

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Well let's turn please in our Bibles to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation, chapter 1. We're going to read together the entire first chapter of Revelation chapter 1, due to the fact that we are beginning today our exposition of that book. Revelation chapter 1, verse 1.

“<sup>1</sup> The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: <sup>2</sup> who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. <sup>3</sup> Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. <sup>4</sup> John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, <sup>6</sup> and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

“<sup>7</sup> Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.

“<sup>8</sup> I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

“<sup>9</sup> I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup> I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, <sup>11</sup> saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. <sup>12</sup> And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; <sup>13</sup> and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the [waist] with a golden girdle. <sup>14</sup> His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; <sup>15</sup> and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. <sup>16</sup> And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. <sup>17</sup> And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: <sup>18</sup> I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. <sup>19</sup> Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; <sup>20</sup> the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”

We are beginning a new year, the year 2016, and also beginning the exposition of a new book, the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is probably the most misunderstood book in the Bible. Leon Morris, in his commentary on the book of Revelation, says on page 17 these words:

“The Revelation...is by common consent one of the most difficult of all the books of the Bible. It is full of strange symbolism. There are curious beasts with unusual numbers of heads and horns. There are extraordinary phenomena, like the turning of one third of the sea into blood (8:8), which are impossible to envisage. Modern readers find it strange. They are, moreover, not usually attracted by the fantastic schemes of prophecy which some exegetes find in it, and whose ingenuity is matched only by their improbability. The result is that for many Revelation remains a closed book. Except for one or two passages, like the vision of the redeemed in chapter 7, or that of the heavenly Jerusalem in the final two chapters, it remains largely unread. We recognize that it is part of the canon of Scripture and therefore we accord it formal recognition. But we remain uneasy and do not make use of it.”

What he says is true, and what he says is also a great tragedy, because this book is intended to be a source of great comfort and great encouragement to the church. But much of that comfort and much of that encouragement this book is intended to be to the church is lost because of the misunderstanding of its structure, of its language, of its symbolism, and of its message.

This misunderstanding of the structure and language and symbolism and message of the book of Revelation is largely due to an attempt to read first century apocalyptic writing with a 21st century mindset and understanding. We cannot view the book of Revelation from a modern day perspective. If we do so, we will be utterly confused by it. We must understand the book of Revelation from a first century perspective, and we must understand the book of Revelation from an Old Testament perspective.

What would John’s first century readers have understood as *they* read the book of Revelation? How would they have understood its symbolism and its structure and its message and its allusions? That is how we must seek to understand it. Modern day dispensational schemes, current political events, and last day speculations are not a basis for understanding the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is firmly rooted in the first century, and the book of Revelation is firmly rooted in the Old Testament.

And so it is from those perspectives—a first century perspective and an Old Testament perspective—that we must approach this book and seek to gain an understanding of this book. The book of Revelation was written to be understood, and it *can* be understood, if it is approached and interpreted with a proper methodology—a methodology that first century Christians would have understood and would have used.

It says in verse 3 of chapter 1, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” And the clear

implication behind that third verse is the expectation that the ordinary Christian would read this book, understand it, and obey the instructions that it provides.

As the modern day Christian reads this book, he often finds himself baffled and confused as to what it means by what it says. This is entirely unnecessary. This book can be understood, and this book will be understood as it is properly approached and as it is properly interpreted. It does not need to be a mystery and a source of confusion and a source of frustration to us as we read it.

Now, it is very fitting that the book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible, because it tells us the end of the story that the Bible contains, and it concludes the message that the Bible conveys. As you recall, the Bible opens with the book of Genesis, otherwise known as the Book of Beginnings, where we see the original creation of the world and of humanity.

The book of Genesis tells us of the work of the Devil in engineering the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden and the depravity and the curse that resulted from that fall, both upon the creation itself, and also upon all mankind in every subsequent generation. As we read the book of Genesis in those early chapters, it seems that Satan has triumphed over God and that Satan has destroyed the work of God.

However, God will not be defeated. God promises in Genesis 3 and verse 15 that He will send the Seed of the woman, who was Jesus Christ, to destroy the works of the Devil and to restore the paradise that had been lost, and to redeem the souls of fallen men. Mankind *will* be redeemed from sin. Paradise *will* be restored. And the Devil and his works *will* be destroyed. This is what God promises in Genesis 3:15.

So Genesis 3:15 is a declaration of war by God against the Devil and the entire rest of the Bible is a record of how that war goes and how that war ends. What we see in the Bible is the progressive defeat of the Devil, and the book of Revelation records the final triumph of Jesus Christ and the final defeat of Satan.

Genesis tells us about the beginning of sin and paradise lost. Revelation tells us about the defeat of sin and paradise restored. Genesis tells us about the work of Satan established. Revelation tells us about the work of Satan destroyed. It is for this reason that the book of Revelation is such a great comfort and encouragement to the believer. The book of Revelation is a declaration of how everything is going to turn out in the end. And the way everything turns out in the end is that Jesus Christ wins and His people win. And Satan and his followers, both demonic and human, suffer everlasting defeat and destruction in the lake of fire.

These are the two goals, then, that we hope to accomplish as we study the book of Revelation together. Our first goal is that we would understand this book, that we would understand the structure and the language and the symbolism and the message of this book.

The second goal of our study of this book is not only that we would understand the book, but that we would see and rejoice in the triumph of Jesus Christ. It says in First John 3 and verse 8, that for this cause was the Son of God manifested, that He might destroy the works of the Devil. And the book of Revelation is a declaration from start to finish of the fact that Jesus Christ has accomplished that goal. Our goal is that we would see and rejoice in the triumph of Christ; that we would see His triumph in destroying the works of the Devil; that we would see His triumph in restoring paradise lost; and that we would see His triumph in redeeming His people from sin and from all of its effects. So to understand the book and to see the triumph of Christ—these are the two goals that we have set ourselves to accomplish as we preach through this book.

Let us then begin by establishing an introduction to the book. Then we are going to proceed to explain how we should interpret the book. Then having introduced the book and talked about how we're going to interpret the book, we will proceed with an exposition of the book—all 22 chapters of it, God willing.

As we begin our introduction to the book, there are a variety of issues that we need to consider, each of which has an important impact on our understanding and our interpretation of the book. Some of these introductory things might not seem too exciting at first, but each of these points is an important building block in the understanding of the book as a whole, and in the understanding of its various parts.

In the first place then this morning, let us consider together the name of the book. The title of this book in our English Bibles is, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," so it's commonly called the "Book of Revelation." The word "revelation" is derived from the Latin language, and simply means "unveiling." The idea is that something is concealed behind a curtain, but when the curtain is removed, what is behind that curtain is now revealed. There has been a revealing, or a revelation, if you will, of what was formerly hidden.

You have also perhaps heard the term "apocalypse" used as the title of this book. In some Bibles, this is in fact the title that's given to the book. When you're reading through the table of contents, it'll say, "First, Second, Third John, Jude, Apocalypse." The word "apocalypse" is a transliteration of the very first word of the Greek text of this book, and that word is "apokalupsis." The Greek word apokalupsis is then transliterated to apocalypse. And the word apokalupsis also means to uncover or to unveil. So this book is a book that reveals things that were previously hidden.

Now the question is, What was hidden that is revealed by this book? What does it unveil? Well the answer is, there is in this book an unveiling of the plan of God for the future and what will unfold over the process of time. We are told what the church will do in the future and what will happen to it. We are told what the world will do in the future and what will happen to it. So there is an unveiling of the things that will occur and will characterize the age between the first and the second coming of Christ. In the first century, they didn't know how it was all going to

unfold over time. The book of Revelation pulls back the curtain and gives them an unveiling or a revelation of how history is going to go from the first century until the second coming of Jesus.

Now you recall that God gave to Jesus a book, in Revelation chapter 5, that is sealed with seven seals. This is the revelation which God gave to His Son, Jesus Christ. That book is the revelation which God gave to His Son, Jesus Christ. You remember Revelation 1:1? “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him.”

God the Father gave something to God the Son. It was a revelation. And that book in chapter 5 is that revelation that God the Father gave to God the Son, and contained in that book was the revelation that describes the things that will occur and the things that will characterize the entire period from John’s day clear out into eternity. So what John could see and what the first century Christians could see and what we can see today is the declaration by God of what history is going to look at and how it’s going to unfold over the process of time, until time is no more.

Now this does not mean that this book foretells specific future events that have occurred over the last 2,000 years, like the rise of King Constantine, the French Revolution, the establishment of America, or World War I, or World War II. We are not saying that when Christ reveals future history that He reveals the specific events in the unfolding of that history, so that this seal refers to the French Revolution, and that trumpet refers to World War I. That’s the historicist’s view of the book of Revelation. We’ll be addressing that, but that is not the proper method of interpretation of the book of Revelation.

When we say that what we have is a view of what history is going to look like and how it’s going to unfold over the process of time, between the first and second coming of Christ, what that means is that the book of Revelation foretells the general characteristics of the age to come, and it sets out the types of blessings that will fall on the believers, and the types of judgments that will fall upon the wicked.

It tells us of the struggle between the church and the world, and what that will look like. It tells us of the conflict between God and Satan, and what that will look like, and how that will turn out, and how that will impact us.

It tells us of the second coming of Christ and of the eternal state of the saved and the lost; and while it does deal with some very specific events right toward the end, in general and in the main, it sets out the characteristics of the spiritual warfare that is going to take place between the first and the second comings of Christ.

In short, it reveals to us what we might expect to see and experience in the spiritual conflict that is going to go on until Christ returns, and then the outcome His second coming will produce when He appears.

So this, then, is the reason for the name of the book. It unveils what the future will consist of between the first and the second coming of Christ, and therefore it is relevant to every single generation that exists between the first and the second coming of Christ.

You see, the problem with the whole futurist school of interpretation, which is based on dispensationalism, is that everything from chapter 4 forward hasn't occurred yet, and isn't going to occur until during the great tribulation. So it really has no relevance to us. In fact, from Revelation 1:1 through Revelation chapter 22, every section of the book has relevance to every generation, because every section describes what goes on in that generation during that generation's spiritual conflict in fighting to establish the Kingdom of God, in fighting against Satan and his forces, and in experiencing the protection and the blessing of God as they do so.

So this book unveils what the future is going to consist of between the first and second coming of Christ, and in that sense, the book of Revelation is a field manual for our present spiritual warfare and the spiritual warfare of all previous generations, and the spiritual warfare of all future generations, until Christ returns.

The book of Revelation is a guidebook. It tells us *what* we are experiencing, it tells us *why* we are experiencing it, and it tells us *how* we should respond to it. Here you are sitting in the pew. You have a history, you have a present, and you have a future. And during that time, you have been undergoing spiritual warfare. What you have been undergoing is described in this book, it is described in the seven seals, it is described in the seven trumpets, and it is described in the seven vials. It is described in the conflict that is between the dragon and the beast and the false prophet and the people of God.

This, then, is a field manual for our present spiritual warfare, and it has been a field manual for the spiritual warfare of all previous generations, and it will be a field manual for spiritual warfare for all subsequent generations. Since it is a field manual, explaining to us what the spiritual warfare of the age in which we live looks like and how we might successfully combat and triumph *in* this warfare, then it is especially sad that this book is so badly misunderstood and misinterpreted and misapplied.

It is especially sad that so many get frustrated with it and throw up their hands in confusion over what it is saying, and just ignore it and leave it unused. That is like a general giving his troops intelligence about the enemy, supplying them with a battle plan for defeating the enemy, and telling them the proper tactics to employ, and promising them victory if they use them, and for the soldiers to say, Well, I can't understand all of this. I'll just set it aside and seek to figure out what to do on my own as I go along.

The failure of the church to properly understand and use the book of Revelation is the reason for so much confusion and ineptitude that Christians in the church in our day are characterized by in the conduct of their spiritual warfare and in their understanding of how it is to be conducted, and how we are to obtain victory in it.

My hope, as we study this book together, is that we will say to ourselves as we go through it, Of course! Now I see why things happen the way they do. Now I see why we experience the things that we do. Jesus told us that this is how it was going to be during this period, and I can also see that if I patiently persevere, that the triumph is mine, and that Christ will obtain the victory for Himself and for me. Therefore I can fight these battles with confidence and fight them with the knowledge that I am using proper tactics, and that I am assured of a triumphant outcome when I understand the battle as He describes it, and I prosecute the battle as He instructs me to do.

And so what the book unveils to us is how history is going to go, the spiritual conflict that is going to characterize it, who the parties are, what the issues are, and how we are to fight that battle in our generation. You know how we're supposed to fight the battle in our generation? The same way the first century church fought it, and the same way the thirty third century church will fight it, if it goes on that long.

So this isn't a book about the past; this is not a book about the future; this is a book about the spiritual warfare we are facing right now. To be sure, it has issues of the past in it and it has issues regarding the future in it. But primarily, it's about, How do we fight spiritual warfare right now in our lives in our generation? What might we expect that battle to look like, and how do we need to respond to it?

That brings us then to our second major point. Having seen the name of the book, secondly, let us consider together the purpose of the book. God never does anything without a reason and God never does anything without a purpose. If you were to ever ask God, Why did you do this, or, Why did you do that, the answer would never be, I don't know.

Have you ever gone up to a little kid when he did something terrible, and you say, Why did you do that? And he says, I don't know. And you know what? He really didn't know. He never thought it through. He just acted on impulse. And later on, he's going to say, Why did I do that? You've done that yourself. You think, What did I do that for?

God is not like that, and we need to not be like that either. God has a clearly defined purpose for everything He does, and God has a sound reason for every action He takes, and He's thought it all through before He does it, so *when* He does it, He doesn't have to think, Ah, I should have done something differently.

So we would expect that God has a definite purpose for writing the book of Revelation and a definite purpose in giving it to us in our Bibles, and we are not disappointed in that expectation. We are specifically told in chapter 1 and verse 3, that the purpose of the book is to provide blessing to all those who both hear and keep the teachings that this book contains.

Now look in your Bibles, if you will, at chapter 1 and verse 3. Here's the purpose of the book. Verse 3, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep

those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” God’s purpose in giving us this book so that we could hear it and understand it and obey it, is so that we would be blessed.

I want you to turn in the book of Revelation to chapter 22 and verse 7. Now we’re at the end of the story, right? And notice what it says. Jesus says, “Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.” So He repeats in Revelation 22:7 what He said in chapter 1 and verse 3. From the start of the book to the end of the book, the purpose is the same. The purpose is that the people of God would be blessed by understanding these things and by responding appropriately to these things, by obeying the instructions that are given to them regarding these things.

Now many blessings accrue to those who read and obey the message of this book. But chief among those blessings that accrue to those who read and obey the message of this book is that of obtaining comfort and assurance as they struggle against the forces of evil. This whole book is about the struggle against the forces of evil. That’s what it starts with.

Notice chapter 1 and verse 9: “I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ.” Where is John? He’s on Patmos. Why is he there? Persecution against him by the Roman Empire. So here is a persecuted, suffering Christian, and Jesus comes to him and reveals to him this book, and the reason why He reveals it to Him is that He wants John to be blessed, and among those blessings is the blessing of comfort in the midst of persecution.

This book is full of help and comfort for persecuted and suffering Christians. Satan is a relentless foe of the people of God, and he stirs up his followers to mercilessly persecute Christians. The church is constantly struggling against the forces of evil. That’s what’s been going on the last 2,000 years, and that’s what’s going to go on for the next 2,000 years, if Christ delays His coming.

So the purpose of this book is to comfort and strengthen and encourage the church in this conflict against Satan and his people, and to assure them of their ultimate victory over Satan and his people. This book opens with a glorious revelation of Christ in chapter 1, which we read earlier. And where is Christ?—standing in the midst of His churches, speaking to them, and saying to them, Fear not. I am the First, I am the Last. I am He that lives and was dead. And behold, I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys to hell and I have the keys to death. And because I am all these things, you do not need to be afraid.

It says in chapter 17 verse 14, regarding the forces of evil: “These [forces of evil] shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.” It speaks of the fact that though the forces of evil are going to assault us, Christ is going to triumph over them and His people are going to triumph in His triumph. It speaks of our final triumph over the forces of evil.



The book of Revelation declares in its closing chapters that the Devil and the beast and the false prophet are all cast into the lake of fire, and death and hell are cast into the lake of fire, and all those who serve Satan and persecuted the church are all cast into the lake of fire; but as for the people of God, God will dwell with them and they shall be His people and God Himself will be their God. “And God will wipe all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed.” (Rev. 21:4)

So the constant theme throughout the book, from start to finish, is that Christ is with His church when they battle the forces of evil, and He will ensure their victory over those forces of evil, even though the battle is long, even though the battle is difficult, even though the battle is painful, and even though sometimes His people are martyred.

Now knowing all of this is a tremendous comfort to a militant church that is fighting hard in every generation to establish and build and expand the kingdom of God throughout the earth. It encourages us who are battered and beaten in the spiritual warfare to remain faithful to Christ, in spite of our sufferings, because that faithfulness will be rewarded in the end, and to those who overcome, wonderful blessings of the new heavens and a new earth are promised.

Revelation 21 and verse 7 says, “He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.” And so the purpose of the book is to give them assurance of victory, to give them comfort in their persecutions, and to encourage them to remain faithful to the death and to overcome all of the pressure on them to compromise and apostatize, knowing that if they overcome and do not cave in in this spiritual warfare that they face, the promises that are given to them are of infinite worth, eternal duration, and immeasurable value.

This book gives the believer all he needs to face the future spiritual warfare with strength, with confidence, and with joy. That’s the purpose of the book—to give you strength and confidence and joy as you fight the spiritual warfare of your generation.

That brings us to our third and final point this morning. Having seen the name of the book, having seen the purpose of the book, notice thirdly, the recipients of the book. This book is directed to a very specific audience. It is specifically directed to the churches of Jesus Christ. This is stated repeatedly.

Notice chapter 1 and verse 4: “John to the seven churches which are in Asia.” Notice chapter 1 and verse 11. Jesus says, “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches.” So John says, I’m writing to the seven churches. Jesus says to John, Send this information to the seven churches, which are in chapter 2 and chapter 3. And notice chapter 22 and verse 16. It says, “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches.”

So from start to finish, this book is addressed to the churches and what they will face in the first century, and what they will face in the second century, and what they will face in the third century, and every subsequent century up until the Second Coming of Christ. The church is the sole institution that Christ left on earth to do His work, to build His kingdom, and to represent His message. And Christ expects every single believer to be committed to and to be involved in a local church. His teaching presupposes this.

For example, in Matthew chapter 18, verses 15 to 18, he says, If you have a problem with your brother, go to him alone. If he won't hear you, take two or three more. If he doesn't hear them, tell it to the church. And the clear expectation is that these brothers have a church to go to and are involved in a church and that there are elders in that church to whom this matter of church discipline can be taken.

Jesus said in Matthew 28, verses 19 to 20, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." So we go out and we witness and we make disciples. What do we do? We baptize them and we teach them. And the context in which baptism and teaching is done is the context of the gathered assembly of the local church.

The New Testament knows nothing of lone ranger Christianity or a do-it-yourself spirituality. The New Testament everywhere expects and assumes that every Christian will be in a church, that they will be committed to that church, and that they will be participating in all the means of grace which that church is entrusted with and exercises by the direction of Jesus Christ. And it is as individual believers are involved in the life of the church that the church collectively and individually will be able to overcome the onslaught of Satan and all of his people.

Christ's work is always and ever done through local churches. You can see it in this book. They are the focus of His concern and they are the object of His care, because after all, where is Christ? Look in chapter 1 of Revelation. In verses 12 and 13, John says, "And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; <sup>13</sup> and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the [waist] with a golden girdle." And what are these seven candlesticks? Notice verse 20. It says, "...and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches."

When Christ reveals Himself to John, where is Christ standing? In the middle of the seven candlesticks, which represent the seven churches. Christ is focused on His church and Christ lives in the midst of His church. In Matthew 18 and in verse 20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," because the local church is the New Covenant temple, made up of living stones, with a universal priesthood, that offers up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ, and the church gathered is the habitation of Jesus Christ on earth, with reference to His special, personal presence. If Christ is focused on

and dwells in the midst of His church, where do you suppose we ought to place our focus and spend our time on the Lord's Day but in the midst of the church, where Christ is?

The local church is God's institution for getting His work done on earth in this age. It is through the local church that He builds His kingdom, proclaims His glory, and preaches His gospel. Therefore, we see that Christ's great concern in the book of Revelation is for the purity of His church, the doctrine of His church, the persecution of His church, the protection of His church, for the suffering of His church, and for the victory of His church. Christ is a church-centered Savior, and therefore, we need to be church-centered Christians, because to be church-centered is to be Christ-centered, because Christ dwells in the midst of His church.

We see all of this—this great concern Christ has for the purity and the doctrine and the persecution and the protection and the suffering and the victory of the church—we see His concern for this in the seven letters that He writes to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. We see that Christ's heart is focused on His churches. There are seven of them, and the number seven is used dozens of times in the book of Revelation. The number seven always and ever symbolizes completeness. Therefore, these seven churches represent the church as a whole and the church throughout the centuries. These seven churches represent all the churches that exist, have existed, or shall exist, between the first and the second comings of Christ.

These seven churches represent the problems that they struggle with, and the virtues they possess, and the opposition that they experience. In these seven churches we see the type and the struggles and the challenges and the blessings and the failings and the successes of all churches that have existed between the first and the second comings of Christ. The afflictions which the church was subjected to in the days of the apostle John are typical of the persecution which churches must endure throughout the entire New Covenant period, and especially in that period just before Christ's second coming, when Satan is loosed.

Therefore, any church and every church that hopes to please Christ, that hopes to overcome the world and that hopes to triumph over persecution needs to both understand and apply the lessons of the book of Revelation. If there ever was a church epistle, the book of Revelation is it. Christ as the Head of His church gives instructions to His church, and the church needs to hear and the church needs to heed the instructions and promises that the Head of the church gives to them.

And if you wonder, What should our church look like? The book of Revelation tells us what our church should look like, and also what it should not look like. It tells us how it can triumph. It tells us of the care and protection of Christ for it. But it also tells us of the work and the labor and the faithfulness that we must exercise if we are to be, what? Overcomers. And promises were made to every one of the churches—to him that overcometh, to him that overcometh.

You know what overcoming implies? There is an obstacle in the way. There is a challenge that stands before you, and you've got to overcome it. And the challenge and the obstacles that we face in our day, and John faced in his day, is that Satan is fighting hard against the church and

God's people, and we have to fight back and defeat them. And we shall, and we will, spiritually, in the warfare, so that in the end, we will have been found to be faithful to Jesus, and Satan will be found to have failed in subverting us into apostasy. Those are the overcomers. They aren't the people that are perfect; they are the people who persevere in the spiritual warfare, and by the grace and strength and blood of Christ, overcome Satan and send him away into defeat in his purpose to pull us away from Christ and attach us to himself.

This, then, is the name of the book, the purpose of the book, and the recipients of the book. Here in this book, like nowhere else, we see the triumph of Christ over Satan. Here in this book, like nowhere else, we see God's sovereign control over the course of history as the seals are opened and the trumpets are sounded and the vials are poured out. All of those things are merely an orchestration of the decrees of God in the conduct of the spiritual warfare that takes place between the first and the second coming of Christ.

So we should not be surprised at all by the way things are unfolding, by the things we experience, by the struggles we have, nor by the fact that somehow, we make it! It's all part of God's plan, because the same Christ who chose us and called us is also the same Christ who ensures by His grace that we are faithful. Here we see the challenges that faced the church and we see the triumph of the church over every opponent it faces.

What we have to understand is that the church is not a place of ease and comfort and feel-good. The church is like a military base. It is an outpost in the war, and therefore, people are going to come in bloodied and wounded. They need to have their wounds bound up and healed. They need to be equipped with spiritual weapons, and they need to go back out and fight some more. The church looks more like a field hospital than a retirement home, and we need to understand that.

People say, Well, can't we just have peace in the church? No, we're involved in a war. And Satan is going to send his people in to try to subvert. Does the enemy ever try to infiltrate the base? We see that Paul himself said that grievous wolves shall come from without. And he says, even from within, of your own selves, men shall arise, speaking perverse things and try to draw away disciples after them.

So we have to understand that we're in a war. We need to have a war mentality and footing, and we need to be fighting the good fight of faith. The day of rest will come when Christ returns. Until then, we need to fight the good fight with all of our might. And what the book of Revelation is, is a field manual for the war. It's the General's plan. It's the unveiling of the tactics of the enemy. We have "intel" on all that Satan is going to do and try, and we also have instructions as to how we're going to respond in all of the descriptions that are in this book.

Next time, God willing, we'll talk about the interpretation of the book. How are we going to ferret our way through all of these strange symbols and all of the things that it says that are so

confusing? We are going to figure out the meaning of this book by looking at it through a first century mindset, and by looking at it through an Old Testament mindset. Shall we pray together?

Our Father, we thank you so much for this wonderful book. And Father, may we not run away from it; rather, may we run toward it and may we find in it great comfort and encouragement in the battle against Satan. May we see in it the unveiling of what is to be expected in the future, in the present, and a description of what's already happened in the past.

Father, we pray that through the study of this book we would become more committed to our churches and to participating in the spiritual warfare that is fought through them against Satan. Thank you that Christ has promised that through His church, He will prevail over the gates of hell, and the gates of hell will not prevail over the church.

And so thank you that though there's resistance, the gates are in fact there and that we are promised to be overcomers. May we fight the good fight and in that day and age be able to say with Paul, I have fought a good fight. I've finished my course. I've kept the faith. May that be said of us and may it be easier to be said of us because of the things we learn through this study.

Father, we just want to humble ourselves before you at the outset, and confess that without you, we cannot rightly understand, interpret, or apply this book. So I pray that you would especially give me clarity and understanding and illumination as I seek to interpret, and for all of us to have that same clarity and illumination and understanding in grasping the message and living it out.

Father, may your Spirit lead us into the truth. We do not expect to be led into it any other way. So Father, we have no Plan B but to trust in you for illumination and guidance. Give it to us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.