



# Why Study Revelation?

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*“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.”*

*(Revelation 1:3)*

In this first chapter we will acknowledge the difficulty of studying Revelation and begin an exploration of the blessings in store for those who accept the challenge. Revelation is difficult because it is a prophetic, apocalyptic letter that, like wisdom literature,<sup>1</sup> requires careful consideration. In fact, it is so difficult to interpret that many have stopped trying. If you are one of them, you are not alone. John Wesley, an eighteenth-century theologian, pastor, and forefather of the Wesleyan movement, understood that some of Revelation might not be grasped until eternity. Yet he encouraged all to “bless God for the measure of light we may enjoy, and improve it to his glory.”<sup>2</sup>

### Reflect on this...

*Take a moment to reflect on your experience with and understanding of Revelation. What words come to mind when you think of Revelation?*

So, why should we study Revelation? The answer is simple: because it is “the Word of God” from Jesus about His gift to us now and for the future. This last book of the Bible is there for a reason, and the book itself declares that those who read and obey its message will be blessed (Revelation 1:3; see 12:17). There were, of course, no printing presses or copy machines in the first century, and many people could not read. The word “read” in 1:3 means specifically to “read aloud,” and that’s what happened. A courier would travel from church to church and read the message to the assembled congregations.

1. We will unpack each of those terms.

2. Wesley, John. “Notes on the Revelation of Jesus Christ.” *The Wesley Center Online*. 1993–2011. Northwest Nazarene University. 5 May 2013. [www.wesley.nnu.edu](http://www.wesley.nnu.edu).

The dramatic nature of the book comes through in such a reading, and the messenger would answer questions from those gathered to increase their understanding. The blessing is promised to those who read, hear, and obey its message. In order to obey what is contained in Revelation we need to grasp what it says, and that requires study.

Let's acknowledge that the book is difficult. Let's admit that it's easier to be blessed by studying the Lord's Prayer or the fruit of the Spirit. Let's also recognize that this often-quoted book is one of the most misunderstood in the Bible. We need to study it so that we aren't confused by inadequate, unhelpful, or even harmful ideas about Revelation. We need to study it so that we can mine its riches. Revelation is not some strange, futuristic tale of gloom and doom. It has a message for us today—a message of warning, encouragement, challenge, and hope. How sad that so many in the Church miss out on the important truths God has revealed to us through this challenging book! Let's look at some of the reasons people shy away from Revelation.

Probably the main things we find difficult in Revelation are its unusual images and characters. It would be easier if we lived in the first century, since this type of writing was popular for several hundred years around the time of Christ. The English word "revelation" is similar to the Greek *apocalypsis*, which means "uncovering," "disclosure," or "revelation." This word is used in the very first verse of Revelation to describe the book as a message from God to uncover the truth about evil and judgment, Christ and salvation. Revelation is not written in some secret code that only certain people can understand. Its purpose is not to obscure, but to explain.

This ancient form of writing includes visions with symbols that morph and have several levels of meaning. Like other ancient apocalypses,<sup>3</sup> Revelation

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3. For example, the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch.

uses symbolic, poetic language that does not spell out meaning, but paints multi-layered word pictures. For example, in Revelation 1:10, John reports hearing a voice, and when he turns around to see who is speaking, he sees seven lampstands and someone “like a son of man” (1:12-13). In 1:20, we learn that the lampstands represent the churches and that the individual must be Jesus. However, the description of Him in verses 12-18 does not sound like a carpenter from Nazareth. The vision in 1:12-18 is packed with details that are derived from the Old Testament, as well as Greek and Roman figures of speech and express the nature of Christ. For example, His eyes are “like blazing fire.” Greek and Latin writings used this comparison to speak of the eyes of their gods, and Daniel 10:6 tells of a heavenly being with eyes “like flaming torches.” From this there is no doubt that the figure is divine, and the other details combine in a powerful representation of the risen Christ.

Revelation is difficult because, like this first vision, the book conveys truth in unusual ways. Like other apocalypses, it includes heavenly messengers, symbolic numbers, and epic battles. Revelation also includes visions of violence and upheaval, and we need to consider them. But Revelation is not the story of a grim war between good and evil where evil seems unbeatable. God is not struggling against an equal; the future is not in question. God the Father has triumphed over evil through Jesus Christ. Forty-six times John sees God sitting triumphantly on a throne in heaven surrounded by creatures, elders, and angels. All creation joins in their praise to God the Father and Jesus the Lamb (5:11-14).

Though God’s mighty presence and actions in the past confirm divine direction in the present and guarantee the future. God’s purposes for humanity depend on our response. Unlike most apocalyptic literature, Revelation is not anonymous. It is personal. John is a spirit-led (1:10) servant

of God (1:1), a brother and fellow-sufferer with those for whom the book was originally written (1:9). We can relate to his astonishment at the visions he sees and his struggle to put the indescribable into words. For example, he often hears loud voices from heaven that sound like “a trumpet” (1:9), “rushing waters” (1:15), and “thunder” (6:1).

Revelation’s apocalyptic form presents a multitude of challenges, but it is helpful to remember that it is also a letter. Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation contain letters to seven churches that represent the entire Church, and the book as a whole is also a letter. Read Revelation 1:4-5 and compare it with Galatians 1:1-5. If you are familiar with the other New Testament letters, you will recognize this style of opening ancient letters.

When is the last time you wrote or received a handwritten letter? I enjoy receiving them and try to write at least one note of appreciation or encouragement each week. But texting and various social media have almost made the old-fashioned letter a quaint, nostalgic museum piece that has very little impact on our lives. For many, Revelation has been set aside in a similar way. But you say, “Revelation is just strange—I’ve never received a letter like that.” And you are right. The letter is filled with extraordinary characters and events that describe the end of history in a variety of bizarre ways—its apocalyptic form is difficult. Additionally, since it is a letter to the first-century churches, we need to keep in mind the circumstances of those churches. In the first century, the Roman Empire both opposed Christian living and promoted a culture that tempted Christians to compromise their faith. Like today, some endured severe persecution.

## Reflect on this...

*What temptations and dangers do Christians face today?*

Revelation challenges us to see a different reality—one in which the powerful opponents of the Church are already defeated. In this authentic view of reality, true power is demonstrated by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. In this world where evil seems so dominant, Revelation calls us to follow Jesus in lives of self-sacrifice and witness in contrast to lifestyles that emphasize power, riches, and self-gratification. We who are the spiritual descendants of the first recipients of Revelation need its message of caution, encouragement, and hope.

Another challenge in studying Revelation is that in addition to being a letter written in apocalyptic style, it is also prophecy (1:3). Like Revelation as a whole, biblical prophecy is often misunderstood. It is not like using a crystal ball or other means to see the future. Rather than describing a predetermined sequence of events, it calls us to live responsibly in the present by revealing the consequences of our choices. Read, for example, Revelation 21:6-8. Instead of foretelling the future, the prophet proclaims God's Word. Revelation does not give a timeline for what is to come, but it does show the culmination of God's plan for humanity to live fully in His presence. Then God will wipe away our tears, and there will be no death, mourning, crying or pain (7:17; 21:4). God's glory will provide light to all the nations through Christ, who is the lamp (21:23-24). These final visions offer only glimpses or

perspectives of that magnificent reality, but their beauty draws us to live with hope and expectation of that promise.

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In fact, the future has already broken into the present. In Revelation, voices in heaven proclaim, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15; see also 12:10). God’s kingdom has begun, but it is not all it will be in the future. Revelation 21 describes that future fellowship as a marriage supper (19:9), and the Church as a bride who is united with her husband, Christ (21:9). In another metaphor, the New Jerusalem comes down to earth from heaven, and all are invited to enter the city of peace. Through these images, the reader is invited to join in eager anticipation for the return of Christ. In the very last verse of Revelation, Christ gives assurance of His return, and our response can only echo the final words of the book: “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20). ●

