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BIBLE STUDY

# Revelation

# *An Overview of Revelation*



**T**he book of Revelation has a PR problem. People think of it as difficult to read, puzzling, mysterious, and even frightening. So much so that many people, even some of the staunchest, most faithful believers, avoid reading it. Revelation is a highly charged, emotional book, often controversial, because its symbolic writing is open to so many interpretations. Some preachers even refuse to preach about Revelation—preferring to leave it sitting on a dusty shelf, out of sight, or treating it as something less than the inspired Word of God, despite its accepted place in the canon since the early days of Christianity.

Revelation could also be titled “Apocalypse,” a word that has entered the popular vernacular through books and movies that are inevitably about the end of the world. It’s tempting to set Revelation aside and let the professionals handle it.

But never fear! We’re here to tell you that, despite its arcane and byzantine reputation, the book of Revelation is a very positive, uplifting book. As the late Rev. Dr. Billy Graham pointed out, “The book of Revelation may be difficult and demanding to read, yet it is the only biblical book whose author promises a blessing to those who read it.”

Written as it was, to churches who were facing terrible tests and trials from Caesar and the Roman Empire in the first century, it remains relevant for Christians today who face our

own tests and trials in the twenty-first century. Revelation was meant for you, not just for Christians in the first century.

Together, we are going to ignore that reputation of being difficult and study this amazing book because it has so much to offer us.

To get a better understanding of Revelation, and to give us a firm foundation to stand on as we learn about it, we need to ask ourselves three questions a good journalist asks when writing a news story: *Who*, *When*, and *Why*. Knowing these basics will set the stage for the rest of the study.

### ***Who Wrote Revelation?***

First-century readers were very sure of the identity of the author of Revelation. They knew him personally as John, their “brother, and companion in tribulation” (1:9, KJV). They also knew him as a prophet or “preacher.” He had a special place and was highly respected among the seven churches of Asia. He was known as a unique man of God, and his word carried authority. He wrote what he saw, and since what he saw and heard came from God, his word was faithful and true (1:11, 19).

All of this simply meant that when the book of Revelation was read in the Asian churches, they felt they were hearing from a friend and that he was speaking directly to them.

The writer of this book is clearly identified as John, but as with other New Testament books, there has for centuries been a great deal of speculation as to just who this John was.

Some interpreters believe he was John, the beloved disciple, who wrote the Gospel that bears his name and the three

letters of John. Other scholars suggest that this John was a Palestinian Jew who came to Asia Minor late in life.

It is obvious that John was steeped in the Old Testament because he quoted from or alluded to it 245 times. We also can tell that he was familiar with the Jewish apocalyptic books that were written between the time of Malachi and the New Testament writings. While he wrote in Greek, it is obvious that he thought in Hebrew.

The precise identity of the author is not as important as his message.

### ***When Was Revelation Written?***

The second thing those first readers knew was *when* John wrote this book. Again, this is open to speculation. There are those who date the writing of Revelation earlier, but we shouldn't be far wrong if we set the date around AD 92–96—during the last four years of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (doh-MEESH-un). The first persecution of Christians for refusal to worship the emperor took place during those years.

Church tradition—history that has been handed down from the earliest days of Christianity—has consistently taught that Emperor Domitian exiled John to a concentration camp on the Isle of Patmos. Then after the emperor's death it is believed that John was liberated and returned to Ephesus, one of the seven churches he had written to.

### ***Why Was Revelation Written?***

The third thing those early readers knew was that the churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey) were

going through turbulent times. Five of the seven churches had the serious internal problem of disloyalty to Christ. John was deeply concerned about the heresy—probably Gnosticism—that was assailing the churches.

The Gnostics were a group of Christians who claimed to have a special revelation from God that allowed them to also dabble in the Roman civil religion. They watered down the uniqueness of Christ, and since they considered all matter to be evil, their behavior was colored by moral compromise.

Then, too, the Christians within these churches were in severe danger because of the civil demand of emperor worship. The idea of emperor worship began in a spontaneous burst of gratitude when Caesar Augustus (27 BC–14 BC) brought peace to the ancient world. Out of gratitude the people began to deify the emperors who personified Roman peace. But for the most part, the early emperors didn't take this seriously until the time of Domitian.

When his brother Titus died in AD 81, Domitian inherited the throne, and to offset his insecurity he laid claim to being a god. Well before AD 100, six of the cities John mentioned in Revelation had imposing temples dedicated to the worship of Domitian. In fact, an ancient statue of Domitian depicted as a god has been found in Ephesus.

Domitian tolerated no opposition and required his subjects to call him “Our Lord and God.” And so, as the leader of the churches in Asia Minor that opposed emperor worship, John was banished to Patmos, where, while in chains and enduring great hardship, he wrote to people who were facing

prison or execution. The Roman Empire was at war with the Christian church.

### ***Apocalyptic Literature***

The fourth thing John's readers knew was that his letter was a kind of writing known as *apocalyptic* literature. The very first word in the Greek text of Revelation is *opokalupsis* (1:1), which means to uncover, disclose, or reveal. This particular kind of writing had flourished from about 200 BC to AD 200, so John's readers would have read and understood it as well as we read our daily newspapers.

Now, if apocalypse means "revelation," what, then, is an apocalypse? The answer to that question will help us better understand some of the Old Testament prophets as well as this book of Revelation. In the Old Testament it was the grand, optimistic vision of the prophets that God was about to bring His plan for human history to a climax. It was the message that God would directly intervene in human affairs to create a new and perfect age. And so apocalypse is the unveiling through symbolic images and visions of how God will have His will done on earth as it is in heaven.

### ***Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature***

Since John's first readers would have so clearly understood this kind of literature, we should ask ourselves what they could have told us that would help us understand this particular book.

These first readers could have told us to watch for the literary devices that carried the apocalyptic message, such as

visions, prayers, hymns, the symbolic use of numbers, word pictures, and allegory. They would tell us to take note of ecstatic feelings and experiences, a sense of urgency, and an emphasis on the end times that characterize John's letter.

Then we see that those first-century readers could have cautioned us to be aware of the basic theological ideas that are found in apocalyptic literature, such as the truth that God is in control of history, that He is not indifferent to the world, that His power is equal to the needs of our time, and that only God can initiate the end of history. We would see that the goal of history is the spiritual kingdom of God.

Finally, we would have learned from those first readers to hang on to the enduring, overarching apocalyptic message—that, while history can be divided into a number of ages, God is in control of every age. And Christians can be optimistic about God's plans. As Billy Graham said, "I have read the last page of the Bible. It is all going to turn out all right."

Ethical and spiritual principles are eternal, and there is life after death. The letter's first-century readers would have told us, too, that apocalyptic symbols are to be taken seriously but can often be interpreted in more than one way.

The important thing for us now is to move ahead in our study of this remarkable book with an open mind and a prayerful heart. There is a powerful message here for us as we attempt to live faithful Christian lives in the twenty-first-century world.

We will soon see that this book belongs to our time. It is uniquely Christian and distinctive because it is the Good News of Jesus Christ in an unusual apocalyptic form.

## LESSON 1: REVELATION 1-3

# *The Victorious Christ and His Seven Churches*



*Dear Father, as I study this lesson on the “victorious Christ,”  
help me to know victory in my own life. AMEN.*

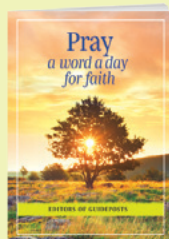
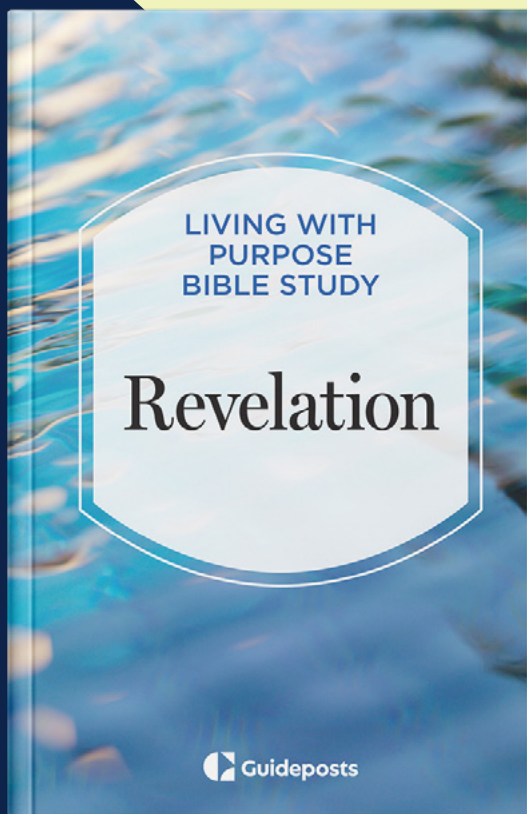
### **John’s Introduction (1:1–8)**

These first three chapters that we will cover in this lesson are the most familiar part of Revelation and are not too hard to understand. The first chapter contains the preface, a greeting and a doxology (an expression of praise to God), and a vision of Christ among the seven churches of the province of Asia. Then chapters 2 and 3 contain letters to those seven churches.

### ***The Preface***

The book opens with these words: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made 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, even to all that he saw. 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” (1:1–3, ESV). These opening words of the preface tell us that this book comes from God as a message that was formerly hidden, veiled, or secret.

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