

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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Revelation Chapter 1- Part 1 – Joss Bray

We are going to look at the first three chapters of Revelation in the next few weeks. Revelation is the last book in the bible and we don't often hear specific teaching or preaching about this particular book. However it is really interesting and fits in very well with our theme from last week about seeing our journey in the bigger picture.

Revelation gives us a glimpse of God as a bigger God, who is before, during and after time itself – who is glorious and all mighty – and who cares deeply for his people. We get glimpses of Jesus in all his majesty as King of Kings and Lord of Lords and who is far beyond our human comprehension. We get a flavour of the Holy Spirit of God who can seem mysterious but has a holy power that is virtually indescribable.

We see pictures of events that are yet to pass – huge earth changing and surprising things – things that are difficult to understand. Indeed, we cannot understand them fully and we should not expect to – but one day we will experience them for ourselves. That is something to surely look forward to!

Revelation is a book to lift our eyes – to give us a taste of the kingdom of God which is now and not yet. It exists right now but we are not experiencing it in full yet. It shows us a tantalising view of eternity in the heavenly kingdom – it is a revelation!

The Greek word for revelation is “apocalypsis” – which is interesting considering the later content in the book – the last days – the end of the world as we know it – apocalyptic events. However, in this series we are going to particularly look at chapters two and three where Jesus specifically addresses issue in churches that have a huge resonance with churches through the ages and the church today.

Before we do that we need to look at chapter one to put them into context. I suggest that we all read at least chapter 1 this week – probably more than once!

Chapter 1v1-3

REV 1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,² who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.³ Blessed is the one who reads 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.

That is the full title – all of verses 1-3 that we just read could be considered the title of this book. Note that it is not the revelation of John but the revelation of Jesus. God gave it to Jesus to show to his servants including John and used among other things, angels to do it.

Angels are created spiritual beings that are God's messengers and also fight heavenly battles and minister to humans and continually worship God around his heavenly throne. We see them cropping up all over the bible and there are probably a lot more that have been close to us than we realise. They must be important to God otherwise he would not have created them. However, we must not become fixated on them or worship them. Angels themselves are very clear about that – they too are servants of the living God and only he is worthy of worship.

We also see that there is a blessing for the person who reads out the prophecy in the book and the one who hears it and takes it to heart. Note too that there is an urgency here – “because the time is near” and “these things must soon take place”. Taking it in means a shift in thinking and priorities for our lives. It becomes central in our heart and shapes our attitudes and what we do. It is a certainty that these things are even closer now than they were when John first wrote this!

Prophecy is simply God speaking into our lives and us in turn speaking out what God has said. This is what John is doing here. Prophecy always builds up and strengthens and equips – we will see this later in this book as well.

John himself was just an ordinary man – he was James's brother and Zebedee was his dad. He was a partner in a small time fishing business. He was a disciple of Jesus - the same as us. He got it wrong several times – the same as us. Jesus loved and he restored him several times – the same as us!

There are no superstars among disciples in the Kingdom – it is just that the more we follow Jesus, the more effective we are in using the gifts he has given us in the situation he has put us. In particular, we are called to do it together as a body. That is why Jesus is so keen to address issues in the churches in chapter two and three – which we will look at later.

Chapter 1v4-6

REV 1:4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne,⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

So here is a personal greeting and blessing from John. The rest of Revelation is in this context – it was written to the seven churches in the province of Asia. It is written from the basis of freedom from sin and forgiveness and the love of God shown to us in Jesus. It builds the recipients up and confirms them in what God has made them – a kingdom and priests – to the glory of God.

John would have known these seven churches well. In fact there were at least two more in Asia. It is interesting that Paul wrote letters to seven churches as well. In the same way that we find so much that is useful and inspiring in Paul's letters to churches – we can find the same in what John has recorded when Jesus speaks to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.

I don't believe that the messages to individual churches in Revelation are just interesting or historical – I believe that they are just as relevant for us as they were for them. This is because the nature of people as sinners who need redeeming doesn't change – we make the same mistakes as they did. And God certainly doesn't change "he was and is and is to come".

MAL 3:6 "I the LORD do not change

So what do we make of the seven spirits - or the "sevenfold spirit" before the throne? The number seven was used a lot in the bible often to denote perfection or completion. Seven is also used later in Revelation to refer to attributes of Jesus. Also in Isaiah 11v2 there is a prophecy about Jesus:

ISA 11:2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--

There is a glimpse into the sevenfold spirit there – The spirit of God, wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Could it be then that the seven spirits of God IS better translated the “sevenfold spirit of God” – with seven attributes that characterise him? Again we will not understand everything here – it is a mystery. But who wants to follow a God that is completely understandable and plays by our logical rules? How boring would that be!

Note also that the theme of the everlasting and ever living God is here right at the beginning of the book when John says “from him who was and is and is to come”. John is trying to get us to lift our eyes and see God for who he is in the context of all time and space. He develops it in the next verses.

Chapter 1v7-8

REV 1:7 Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.

REV 1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

More lifting up of eyes here – John is getting increasingly excited and building up to the main event which he is about to reveal. Imagine how it must have been for hearers who were hearing for the first time as this was read out in their churches!

When Jesus comes again there will be no doubt who he is and what power and authority he has. Glory will surround him – clouds of glory. Everyone will recognise him and the enormity of the rebellion of the people of the earth against their creator God will be revealed – and the consequences will be extreme. People who rejected Jesus will in an instant recognise the disaster of their decision.

The Alpha and Omega will be revealed in glory. We know that Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last. Jesus is the word who was in the beginning, who was made flesh and who ascended into heaven will come again in the end. History is actually His Story.

JN 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was with God in the beginning. JN 1:3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The light shone in Jesus and God sent him to reveal the Father's heart and purpose for us. That was a revelation in itself. When Jesus died and was raised from the dead - that was another revelation. When he sent his spirit to fill and empower his disciples, there was another one.

So then we come back to the last book in the bible – the final revelation. The word revelation does not appear any more in this longest of the New Testament letters. The revelation just happens and unfolds as it goes along.

God would not have revealed the things he did to John if there wasn't a reason. The book would not have survived to be the last book in the bible if God did not make it so. We will not understand it all as we go on reading it – that is for sure. We don't need to be scared of it or ignore it because we don't understand large chunks of it. But this promise is there right from the beginning of the first chapter:

REV 1:3 Blessed is the one who reads 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.

So next week – we will look at who and what John actually hears and sees that sets the scene for the letters to the churches.

It's exciting stuff!