine living in a time and place where this is happening to Christian leaders? Imagine tomorrow morning you open the news and you see that the pope had been arrested in the Vatican, was drug into the streets of Rome, and had his head cut off. Imagine you kept scrolling and saw that Rick Warren and Andy Stanley and TD Jakes and Matt Chandler and John Piper and Max Lucado—the most prominent pastors in America—were gunned down in their houses, bullets in the backs of their heads. If that was going on in your world right now, how willing would you be to come to church next week? How open would you be to sharing your faith, about telling people of the Jesus who saved your soul? Most of us would wilt like a flower severed from the vine; we would go into self-protective mode. You would think, wouldn't you, that with that kind of heavy, horrific persecution going on, knowing that an arrest or martyrdom could happen at any moment, Christians in John's day would be living in fear, that they would be cowering and hiding away. That's what you would expect, but just the opposite was true. They were emboldened in their faith and witness, and the words of Revelation are part of what gave them their strength.

When Jesus speaks to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, these are the promises he offers them:

- 2:7 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
- 2:11 The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.
- 2:17 To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.
- 2:26-27 To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star.
- 3:5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

- 3:12 The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.
- 3:21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

How about that for a jolt of courage and resilience? No matter the opposition, the persecution, the challenge, we might face, if we are faithful, if we overcome, if we hold on to Christ, he will take care of every need we could ever have.

**Revelation blesses us with joy and hope.** Life is hard. We need joy and hope. I am mindful of so many marriages that are struggling severely. We've had senseless shootings in our community that have claimed the lives of innocent victims. We've had people killed in car accidents. This week a 5-year-old boy named Josiah contracted COVID, had a seizure, and after a few days in the hospital, he passed away. Grief, heartache, pain, and loss mark so many of our days. We journey through the valley of the shadow of death and sometimes our eyes are so blurry from tears that we cannot see straight. In those moments of pain, confusion, heartache, and loss, the words of Revelation 21:1-5 speak so powerfully.

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

This is the blessing, the assurance we need, to bring us joy and hope—confidence knowing that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are never alone, and one day, he will cast death into the pit of hell, he will wipe every tear from our eye, everything broken and painful in this world will be gone, and all things will be made new. What a blessing!



THE CHURCHES OF  
**REVELATION**  
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