

## Introduction: What is Revelation All About?

### Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will discover:

- a) Who wrote Revelation?
- b) When and why was Revelation written?
- c) Who is this letter addressed to?
- d) How can we read/understand Revelation?

### Words You Should Know

δοῦλος (doulous) – servant or slave. A person who is owned by someone else and whose entire livelihood and purpose is controlled by the master

### *Who wrote Revelation? (Revelation 1:1)*

The author of the book of Revelation identifies himself simply as John (Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). He is writing to the Christians in the Roman province of Asia (Rev. 1:4, 11), providing practical counsel for the problems they faced. John speaks of himself as their “brother and fellow partaker in the affliction and kingdom and endurance in Jesus” (1:9). This suggests that he knows well the churches of Asia and that he is well known by them. Thus, his name is sufficient to provide the credentials for his book.

The author of the book identifies himself as “John, the slave/servant of (Jesus/God) ... (exiled) on the island of Patmos” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), and he is the recipient of a series of visions sent from God for the churches of the Roman province of Asia. He is to provide prophetic “witness” to these churches of the message God is sending to them through him (1:2).

***Q1: Why does John refer to himself as a servant/slave of Christ in Revelation 1:1?***

*When and Why was Revelation Written? (Revelation 1:3)*

The letter was sent because the Christians in Asia were troubled by an increasing number of problems coming from outside and inside the church. Revelation was written in a time of Roman hostility toward Christianity that eventually turned into direct persecution.

It was written during the time of Roman emperor, Domitian (a.d. 81–96). It was under Domitian, that the question of emperor worship became, for the first time, a crucial issue for Christians. Christians were experiencing hardship and pressure because of their refusal to comply with popular demands for emperor worship

Although widely spread, the worship of Caesar was especially practiced in Asia where Christians came into conflict with the authorities because of their opposition to such worship. Though the persecution of Christians initiated under Domitian was not on a wide scale, it preceded many violent persecutions to come.

The book of Revelation was suited and designed to provide hope and encouragement to oppressed Christians of John's day in their frightening circumstances and to prepare them to meet future crises.

***Q2: Reflect on the relevance of Revelation today. What frightening circumstances do we face today as Christians that are preparing us to meet future crises?***

### *Who Is This Letter Addressed To? (Revelation 1:4)*

The book of Revelation was originally written as a letter. It was no doubt intended primarily for the seven Christian communities in the Roman province of Asia. These churches are further identified as the ones in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. They had been in existence for a considerable period of time.

John resided in Ephesus and was apparently overseeing those local communities. It is likely that he visited the churches from time to time to help them with their needs. Toward the end of the first century, the situation in those churches was characterized by spiritual decline and apostasy. The churches were facing an increasing number of problems, both external and internal; but mostly internal.

The Christians in Asia faced pagan opposition and accusations because they did not participate in social activities. They avoided celebrations that were characterized by immoral practices and the eating of food dedicated to pagan gods. Christians were accused of atheism for worshiping only their God (whoever did not worship the emperor was considered an atheist by the Romans). They were also charged with cannibalism in relation to the Lord's Supper where they were thought to be eating human flesh and drinking their blood.

John expected an intensification of persecution, with the prospect that a number of the weaker and less devoted among the church's members would fall away. All of these factors created an insecure situation in the churches; the believers were filled with fear about what the future might bring.

The people did not perceive the internal crises and pressures they faced, so John was trying to awaken their understanding to their actual situation. The details of the letter were intended to heighten their awareness of how the external pressures or life were affecting their faith community. The hope was this realization would then draw them to a deeper reliance on Jesus through which they could face the situation.

The primary purpose of John's writing Revelation was to help the first century Christians in the Roman province of Asia with their condition and problems. It declares that although the situation in the world seems threatening and hostile to God's people, and the future might appear gloomy, God in Christ is indeed still "the master of history." He is and always will be with his people.

*Q3: Revelation was written to remind us not to allow the pressures of life to shape our faith and church relationships. How can a failure to acknowledge the dangers of outside influences affect the overall mission of the local church?*

*How Can We Read/Understand Revelation? (Plain Revelation, p. 4-9)*

The message of the book of Revelation has often been obscured by biased and subjective approaches. Traditionally, four distinct approaches to Revelation have been used. While expositors usually follow one of those four approaches, some contemporary scholars combine the strongest elements of two or more of the traditional approaches in their exposition of the book.

**Preterism.** The preterist method holds that the book of Revelation addresses primarily the situation of the Christian church in the Roman province of Asia in the first century a.d. Preterists hold that John the revelator could foresee the things to happen in the immediate future. However, the book does not contain any predictive prophecy. Its purpose was rather to provide hope and encouragement for the church facing impending persecution by imperial Rome in John's day. The problem with this approach is that no valid extra-biblical evidence exists to support the view of an empire-wide, systematic persecution of the first-century church. Revelation itself refers to local persecutions of Christians in Asia (cf. Rev. 2:10, 13; 3:10) under which John himself experienced exile to Patmos (Rev. 1:9).

**Idealism.** The idealist method argues against any historical purpose of the symbols in Revelation. Rather, the book contains a symbolic description of the ongoing struggle between good and evil which cannot be applied to any historical time period or place. The symbols of the book do not refer to any specific events in history.

**Futurism.** In contrast to preterism, futurism places the entire significance of the book in the future. The futurist method maintains that Revelation (particularly chapters 4–22) is a prophecy of future events—even from today's perspective—to take place just prior to and after the Second Coming. The book is relevant exclusively for the last generation of Christians living in the time of the end.

**Historicism.** The historical method holds that the book of Revelation provides a symbolic presentation of the prophetic outline of the future course of history from the apostolic times until the time of the end. This method argues that Revelation is rooted in the book of Daniel which deals with sequential periods of history. The symbols of the book portray “various historical movements and events in the western world and the Christian church.” And those predictive prophecies are in the process of fulfillment. The historicist approach, however, has often been misused by various attempts to fit every detail of the text into a historical fulfillment. The exposition of the text for many historicists has been based primarily on the allegorical method, rather than on adequate Old Testament background. In order to unlock the symbols of Revelation, the reader today must search for the most appropriate Old Testament background. seriously

The messages of the book were intended to benefit the church of every generation throughout history—at any time and place—from John’s day until the Second Coming.

John the revelator himself seems to provide a clue about how to interpret his book’s content. He states in Revelation 1:19 that what he saw in the visions while on Patmos was basically made up of two things: “the things which are” and “the things which are about to take place after these things.” In Revelation 4:1, John is invited in vision to see the things which would “take place after these things,” namely, after the seven messages to the churches. The phrase “the things which are” in 1:19 refers to the messages sent to the seven local churches in Asia (1:9–3:22), and that “the things which are about to take place after these things” refers to chapters 4–22:5. One might thus see that Revelation itself points to historicism as the most appropriate approach to a fair interpretation of the book’s contents.

***Q4: What are you excited to learn about in the book of Revelation?***