

# January 2022 | Revelation Series

*A Letter for faithful living in a dangerous world*

## *We've got mail!*

*Slide | Why are we starting the year in Revelation?*

Why on earth did I make the decision to steer away from the Australian lectionary to concentrate on the weird and controversial book of Revelation?

Because, I really felt we all needed to receive the pastoral letter that was written by the beloved apostle John. He was told to write out what he saw and heard to the believers who were facing a much more volatile and dangerous world than the one we are facing now.

It is true that this pandemic has shaken the foundations of society. The future is uncertain, governments are scrambling to know how to navigate these turbulent times. Yet, when we read God's Word, we find that even thousands of years ago, God knew the world would gradually become more unstable, and a dangerous, frightening place in which to live.

That is the world to whom the Apostle John lived and wrote. In times of intense persecution, by the oppressive Roman empire, John desired to comfort the struggling believers to remain faithful, despite the danger that raged around them.

*Slide | Why is Revelation often neglected?*

But, why Oh why, did John write in the manner in which he did?

Why did he fill his letter with images of dragons, beasts and lampstands?

I'm not sure John knew, when he wrote his letter, the flurry of confusion and controversy his letter would cause. I'm sure he would be saddened to hear that his letter is the most neglected in the entire Bible. But, as you wade through commentaries and books of explanation on this unique letter, it is easy to come away with your head spinning.

That's why there are four different approaches to interpreting this strange book, and rather than explaining each approach I'll describe the approach I'll be taking as we undertake our journey.

The first step of reading any passage from the Bible is to first step back and ask how the original readers would have understood as they read John's words.

An important principle of Biblical interpretation is that the Scriptures can never have a meaning that is entirely different from what the original authors intended it to mean.

So, each week we will endeavour to understand what meaning the specific images conjured up in the minds of John's readers.

To do this we'll need to dig entirely from the Old Testament, because everything in Revelation can be found in the previous 65 books of the Bible.

But, John clearly starts his letter explaining “he writes to show his servants the events which will shortly take place.” (Rev 1:1) So, the emphasis on the future and the end times is a major theme we’ll see repeated.

We must never forget that this letter is a ‘word of prophecy’ (1:3). This year you are going to hear the word ‘prophecy’ come out of my mouth a lot. I really want to teach more on prophecy, and its importance in the church today.

The word ‘prophecy’ has more baggage than an international airport. So, we will need to examine what the word means, and how this gift operates. Thankfully, the revelation of Jesus shared by John, gives us a library of textbooks on the topic.

When I say ‘prophecy’, however, we immediately think it is all about predicting future events.

That is why we must keep in mind, the series of visions received by John in the Revelation, unlike what many suggest, were not given to tell John the chronological timeline of when and how things were going to happen in the future.

Instead, it is as though John was invited into a room with many windows, and each time he looked through a window he saw a different aspect of the same reoccurring theme.

It was revealed in that way so that at any point in time in history, readers can read the Revelation and see God’s commentary on the conflict, persecution and destruction which they are experiencing.

Finally, what we must always remember is that John wrote in a unique style using ‘apocalyptic’ language’. If I was to describe to you one of my recent dreams, complete with my experience of flying through the air and riding the clouds on a blue eagle – you would never attempt to understand the meaning of my dream literally.

In the same way, the pictures described in the Revelation, should not be taken literally, nor the numbers understood as specific dates that can be written in pen in our calendars.

We must accept John’s strange style of writing in the prophetic genre in which it was delivered.

*Slide / What are some overall themes?*

If someone asked what the book of Revelation is all about, many would say ‘about the future, the end times and Armageddon.’

But many theologians<sup>1</sup> say, to read the book through this lens is to misunderstand its major focus.

When we watch the great picture stories play out, we see that the whole book is an expanded treatment of the gospel of Christ.

Christ’s death and resurrection, his present Lordship over history and his judgement of God’s enemies, cosmic and human is a reoccurring theme. But the final reunion of God and his people really bring the book to a climatic close.

One of the great emphases of the book is on the already-completed victory of Jesus Christ. In fact, as we read through each week, we’ll see the great end-time battle of God does not lie in the future. Rather, the battle has already been fought and won – with Jesus standing as the blood-stained victor.

What is clearly apparent is that the book actually has nothing new to say – however, it says what it says in a new and powerful way.

Finally, a major reason why John wrote in this unique style was to arouse his reader’s imagination. While it encouraged the original readers to remain faithful amidst intense persecution, the vivid and provocative imagery cannot help but shock us out of our spiritual apathy and laziness.

Well, let’s step into the wild world of God’s picture story and peer through the door of heaven which was opened to John.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Barnett, Apocalypse Now and Then, page 10.

Right at the very beginning, John writes in verse 3 "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." I strongly urge you to sit down, one day this week, and read through the entire book of Revelation in one sitting. Don't worry about not understanding it. Just read it through.

I also strongly recommend that each week, before Sunday, you read through the next two chapters we'll be delving into. This will help create a sense of us all journeying together.

Today we are going to focus on the first of John's visions: the vision of the glorious Son of Man, with a voice like a trumpet blast (1:10) and thundering ocean waves (1:15). The incredible being is dressed in majestic regalia, and has pure white hair, and eyes aflame with fire. Out of his mouth proceeds a two-edged sword. He is standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands and holds seven stars in his hands. (Rev 1:9-20)

We could reasonably assume that John had in his mind the vision that Daniel had experienced earlier. When we compare the two, they are remarkably similar (Daniel 7:9).

Notice in verse 17 the language Jesus uses about himself "I AM the first and the last", "I AM the living one", and "I AM alive forever and ever."

Without a doubt we are seeing the risen Christ (Exodus 3:14) affirming His deity and sovereignty over history.

Then Jesus, continues affirming his victory over death, by holding the keys of death and the grave.

Then, John sees, our glorious Saviour, standing amid seven golden lampstands, with seven stars in his hands (Rev 1:18).

Thankfully, perhaps knowing it would take some time for his readers to get into the swing of his unique style, John explains the key images for us.

In verse 20, John writes,

*"This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."* (Rev 1:20)

What I find is immensely encouraging from this picture is that the all-powerful Christ knows the situation of his churches, however faithful and pressured they may have been. He has not abandoned them but walks among them.

Numbers are important in this style of writing. So, the fact that there are seven stars, and seven lampstands, speaks of completeness. Jesus holds the sevenfold or complete church, the entire body of Christ throughout history in his hands.

### **Slide | Application |**

Even at the start, this letter shines brightly as a pastoral letter. Although John was exiled on the Island of Patmos, his heart was still concerned with what was happening in the churches of which he had an intimate relationship.

Jesus also was concerned for his churches, and so he sent a message for John to forward to them. Its purpose? To reassure them that our Saviour was intimately aware of the suffering they were experiencing.

*It is easy for us to find encouragement from John's prophetic vision.*

Right at the beginning of the book we learn how Jesus desires his people to regard themselves: "He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father." (1:6)

We are a community of priests, who together, are like a lampstand that shines brightly in the Temple of God.