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REVELATION 1: 1 – 8

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## GOD INTRODUCES THE FINAL PHASE OF HISTORY

It has taken me a long time to come to grips with the intention of this last book of the Bible – the Book of God’s Revelation to John. The difficulties to understand the structure of Revelation, and then to explain the details, so that they would fit in the overall structure, were pretty daunting. So now you have this book in your hands, you may think: “He must have figured it all out”.

The answer is ‘no’! As a matter of fact, I have sort of given up on finding the final answers in the many confusing discussions about Revelation. But I have also become convinced that the message of this book is too important to let that stop me.

Many people look around in this world and wonder: where is God in this world full of wars, violence, famine, disasters, and you name it?

Well - Revelation gives directions when it comes to this.

But can Revelation be understood then? Yes, it can, even without having all the answers!

One author tells about some senior Seminary students who noticed one of the cleaning-staff reading a book.

*“What are you reading?” they asked.*

*“The Bible”, he said.*

*“What part of the Bible?”*

*“I’m reading Revelation”, was the answer. The students thought they would help this poor man, who was probably all confused.*

*“Do you understand what you are reading?” they asked.*

*“O, yes!” he replied. They were astonished.*

*“What does it mean?”*

*“Jesus is going to win....!” he said.<sup>1</sup>*

I have thought sometimes that for children and young people Revelation might be easier to understand than for adults. Read it as fantasy-literature, full of magic, mystery, and bizarre creatures. With this important difference: Revelation is real! God rules history and brings it to consummation in Jesus’ return and victory.

In the time between Jesus’ first coming in Bethlehem and his second coming at the end of times, Satan will attack the church. But Revelation shows us the victory of Jesus Christ. Here is our encouragement and comfort: God is in control. As his people we may find ourselves travelling through the wilderness, but we will find our way home, to the new Promised Land, the new earth and heaven, when the final phase of history is completed. This is what this book is all about.

In Rev. 1:1–8 God introduces this. And the beginning anticipates the end. Rev. 22:6–21 echoes many of the sayings of the beginning. Within this framework the pictures are moving toward the final victory.

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<sup>1</sup> Anecdote told by Vern S. Poythress in his commentary *The Returning King*, P&R Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2000, page 14

## A TRUSTWORTHY REVELATION

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When you like reading, you will know that book-titles are important. When an author can find a catchy title for his book, he can draw the attention of potential readers.

A good book-title will help you anticipate what you can expect. It can trigger your curiosity as to what you may encounter when you pick up the book, open it, and start reading.

This is what the apostle John does with the book we are opening here. He gives his book an extensive title in the v.1–3. Or perhaps you could say that the title is *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, and then he gives us, in the rest of the v.1–3, an extensive subtitle. This subtitle gives a brief but important characteristic of the book we have in front of us.

The first thing that strikes us is that it comes to us as *the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him*. So this book is not, as it is sometimes called, “The Revelation of John”. No, from the first word John makes it very clear: “Yes, I wrote it; I put it on paper, but there should be no misunderstanding: what you have in your hand is not from me. It was given to me. Or better even: it was shown to me. The things you will read may sound fantastic. But it was not my fantasy. It was not my imagination.”

No, what we have here comes directly from the Holy God himself! This is really amazing. This whole book comes as a direct communication from God to all of us. That makes it crucially important that we come to know what it is all about; that we understand the message God has for us.

This should be possible because it is called “revelation” and that means “uncovering”. Many people think that, in this book, secret and mysterious matters are hidden in dark symbolism, like symbolic monsters and symbolic numbers. But that is not the case. This book is not hiding things. It is called “revelation”. We may need to do some work to understand it, but it does mean that God is disclosing, revealing things to us.

That may not sound so special. As Christians we believe that the whole Bible is God’s Word, God’s revelation. It gives us the truth and it has divine

authority. That is true. And yet – here is something special going on. God himself is revealing his plan for the history of the church and the world.

We all look at what has been going on throughout the ages and what is going on today in the church and in the world. Sometimes we try to imagine how things will develop in the future. Most of the time it looks pretty chaotic, or outright scary. It is often confusing, and it is hard to make sense of the things you see on this earth.

Are we going anywhere? Is there any rhyme or reason to what we are observing?

Now remember – we believe that God is the direct author of the Book of Revelation in the strict sense of the word. This makes Revelation indeed a unique book. Not so much because of the bizarre creatures we hear about, but because it gives you a unique point of view. We will look at the history of the church and the world – but from above.

Our everyday earthly point of view is very restricted. It is very much hindered by our limited perspective. We only have a narrow window on time and on space. That makes it impossible for any individual to connect all the dots.

In contrast with that angle we will learn things, we will see connections in Revelation that can only be seen and recognized from above, from a heavenly point of view. That is, from God's point of view. And you can trust this – not only because we get it directly from God, but also because of the involvement of Jesus Christ. And we know this Jesus as the One who made us familiar with God the Father.

We hear in v.1 that God gave the message to him to pass it on.

In other words, what John sees in his visions was the Word of God, testified to be true by the Son of God. That makes for a trustworthy message. It is quite amazing to think of this. This revelation from God comes to John, and via him it reaches us, here, our churches, our congregations. It comes here and enters our worship.

If this is how God is introducing the final phase of history, you can trust that it will help you to make sense of what you see and hear in this life on

earth. And you can trust that it will be full of encouragement and hope in this confusing world.

Look at the marvellous chain of transmission of this trustworthy revelation. It starts with God – he is the origin. Then it goes to Jesus, who in turn gives it to an angel, who passes it on to John. John was told to write it down, and then the book ended up in the hands of a reader. And now you can hear it, read it, and take it to heart.

Do we get the point? We are hearing trustworthy revelation. God takes care of this “transmission process” by which “the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (v.2) are moving through the chain. And in his grace he puts us at the receiving end of it. So now we may know that what is coming to us is a reliable message from above. You can trust the origin.

In this concise subtitle, the apostle John tells us more about this “trustworthy revelation”. It is something, he says, that God gave to Jesus, to “show to his servants”. There is a lot to see and hear in this book. Revelation is not just a picture book; it is a noisy picture book. It is full of visions. It is full of moving pictures, video-clips as it were, that tell us more than words can express.

We will find out how often John says: “I looked . . . , I watched . . . , I saw . . .” It says in v.2 that John “bore witness even to all that he saw.” In this way he urges us to trust his book. He wants us to believe him and to find strength and courage in what he saw. It is true – all these fascinating pictures are full of symbolism. That sounds complicated, and yet you can understand.

After all, this revelation is for “his servants”. In other words, this message is not for theological professors only. It is not for a scholarly elite. It is not for specialized insiders. It is for God’s servants. It is for the people that serve God every day. That is for all believers. This book is for common folk like you and me.

This gives it a lot of suspense. What are we going to see when we watch these pictures? *The things that must soon take place*, it says. “What must take place” is the unfolding of God’s plan for the church and for this world. What began with Jesus’ first coming *must* be completed with his second coming. God’s promises will be fulfilled. It is going to happen! You are going to see what is coming.

And make no mistake: it is coming *soon*, it says. You may wonder whether that still make sense today, 2000 years after it was written – this word “soon”. No, not from where we are, here on earth. We may not see much progress. But the word “soon” reflects what you see from above, from heaven. It makes sense when you see God’s big picture.

As church of Jesus Christ, you will soon begin to experience the things you will see, says John. And then it must and will go on, uninterrupted. No one can stop it. Jesus is coming. Evil is going to be destroyed. A new heaven and new earth is going to be ushered in.

Then the question is not: when will it be completed, somewhere on our calendars? But rather, we know: Since Jesus’ resurrection, we are in the final phase of his victorious warfare. It will be completed. And you and I better be ready for it, whenever the moment is there! These are “the last days” says the Bible. The pictures in this book show that these ‘last days’ are times of intense conflict. And we are right in the middle of it.

That is why God encourages us not to shy away from this book, but to read it or listen to it, and apply it. It is *prophecy*, it says. In the Bible, “prophecy” always speaks about what God is doing or what he is going to do. But “prophecy” also comes with the urgent and inevitable call to be faithful, to repent and believe, to trust and obey. In other words – the message of Revelation wants to reach the heart and lives of God’s people. God wants to reach your heart and my heart. Because he wants to comfort you and give you hope in the time in which we live.

That is why John adds in v.3 that *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.*

Listeners gather around one who reads God’s Word. It shows a congregation gathered for worship. This is where God calls us. This is where he addresses us. This is where we hear the sounds of his revelation and where this revelation will bring a blessing. Take to heart what you see and hear. It will impact your life. You will learn to rejoice together in what God is doing and what he is going to do.

Don't miss out on this blessing. *The time is near*. Stay focussed on what is coming.

The count-down has started.

## **A** N ENCOURAGING GREETING

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We continue to read our passage. We have read the sub-title of John's book, and when we turn the page, so to speak, we find out that it is actually a letter (v.4). We know about the seven letters we will come across in Rev. 2 and 3, but the whole thing is basically one letter, to be shared by all the addressees.

Just as in almost all the epistles in the New Testament, the author introduces himself. Men like Paul, Peter, and others, usually add something like "an apostle of Jesus Christ" or: "a servant of Jesus Christ". But this author simply says "John" – no particulars added. How vague and how non-specific can you get?

It is a pretty common name, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians have speculated wildly as to who this mysterious 'John' might be. However, just "John" must have been sufficient for the first readers. They did not need more details. They knew right away: this 'John' must be the John they all knew as their pastor.

That is why we hold to the traditional view that this author was the apostle John, the same who wrote the Gospel and three letters in the New Testament. It makes sense, for this John lived and worked for many years in Ephesus and beyond. He knew the people to whom he wrote, and they knew him.

Well then, this John is addressing his letter *to the seven churches in Asia*, it says. In Revelation 2 and 3 we hope to learn more about these churches. For now it's good to know that we are talking about a number of local congregations, located in what is today the western part of Turkey – at that time a province of the Roman Empire called "Asia Minor".

Here we find for the first time the number “seven”. It will not be the last time. The number ‘seven’ is everywhere. It appears fifty-five times in Revelation. We know that numbers play a significant role in this book, and always, or at least most of the time, with a symbolic meaning. Seven is only one of them. You also come across three, four, ten, twelve, or some combinations of these.

Seven is very prominent in this book. It is the number of completeness, fullness, perfection. As such it is often connected with God. Here it means that you cannot say: “Oh, he also could have picked six or eight churches. No, these seven churches represent the fullness of the universal church; the entire church which Jesus Christ is gathering out of the whole human race from the beginning of the world to its end.

The purpose is that John’s letter had to be read and heard in those seven churches. But then also in all the churches in John’s time. And then also in all the churches of all times and places. In fact, the apostle John – or actually God himself – wants this book to be read and heard everywhere.

Why is this so urgent, also for us, today? Well, remember what we said earlier: We have this trustworthy revelation, coming directly from God himself, about his plans for the final phase of history. And now we learn that the entire Christian church is heavily involved in this. That is why we need to know. We need to be alert as to what is going on. We need the comfort of the view from above. We need the courage to persevere in the time in which we live – the last days!

This is what God provides in this book. And he does so in a marvellous way, right from the start. For when we begin to read and listen, as we were encouraged to do in v.3, John greets us on behalf of God with a most encouraging greeting, a most heartwarming and compassionate welcome to his visionary world.

This greeting in the v.4 and 5 is quite familiar to many Christians. It is often used as an opening greeting in Sunday worship services. But do you really hear it? Do you really pay attention to what God says to you there? Do you hear the comfort and encouragement with which God Almighty comes to you and addresses you in this often so confusing and frightening world? Do you hear the deep compassion with which God reaches out to you?



Life can be pretty overwhelming. This affects your personal circumstances and your relationships. But it can also hit you when you look around in this world and try to get a handle on the big picture of everything that is going on. And in this book we are about to see and hear many new things. Is it going to help us? Or is it going to confuse us? You may wonder about that.

Well, whatever happens, whatever goes on, keep in mind always: *My grace and my peace will be for you*, says God. “Grace” is God’s love and mercy, God’s forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ. And the result of this is “Peace”. It gives you ‘peace’ with God. God’s grace is the basis for a new relationship with him that will give you ‘peace of mind’. By his grace, God sets this confused and chaotic world straight, and the result is breath-taking: true and indestructible peace for you, in Jesus Christ.

It says that this comes from God. But who is this God? How does he present himself as he enters your life with his grace and peace? It comes *from him who is, and who was and who is to come* (or: ‘who is coming’). He is the God who controls the present, the past, and the future; the God who keeps his Word. He is and remains faithful.

He is the same God who met Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14), where he said about himself *I am who I am*. That means the same. He has not changed, and he will never change. This is our God, also today, as he brings history to its consummation. “You can trust me,” he says. “I do what I have promised.”

“Grace and peace” also come *from the seven spirits before God’s throne*. Again, think of the ‘seven’! It stands for the full and invincible power of the Holy Spirit. He distributes God’s grace among God’s children, and he fills our hearts with God’s peace.

Finally, in the third place, “grace and peace” also come *from Jesus Christ* (v.5). But then his power unfolds in another three-some. It is amazing – the glory of this three-fold office of “the Christ”, your prophet, priest, and king!

As Prophet, he is *the faithful witness*. He testifies about God’s love for you.

As Priest, he is *the firstborn from the dead*. He shows God’s love when he died for you; when he conquered the power of death and arose.

And as King, he is also *the ruler of the kings of the earth*. He shows God's love when he protects you and takes care of you. He is above every power on earth.

This is the most encouraging greeting ever. It is almost too much to wrap your head around. Where does true grace and peace come from in your life? It is the holy and almighty Triune God, with all the abundance of his awesome power, majesty, love and compassion. He makes you share in his grace and peace. These are his gifts for his children.

Trust that his grace and peace are always close by, always – no matter how frightening, how confusing things may become as the final phase of God's plan unfolds.

## A GLORIOUS EXPECTATION

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All this leads to praising and worshipping Jesus Christ as the coming King. As God introduces the final phase of history, it comes with the glorious expectation that our victorious Saviour is on his way. *To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever*. Here is the first of the many doxologies in this book. Men, angels, other creatures, again and again they all make abundantly clear that all glory and praise is to the Triune God, and not to man – never!

This is the emphasis in the last part of this passage. Whatever you will see or hear, whatever is coming that might scare you – *all glory and power for ever and ever is to him who loves us so much, that he has set us free from sin by his blood*. Nothing expresses the love of God, as the redeeming work of Jesus does.

In him is your security and hope in the midst of the trials and disasters we encounter as God's revelation unfolds. Persecution or temptation might threaten to overwhelm us, but God's love in Jesus' victory over sin will help you persevere. For he is the One who *made us a kingdom, priests to serve his God and Father*.

The expression comes from Exodus 19:6. Here the Lord instructs Moses to tell the Israelites, just freed from slavery in Egypt, *you will be for me a king-*

*dom of priests and a holy nation.* And the apostle Peter shows that in Jesus Christ people from all nations may share in this unique privilege of Israel. *You are a chosen people,* he says to his readers, *a royal priesthood, a holy nation* (1 Peter 2:9).

These were Christians from Jews and Gentiles. But together they were renewed to serve and worship God. And that is what continues today. A new kingdom of priests is growing and growing. It is the awesome result in this world of the great church-gathering project of our victorious God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

This is so exciting! And even more so, because it fills us with the glorious expectation of Jesus' return, the source of your hope and comfort. It is this Saviour who is coming. This is the major theme in this book.

*Look,* God says through John, 'pay attention, keep this perspective and don't get caught up in distractions, so that it may take you by surprise. Continue to be alert'.

*Behold, he is coming with the clouds.* These clouds are a sign of his divine majesty. He is coming in glory. As Jesus himself puts it in Matthew 24:30 (referring back to Daniel 7:13): *They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*

Is this our longing? Are you looking forward to seeing him come in glory? Is the longing for Jesus' return really alive among us? Are you and I ready for it? We tend to forget sometimes that we live in the last days!

But he is on his way, *and every eye will see him*, including those who have killed him. This is what everyone and everything is headed for – Jesus is coming to bring to fulfilment the final phase of history, everything in this book. Suddenly he will be there, for everyone to see. No one will be uncertain or in doubt about it. Everyone: those who believe in Jesus as the Saviour AND those who reject him. They will all recognize him as the crucified one.

*And all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.* No, not because they are sorry and repent. But Christ's enemies will express their hopelessness and despair.

At the same time, as God's children you may look forward with confidence. *Amen. So shall it be!* Are you thrilled with this glorious expectation?

Or do you wonder sometimes: Is this really going to happen?

Listen to your God in v.8 and listen carefully. This is one of the very few times in this book that you will literally hear God's own voice.

*I am the Alpha and the Omega.* Those are the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet. "I am first and I am last. I began and I will complete. I have the first word and I have the last word. I am the beginning and I am the end. And you can trust my faithfulness. Remember: I am the One who is, who was and who is coming. I am the Almighty!"

And that's enough. With him you can move forward through the final phase of history. He is the only one who controls all of history.

In his hands your future is secure.

## STUDY SUGGESTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Due to the size it can be a bit daunting to use this book as a study-guide for a Bible Study Group. There are others. In *Let's Study Revelation* Derek Thomas gives a scheme for studying Revelation (with the help of his book) that covers 13 weeks. This is convenient for one study season, but then there is much material to deal with in each session, which can also become overwhelming. Using for this purpose the book you have in your hands is not impossible, and to facilitate this somewhat I have added to every chapter four questions.

*A helpful study pattern could be:*

- Pray for the Spirit's guidance.
- Read at home the Bible passage to be studied before turning to the chapter in this book, or other literature.
- Write down questions and/or comments that come to mind when reading the passage.
- After this read the chapter in this book, and write down questions and/or comments.
- In this way your study group will most likely have more to discuss than just the four questions given.

### Chapter 1 – Revelation 1:1-8

1. In many ways Revelation is a unique book in the New Testament. Despite the many references to other parts, it is unlike any other writing in Scripture. Describe what sets it apart from, let's say a gospel or a letter from Paul, in what it presents in those graphic pictures?
2. Verse 1 speaks about *the things that must soon take place*. What are the implications of the word 'must'? What does that tell us about what is happening in the world today as what appears to be the result of political decisions, economic planning, military strategy, or of just human wisdom or foolishness in general?

3. Do you really believe that *the time is near*, as it says in verse 3? How does this affect your priorities in life today, but also your activities with a long-term focus, for instance your education, your career or raising your children?
4. In v.4 and 5 God greets the churches. Quite often the same words are used to greet you and welcome you in church every Sunday. It implies that God himself is greeting you and welcoming you with these words when you come to worship. Explain why this is significant and discuss how this affects you.

## Chapter 2 – Revelation 1:9-20

1. In v.9 we hear the word *tribulation*. It reflects that in the last days, the days between Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, the world is often a hostile place for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Find passages elsewhere in the New Testament that illustrate and affirm this.
2. How are you comforted and encouraged in what is going on in your life and in this world by the various details of the vision of the glorified Christ as John describes those in the verses 12 – 16?
3. John's vision of the glorified Christ causes him to *fall at his feet as though dead*. Christ then lays his hand on him and says, *fear not* (v.17). Explain what this tells you about how we should experience our relationship with Christ, and how we should worship him.
4. What makes 'golden lampstands' (v.12 and 20) a fitting image for churches? And why the plural and not just one golden lampstand as image of the one universal church?

## Chapter 3 – Revelation 2:1-7

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Ephesus Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. Can you, and dare you, identify what drives you, either personally or as congregation, in your Christian life and in your activities in the church, but also as church?