

“The Good News in Revelation: What’s the Story?”

Revelation 1:1-20

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Today we begin a sermon series called “The Good News in Revelation.” Now, that title might be enough to raise an eyebrow or two, or make you spit out your orange juice if you happen to be in the middle of breakfast. “Good news? In Revelation? You’ve got to be kidding! I thought Revelation was all about the end of the world. What’s so good about that?” Or maybe, if you’ve read some of Revelation before, you find this last book in the Book of Books just too confusing:

- The symbolism is strange (monsters, beasts, numbers, and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse);
- the images too violent (war and bloodshed); and,
- the message unclear and unsettling.

If you have trouble with Revelation, don’t worry. You are in good company. Many people over the centuries have found this a difficult book. In fact, Revelation was so hard to comprehend that it almost didn’t make it into the Bible. That’s because early leaders in the Church had some of the same problems with this book as people today—they couldn’t understand, what was the meaning the Revelation? This was true for more recent leaders of the church as well.



Martin Luther (1483-1546)

- Martin Luther, one of the great reformers of the 16th century, thought Revelation should not have the same status as the gospels or Paul’s letters. So he put it at the end of the New Testament, and he didn’t put “saint” in front of John’s name as a way to lower the esteem of the author.¹

- John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* that he didn’t study the middle part of Revelation because he was “utterly despairing of understanding” the imagery in the vision. As a result, Wesley used the notes of another biblical scholar and added a few thoughts of his own. Even after this he wrote: “Yet I by no means pretend to understand or explain all that is contained in this mysterious book.”²

So, if you feel bad because you don’t know what to make of Revelation, don’t worry—you are in excellent company. And if your chief impression of Revelation is that it’s full of bad news, do not fear. The overall message of Revelation is one of good news. That’s the main reason I want to preach this series: To bring out the Good News in it for God’s people. One of the biggest pieces of good news is this: In the struggle between good and evil, we know how the story ends—God wins!

So, let’s begin by finding out a little more about this book: who wrote it, when, and why? And please note: when we talk about this book, remember: It is the Revelation, not the Revelations. The title is singular, not plural. There is one Revelation from God here, not many. If you remember nothing else today, try to hold on to this. Now, what’s the story with Revelation?



John Wesley (1703-1791)

¹ Mark Edwards, Jr., “Apocalypticism Explained: Martin Luther,” *Frontline*, PBS, article on internet, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/martinluther.html>, accessed 8 Jul 2020.

² John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 1976, reprinted 2000), 932 [Originally published in 1754].

- It's hard to say exactly when it was written. Some Bible scholars believe it was during (or just after) the reign of the Emperor Nero near the middle of the 1st century. Others believe it was near the end of that century when an emperor named Domitian was in charge.



John the Seer (Divine)

- It's also hard to say who wrote Revelation. Some people maintain the author was John the Apostle, "the disciple Jesus loved." However, most Bible scholars today think John the Apostle did not write Revelation. They base this judgment on the many differences in writing style between the Gospel of John and Revelation. As a result, we refer to John, the recipient of the Revelation, as John of Patmos—the island where he received the revelation—John the Seer, or John the Theologian (or Divine).³

- It's obvious this book is written as a letter. Who was it meant for? Revelation was originally written to seven churches in Asia Minor, an area that is now modern-day Turkey. These churches were being tested by the pagan culture around them. You see, the fastest growing religion at that time

was the cult of worshiping the Roman Emperor as a god. The challenge for the churches then was: Do we compromise and worship the emperor and do the things people around us are doing? Or, do we remain faithful to Jesus Christ, who calls us to worship God and God alone?

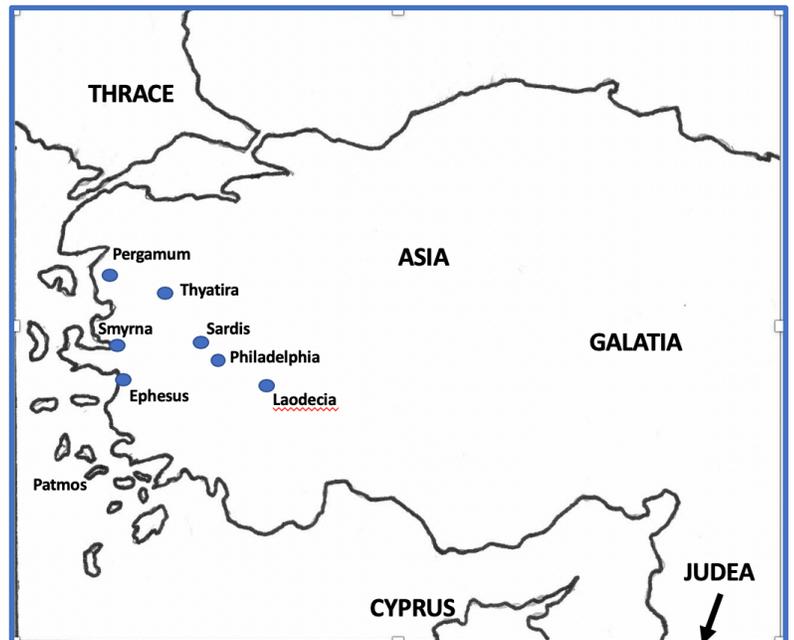
- We face some of the same pressures today: Do we compromise with the culture around us, which can be selfish, exploitive, and sometimes abusive?
- Or do we remain true to Jesus and the things he taught us about loving God and others? It's still a question today.

This gives us the main reason Revelation was written: It was written as a letter to give hope to the small Christian communities in Asia Minor, some of which were suffering persecution, to encourage them to remain faithful to Jesus. We hear this hope clearly in verse 7:

"Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen."

Here is good news: Jesus will come again and when he does, everyone will know it. That must be comforting news for the church in its struggles against the evils of this world, in any time and place. And those young churches were not alone in their suffering. The writer of the letter shares in their distress, as John the Seer says a couple of verses later:

"I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9).



The Seven Churches of the Revelation

³ N.T. Wright, Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World, An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 813-814.

Notice what John shares with the reader: the persecution...the kingdom...and the endurance. John the Seer was likely imprisoned by Rome on Patmos—he was not free. Revelation is a word written in solidarity with people who are suffering. What appears as an odd combination to share—the persecution and the kingdom—actually go together naturally for Christians. We are called:

- “To be in the world, but not of the world.”
- To live as citizens of heaven in the kingdoms of the earth.
- To hold on to the values of Jesus in the face of a culture bent on the gospel of materialism, self-interest, love of money, love of power, and an anything goes morality.

At the end of this, John says he shares in their “patient endurance.” This is a call to persevere in the faith, to remember the Savior! We hear this directly from Jesus in a part of the vision I like to call the “scary Jesus” image:

“THEN I TURNED TO SEE WHOSE VOICE IT WAS THAT SPOKE TO ME, AND ON TURNING I SAW SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS, AND IN THE MIDST OF THE LAMPSTANDS I SAW ONE LIKE THE SON OF MAN, CLOTHED WITH A LONG ROBE AND WITH A GOLDEN SASH ACROSS HIS CHEST. HIS HEAD AND HIS HAIR WERE WHITE AS WHITE WOOL, WHITE AS SNOW; HIS EYES WERE LIKE A FLAME OF FIRE, HIS FEET WERE LIKE BURNISHED BRONZE, REFINED AS IN A FURNACE, AND HIS VOICE WAS LIKE THE SOUND OF MANY WATERS. IN HIS RIGHT HAND HE HELD SEVEN STARS, AND FROM HIS MOUTH CAME A SHARP, TWO-EDGED SWORD, AND HIS FACE WAS LIKE THE SUN SHINING WITH FULL FORCE” (REVELATION 1:12-16).

Try to put these words into a picture (some people have) and you can see how this would be a “scary Jesus.” But there’s a reason the vision takes this form. The Revelation, like other books of the Bible, draws on the Old Testament. In many ways, it echoes stories and images from the Hebrew Bible. These images would have been readily understood to the Christians of the first century. When we look at passages from the Old Testament, we find the image of Jesus in Revelation sounds a lot like the description of the Son of Man figure from the prophet Daniel. This figure had “clothing as white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool” (Dan 7:9), and “...his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude” (Dan 10:5-6).

What’s the message from this image? Jesus is the Divine One, the Son of God, the Son of Man.

- He is pure as white snow.
- His eyes penetrate everything; his fire is for refining, for purging that which is impure, not for destruction.
- His feet are like bronze—they cannot be moved.

We’ll have more images like this later on in the series. For now, it’s important to know the images have meaning, some of which we can understand, but some remain hard to grasp. Overall, they portray the power and the majesty of God.

Next, Jesus speaks in the vision:

“Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (1:18).

In other words, Jesus holds the power over death. Those who suffer for the sake of Jesus can rest assured that Jesus is in charge and will grant the believer eternal life. This is the reward for persevering: the assurance of life with Jesus.

Perseverance is one of the themes of the message to the seven churches. This is covered in the second and third chapters of Revelation (chapters that are worth reading when you get the chance). Persecutions took different forms:

- Some of it was economic—the loss of jobs or the boycott of a business.
- Some of it was social—ridicule and rejection by friends and family.
- Some of it was moral—temptation to take part in sexual immorality.
- Some of it turned deadly—people were killed on account of their faith.⁴

In every case, people were forced to make choices that affected their livelihoods and their very lives.

We do not face many of the same challenges the early Christians faced. Now there are places in the world today where people risk their lives to follow Jesus, but North America in the first part of the 21st century is not one of those places. We are more likely to face challenges that are social or moral. And while most of these will not rise to the level of persecution, it is possible to face suffering on account of our faith. We will find the picture of the world we get in Revelation is of a world that falls into bedlam, chaos, and conflict. That picture is a lot like our own world. In fact, it is our world. But...

- Whatever we come up against, we should find comfort and encouragement from the words of Revelation, no matter how wild and crazy our lives, and our world, become.
- Whatever we come up against, whatever we encounter, takes perseverance and trust in the one who holds the future.⁵

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said to his disciples: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). In this world, you’ve gotta’ know that someone has your back. That someone is Jesus, who came in the form of a human being, lived a life of perfect devotion and obedience to God, who died for our sins, and who God raised from the dead into new life, and Jesus will come again to put a final end to evil, injustice, and suffering in a new creation. The good news for us that we hear in Revelation this week is this:

- God is for us.
- God is with us.
- God will never leave us alone.

Stay true to Jesus. Persevere in the faith. Because Jesus loves you, Jesus has your back, Jesus has all of you in his hands. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The images used in this document are from Wikimedia Commons and are in the public domain.

⁴ Larry Helyer and Ed Czerwski, *The Good News of Revelation*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 22-23.

⁵ Helyer and Czerwski, *The Good News of Revelation*, 38.