

## Prologue: The Blessings of Revelation

*Revelation 1-5*

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**Bible Text:** Revelation 1:1-3  
**Preached on:** Sunday, June 3, 2012

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If you have your Bibles with you, open them to Revelation 1. Today we'll examine verses 1 to 3, prologue. Revelation 1:1 to 3, and as we examine the prologue, what you will find is a pattern here in the prologue that is carried throughout the letter.

We talked about the importance of numbers and one of those numbers that was important in the book of Revelation is the number 3. It's important for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it is a number that represents the Triune God but it's also important because it's a number that gives this letter a rhythm, if you will. It's almost like a waltz. 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. So the number 3 is not always used to refer to the Triune God, it is sometimes simply used in order to give us a rhythm in the letter. Remember the letter was meant to be read aloud and, in fact, if you are interested I would encourage you and even challenge you to memorize the book of Revelation because there are many aspects of this letter that make it easier to remember, not least of which is this rhythm of 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, the numbers that we find, the colors that we find, the creatures that we find all very memorable. The overarching pattern of the letter itself, very memorable. An example of that is found here in the prologue. So John is not only introducing the letter but he is also introducing the rhythm of the letter, if you will. He is introducing the waltz.

Look with me beginning in verse 1. "The revelation of Jesus Christ." Now no sooner do we pass those words that we find this rhythm,

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He [Jesus] made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God

So we see God gave, the Son made known, and John bore witness, but to what did John bear witness? We've seen 1, 2, 3. To number 1, the word of God, and number 2, to the testimony of Jesus Christ, number 3, even to all that he saw. 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. And in case you didn't get it the first two times, now we see the first beatitude. By the way, this is the first of seven beatitudes in the book of Revelation.

3 Blessed is the one who [1] reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and [2] blessed are those who hear, and [3] who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. There is a rhythm to the letter and this rhythm is carried out especially throughout this first chapter.

So the numbers that we find here are not just important from the perspective of the type of literature but they're also important from the perspective of the very rhythm or cadence of the letter which, again, remember is meant to be read aloud so that as you hear it read aloud, important points are emphasized and reiterated again and again and again. But not only do we see the rhythm here but we see the source of the revelation. We see that in verse 1, "The revelation of Jesus Christ," and the question there is, is this the revelation about Jesus or is this the revelation from Jesus. Well, I believe we find evidence here in the grammar and syntax and also in chapter 22 that points to the fact that this is the revelation from Jesus, "which God gave him." So we have the Father giving this revelation to Jesus, "to show his servants the things which must soon take place. He make it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to all that he saw."

So we see here this sort of chain of evidence, if you will. The Father to the Son, to the angels, who then communicate further, but when we talk about the source of this, we talk about those first three steps in the chain or those first three links in the chain, that the Father gives this to the Son, who gives this to an angel. The idea of angels being used of God to bring this type of information is not unique to the book of Revelation. We find it, for example, in the Old Testament prophets, not least of which to the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 8:16-19, 9; chapters 21 through 23, we see that the angel Gabriel assists Daniel in interpreting and understanding the vision, and here John is speaking about a vision that is given to him by an angel who helps him with communication and interpretation.

We also see this in the New Testament. It's reiterated in the New Testament. Turn with me to the left, if you will, a beautiful thing about being in the book of Revelation is everything else is to the left, amen? Turn with me to the left to Hebrews 2. Hebrews 2 and there we read, "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." So there in Hebrews 2 we have this same picture of God revealing himself. We see angels there in that chain of the revelation but also the Lord himself and finally his apostles in that chain of revelation.

Alan Johnson writes, "The words 'by sending his angel to his servant John' introduce us to the significance of angels in the worship of God in the revelation of God's word and in the execution of his judgments in the earth." Angels are referred to 67 times in

Revelation, 67 times. Oftentimes when John sees something new there is the angel who shows him this new thing. In chapter 5, we see the angels around the throne. We see this picture of the angels worshipping God and it's something that we have, evidently, just become jaded by because we don't talk about it anymore or even sing about it all that much anymore, but the fact of the matter is angels are impressive creatures which is evidenced by the fact that when they show up in the Bible their two most common phrases are, "Fear not," and, "Get up," and yet these creatures who are awe-inspiring worship God ceaselessly. These creatures whose beauty is unlike anything we've ever experienced worship God ceaselessly. These creatures, by the way, who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, by the way, God did not send thousands of angels to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he just sent two and that was enough. Two cities, two angels, no more, and yet these awe-inspiring, powerful, beautiful, matchless creatures worship God ceaselessly.

Listen to some of these familiar refrains. This one from "All hail the power of Jesus' name. All hail the power of Jesus' name, let angels prostrate fall, bring forth the royal diadem and crown him Lord of all." And this one from "Angels from the realms of glory. Angels from the realms of glory, wing your feet o'er all the earth, ye who sang creation's story, now proclaim Messiah's birth. Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn King." How about "Blessed assurance"? The refrain, "Perfect submission, perfect delight, visions of rapture now burst on my sight. Angels descending, bring from above, echoes of mercy, whispers of love." How about "Immortal invisible God only wise"? We find this refrain, "Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight. All praise we would render, O help us to see, 'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee." In "Joyful, joyful we adore thee," we find this refrain, "All thy works with joy surround me, earth and heaven reflect thy rays. Stars and angels sing around thee, center of unbroken praise." Who can forget the refrain in "Holy, holy, holy"? "Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee, who wert and art and evermore shall be." Where do you think the author of that hymn got that idea? Right here from the book of Revelation. The angels who worship God ceaselessly. The angels who are messengers of God, who facilitate this message through God's servant John.

What about the recipients of the revelation? We see, of course, that John is a recipient. We see that there in the second part of verse 1, "He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John." His angel to his servant who then bore witness to his servants. John, we understand, is an apostle so according to Hebrews 2 we see how he falls within this chain of revelation, of authoritative revelation, but there's also this idea of him as servant. It's a word that's repeated again and again and again in Revelation. I believe 14 times we find the word, but particularly we see it several times referring to the people of God. In Revelation 2:20, "But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols." In chapter 6, verse 11, "Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been." Chapter 7, verse 3, "saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.'" Chapter 19, verse 2, "for his

judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants." You see, in this letter servants always refers to Christians, to those who are faithful, to those who serve God and they are set over and against those who worship the beast, who accept his mark, who do his bidding and who walk in sin as opposed to righteousness. This is God's word. It is the word from God, to and through his servant John, brought to all of his servants throughout the ages who are faithful to him.

We also see the urgency of this revelation. We find that in verses 1 and 3. Look at the end of verse 1, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place." Look again at verse 3, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near." It must soon take place and the time is near. G. K. Biele writes, "The unconsummated aspect of the fulfillment also included in the two expressions of immanence in verses 1 and 3 refers to the imminent tribulation which has already begun," we see that in 1:9, 2:9 and 22 and then in 3:10, "and to the coming of Christ but as will be seen, the repeated statement in the following chapters that Christ will come quickly likely do not allude primarily to his apocalyptic appearance at the end of the age but to all his unseen comings in judgment throughout the age and climaxing with the final parousia or his final coming or appearing."

So when John makes this reference to things that must soon occur, he's not making a reference to the fact that the world itself is going to end very soon, he is actually making reference to the fact that what he's talking about is already underway. Look with me, if you will, in chapter 1 and verse 9. In chapter 1, verse 9, we find, "I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." In other words, John says, "I'm writing you from the island of Patmos." Why? "Because of the testimony of God, because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus." Why is John on the island of Patmos? Because there is persecution of Christians already taking place even at this time. John says that he's our partner in the tribulation. John's not writing about a tribulation that's going to come at some future date, John is writing about a tribulation that in his mind is now and has continued even to this point.

Revelation 6:9, "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne." Is that something future? I think not. That's something now. Revelation 20:4, "Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." John is talking about something that has already commenced, that is continuing to go on but that will ultimately come to fruition at the end of the age.

This is extremely important for us because this is why the book of Revelation is relevant to every Christian in every age. If John is only speaking about things that are going to come right before the end, then it's not had meaning to anyone and doesn't have meaning to anyone until right before the end. If John is talking about something that has already occurred as a preterist brothers would have us believe, then it has no meaning for us in the here and the now but its meaning is past, but John is talking about something that was occurring even in his own life. In fact, his very imprisonment or exile on the island of Patmos was evidence that it had already begun to occur. He's there because Emperor Domitian is already persecuting those who preach and teach the word of Jesus Christ, those who have as their profession Jesus is Lord in the midst of a society that requires you to make the confession Caesar is Lord. By the way, John is the only one of the apostles who gets to live to a ripe old age and write a letter at this late a date. At the end of the first century is when he's writing Revelation.

So those who would argue that John is writing about some tribulation in the future basically have to argue that he sits there on the island of Patmos in exile writing about some terrible time that's going to come in the future while simultaneously thinking about all his fellow apostles who were beheaded, crucified upside down, run through with a spear, beaten to death with a branch of an olive tree, boiled in oil. No, when John writes about tribulation he's writing about right here, right now. He's writing about the church in every age and the fact of the matter is we're spoiled. We live in a time and in a place and in a land where we know nothing of this. We worship today in the open. We worship today in public and none of us sits here fearing that an armed mob will come through the doors and beat us to death, or worse yet put chains on the doors and set this place on fire which happens all over the world to our brothers and sisters in Christ. This letter is to them, this letter is to us, to saints in every age who endure.

We also see the nature of the revelation. This is important. Notice what John says, verse 2, "who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw." First of all, John identifies this as the word of God, as the testimony of Jesus Christ, and as all that he saw. He equates what he saw with word of God. In other words, John is saying that God has communicated to us not just in words but also in images. There is also an allusion here to Daniel 2. Turn with me back, if you will, to Daniel 2. I know that we were there not long ago, and look beginning at verse 28, "but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries," by the way, that word "revelation" or "apocalypse," the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, that word means "to reveal mysteries; something that was hidden but is now revealed." "But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries," by the way, revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave to him, the God in heaven who reveals mysteries, "and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be." Do you not hear the same language in Revelation 1? But because you hear the same language in Revelation 1, you ought to understand what is being communicated here, that the book of Revelation is a prophetic book, that it is revealing through signs and images.

That means that we don't interpret this letter the same way we interpret other parts of Scripture and here's a departure for many who interpret the book of Revelation. There are many who interpret the book of Revelation who argue that you should interpret the book literally unless you are told otherwise. So everything in here you look at literally unless there's something that says you interpret otherwise. I believe that is completely backwards. The truth is actually the other way around. We see here in these first two verses that this book is to be interpreted symbolically unless you are told specifically to take something literally. That's the way you interpret the book of Revelation.

When does that make a difference? Let me give you a couple of places where it makes a huge difference. If your argument is that you're to interpret the book of Revelation literally unless and until you're told that something is figurative, well, that's when you go and you add up days and you get a year and a half here, and a year and a half there, that, you know, or three and a half years here, three and a half years there, seven years of tribulation, and then in the middle of the tribulation you have pretrib rapture, midtrib rapture, posttrib rapture, all of that comes from looking at that three and a half years literally. 144,000, is that literally 144,000 people? Well, if you interpret things literally unless you're otherwise told, then yeah, literally 144,000 people. Millennium, thousand years, is it literally a thousand years? Well, yeah, you interpret it literally unless you're told specifically that it's not literal, that's how you get there from that hermeneutical principle, but you interpret this literally unless you're told otherwise. Folks, John just told us by his allusion to Daniel 2 by his use of this word for "sign," by this word for "show," seven times that we find in Revelation, that what he is communicating here is a vision that is to be understood symbolically unless you're told to take things literally. 144,000, is it literal? No. Significant number 12, 12 times 12 gets you 144. A thousand which is humongous ginormous number, 12 times 12 times 1,000. The number is symbolic. Thousand years, literally a thousand years? Nope, 10 times 10 times 10. It's not literal. It's not literal, it's symbolic. Literally three and a half years and then three and a half years? Nope. It's symbolic. We understand these things symbolically unless we're told to understand them literally. That changes the way you view the book, changes the way you interpret the book, and I will just say right here upfront, it will probably put what you hear over the next few months at odds with much if not most of what you've heard over the last several years. And let me just go ahead and put this out there. If you love the "Left Behind" series, that's just gonna get all messed up for you. Amen somebody, okay? That is not the interpretive key that we're using here.

Listen to this from Simon Kistemaker. "Jesus Christ receives the task of showing it in the manner of a pictorial display. The book itself is an eloquent testimony that this display is given by signs, symbols, names, numbers, colors, and creatures. At the beginning of the book it's pictorial characteristics already become visible in the verb 'to show.' It is a hint to the reader as to how the book should be read and understood."

Turn with me, if you will, to chapter 4 and verse 1. "After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'" Turn with me to chapter 17 and verse 1, "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven

bowls came and said," by the way, you see those numbers? Seven. "Came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters.'" Is that literal? Absolutely not. "Come and I will show you a sign." You interpret this figuratively and not literally.

Not only do we understand the nature of this book to be symbolic but we understand the nature of this book to be worshipful. This is not a book that was designed for us to read with a globe in one hand and the newspaper in the other so that we could figure out how to be in the right place at the right time, or when to get really really scared. This is a book that is designed to do one thing and one thing only, bring praise and glory and laud and honor to our God and to his Son Jesus Christ. That's the purpose of the revelation.

Look with me, if you will, and we'll now see the blessing of the revelation. Look at verse 3, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it." Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, those who hear, and those who keep what are written in it. There are seven beatitudes in the book of Revelation. There is this beatitude here, there is one in chapter 14, verse 13; there's one in chapter 16, verse 15; one in chapter 19, verse 9; one in chapter 20, verse 6; one in chapter 22, verse 7; and a final one in chapter 22, verse 14. Seven beatitudes. Seven mile markers. We've talked about this number seven and this number of completion and so we have the complete blessing of the complete people of God by the completion of the revelation of the Triune God.

But notice that there is a blessing first for those who read this aloud. There's a blessing for those who read this aloud. Those who read this aloud are doing what in John's estimation? Does John mean that blessed is the guy who stands all by himself, opens up his Bible and reads the book of Revelation aloud? That's not what he's saying. John's writing this letter specifically to whom? To seven churches. By the way, they're not the only seven churches. We've said this before and we'll talk about this again. There are other churches there in Asia Minor. He picks the number seven intentionally, symbolically. It's the complete number of the churches of God. So these letters are written to these churches. How are these letters received by these churches? Is there a copy for every person in the church? That's the way we think because every one of us has a copy of the word of God, in fact, we've got multiple copies. You come here and you bring all your Bibles and everybody in your family's got their own copy. You've got copies of the Bible for people in your family that can't even read yet. If you can't say amen, you ought to say ouch, right? But we do, there's nothing wrong with that but is that what happened in Ephesus and Smyrna and Thyatira and Pergamos. No, that's not what happened. What happened? What happened was the letter arrived and when the letter arrived someone had the privilege of standing up in the midst of the congregation and reading aloud this letter that was designed to bring encouragement to the saints in the midst of their darkest hours. That's a blessing, amen? And all of us are blessed. In fact, when we started this process and we looked through the book of Revelation and sort of lined out who was going to be teaching what and when, I think I can speak for all of those who are scheduled to be up here that initially when the decision was made that we were going to be teaching through the book of Revelation, not everybody was just completely

and utterly excited, but as we've read and studied and learned and walked through this together and as we understand how much this book makes of Christ, as we understand the message of this book, who it's designed for and what it's designed to do, we understand more and more and more every day that it's a blessing just to read this aloud, let alone to explain it to God's people.

I've had conversations with several of you just since the introduction last week. There's some of you who just, you've already been freed up, amen, just from the introduction of last week because there's so many who've either never read this letter, been afraid of this letter, heard it taught and sat there thinking, "I have no idea where that comes from or if it fits." Some of you comes from places where you have a background where you've been told specifically that some things were going to happen and now decades later they didn't happen and the guy who was telling you decades ago that things were going to happen in 1984 or 1986 or 1988 is telling a whole new crop of people what's gonna happen in the next few years. It's a blessing even in our day and age where this book has been maligned, misused and abused, it's a blessing to stand before you and to teach it in such a way that it is a blessing to you.

Secondly, blessed are those who hear. Amen. Blessed are those who hear. In order to understand why it's a blessing for people to hear, you have to put that in its context. Why is it a blessing for those who hear? Remember Paul is talking about persecution. He is experiencing persecution. He has watched all of his fellow apostles die violent deaths. He is seeing the church be persecuted. There's been a persecution under Nero, now there's a persecution under Domitian, and there are more persecutions to come. So John says, "I'm writing this to you that was revealed to me." Remember this, John is on the island of Patmos in exile, he has no idea what's going to happen to him, he has no idea what the future holds, he has no idea how he's going to die and Christ sends an angel to say to him, "I want to show you something and I want you to write it down."

How does John know that it's a blessing to those who are being persecuted to hear this? Because he's on Patmos because of persecution and he got to hear it first. That's how he knows. It's a blessing to those who hear because when the church is persecuted, she needs to be reminded of the goodness of God, the sovereignty of God; she needs to be reminded who she serves; she needs to be reminded how she was redeemed and why she was redeemed. When persecution comes to the church, the church needs to be reminded that we are those who are here because of one who dies a death of persecution but who rose again on the third day, who overcame not just persecution but death itself. And so John says again and again looking at the martyrs all over Revelation, and they cry out, "How long?" And the response to them is not, "Hold on," but "Hold on, there's more of you." Did you catch that? The martyrs are crying out, "How long before we're vindicated?" "Hold on, there's more of you. The vindication is coming but so is more martyrdom."

It's a blessing to those who hear because we're reminded that even in the midst of our darkest days, our darkest moments, our darkest hours, we serve the risen, resurrected, all-powerful Creator, sustainer of the universe, the one at whose feet even the angels bow. But notice finally and those who keep what is written in it. Those who keep what is



written in it. At its core the book of Revelation is encouragement to the saints not just to go hole up somewhere and wait for Jesus to crack the sky. That's not what the letter's about. Notice the nature of the book of Revelation, the book of Revelation says to the saints not run and hide somewhere until Jesus comes for you, the book of Revelation says to the saints endure suffering until Jesus comes for you or calls for you either through your death or ultimately through his return. But no matter what, endure. Don't accept the mark. Don't worship the beast. Don't bow down in the midst of that pressure. By the way, we're going back again to Daniel, are we not?

Blessed are those who keep these things, who endure these things. Turn to Revelation 22. Look beginning at verse 6 and you'll find in here the interplay that we find throughout the book of Revelation. Revelation is all about a battle. It's all about clear lines being drawn. There is the Father and the Son and the Spirit and there's the beast and the false prophet and the dragon. There are the servants of God and there are those who worship the beast. There are those whose robes have been made white and there are those whose have not and here in chapter 22 in the epilogue we see that again. "And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.'" Going right back to chapter 1. "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." There is Jesus speaking, there again, "behold, I am coming soon." That we know what he's talking about.

Go down to verse 10. No, just go back to verse 8, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.'" Amen. "And he said to me, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy. Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'" 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." Is the difference between those on the inside and the outside the ones who've figured out the symbols? No. The difference between those on the inside and the outside is those whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and made white and pure and clean. The difference is those who believe his words and obey his words, that's the difference. But how do they do that? Because the Lamb's blood was shed on their behalf and they have been washed by his blood and made clean by his blood, been made whole by his blood, been made righteous by his blood. They belong to him. They are sealed by him. They are his and they're not going anywhere.

They would die by the sword rather than disobey or deny their Master, Savior and King. Those are the ones who are blessed. From the first beatitude to the seventh and final beatitude, we see the picture and what Revelation is all about and the question remains

for all of us, are you his? Are you marked by him? Do you belong to him? Do you worship him and serve him or do you worship and serve the beast? Have your robes been made white and clean and pure or do you remain in your sin? Are you inside or are you outside? What have you done with Christ?

No, the blessing in this book is not being able to crack the code, the blessing in this book is the message that resonates with those who belong to the Lamb that was slain and the question again is, is that you? You see, if you don't belong to Christ, you want a code book because you're trying to figure out what it is that you can do to be ready. If you belong to Christ, quite frankly you don't need a code book, amen? If you belong to Jesus you don't need a code book. If you belong to Jesus what is it that you need to figure out? If you belong to Jesus what is it that you fear? If you belong to Jesus what is it that you are trying to defeat in and of yourself? If you belong to Jesus what is it that you think you lack? If you belong to Christ you recognize that it's a blessing just to read and to hear and to obey. This is not for us to do, this is for us to believe.