



Revelation

LET THE ONE WHO IS
THIRSTY COME

SARAH IVILL

“Sarah Ivill . . . leads us with clarity, focus, and life-impacting applications.” —Charles Dunahoo

“This is the first study guide to the book of Revelation that I can see using in our women’s Bible studies. As I read through this study, I see it as an inviting, effective tool to gain an understanding of this often-daunting book of the Bible. The unique format of this study guide and its questions give us an experience of digging out the text’s meaning for ourselves and finding new possibilities for application to our lives and to our hopes for the future in Christ.”

—**Kari Stainback**, Director of Women’s Ministries, Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas

“Sarah Ivill’s studies of Scripture are a reflection of the wonderful influences that have shaped her as a scholar and teacher. There is the disciplined textual skill of exegesis and exposition. This flows seamlessly into real-life application. Yet pervading this blend of the scholar-teacher and spiritual counselor is a recognition of the majesty of God and the awe-inspiring privilege of having in one’s hands the panorama of the history of redemption accomplished by the triune God of sovereign grace. I highly commend *Revelation* as the firstfruits of Ivill’s careful investigation into Christ’s truth and grace.”

—**Peter A. Lillback**, President, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“Rich, rich, rich. Sarah’s book on Revelation digs deep into the Word of God. She brings the whole of Scripture to bear in her expositions so that you truly see the unity of Revelation with the rest of the Bible. And she shows with clarity and without a doubt that the one writer of all Scripture could only be God the Holy Spirit himself, because of the wonder and grandeur of the Holy Scriptures on full display through her careful explanation of the text. In addition, the book contains an excellent study guide with questions designed to give readers the opportunity to dig into Scripture for themselves, enabling them to read, digest, and apply the truths it contains.”

—**Donna Dobbs**, Director of Christian Education, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi

“Revelation can be an intimidating book to read. Its many complexities and pitfalls require careful navigation. But Sarah Ivill proves to be a steady guide, steering the reader through these difficult waters. In this study, she reminds us that the book of Revelation is not just some puzzle to solve or some code to crack. Rather, it is a wonderful and glorious vision of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus, she helps us to see that Revelation is a book not just about the future, but also very much about the present.”

—**Michael J. Kruger**, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“This study is a banquet: it feeds the hungry soul with riches from the Word. Sarah covers every facet of Bible study, from teaching the beginning Bible student how to study to helping the seasoned student plumb the depths of each passage. Sarah is a careful, thoughtful student of the Word who makes the complicated passages and images of

Revelation very understandable and accessible. Throughout this study, she encourages students to dig deeper and reach further as they apply the Scriptures to their hearts.”

—**Helen Holbrook**, children’s director, Grace Presbyterian Church of the North Shore, Winnetka, Illinois

“The book of Revelation, often a closed book to many, is to be read. Sarah Ivill has given us a carefully crafted pattern that enables us to see Revelation through covenantal eyes. She leads us with clarity, focus, and life-impacting applications. She is a faithful guide, using her gifts to open the rich blessings from God found in Revelation. We appreciate her objective in doing so: to speak to the mind, the heart, and the hands—and to have us open the door and sit at the table with Jesus through this study.”

—**Charles Dunahoo**, Coordinator of Christian Education and Publications for the PCA

“I commend this book for bridging the gap between a commentary and a fill-in-the-blank exercise for women. The study of Revelation has become less challenging and more edifying with Ivill’s book. It is an annotated Bible study, providing Old Testament background, salient commentary, and personal exhortations and examples from a covenantal perspective. Questions for each Bible chapter enhance and encourage group discussion that is focused on Scripture interpreting Scripture.”

—**Diane M. Poythress**, wife, mother, author, founder of Women’s Weekend Seminary, Bible study leader, teacher, and speaker

“Sarah Ivill invites women to explore the treasures of the book of Revelation and to mine the spiritual riches of the visions granted to John for the comfort and encouragement of Christ’s church. Ivill approaches Revelation from the perspective of Reformed theology and inaugurated (amillennial) eschatology. Among the strengths of *Revelation* are its sensitivity to the Old Testament background of John’s visions and to the symbolic genre of the book, the personal illustrations that open and close each lesson, and the insightful study questions that encourage thoughtful engagement with the text.”

—**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Sarah Ivill’s new Bible study is wonderful and fills a gap that has long been avoided in women’s ministry, particularly within Reformed circles. Ivill does a remarkable job of showing the applicability of the prophecies to us women as we are today, without resorting to sensationalism. Ivill reminds us that this oft-neglected book is just as important for women as Proverbs 31, Titus 2, Ephesians, and the other books and passages that get so much ‘airtime’ today. The Introduction alone taught me more than I had previously known about Revelation, and it set a great foundation for the rest of the book’s teaching.”

—**Jennifer Smithfield**, Bible Study Leader, Scientific Information and Research Specialist

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R&R
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“To him who loves us
and has freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

Amen.”

Revelation 1:5–6

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Foreword

THE BIBLE IS A COMPLEX BOOK. In fact, the Bible is a divine library of sixty-six books, all conveying to us the history of redemption. As a series of books, and as one volume, the Bible has a logical structure to it. Genesis 1–11 is the introduction to the entire Bible, setting forth the major themes that will be developed throughout the remaining books of Scripture. Chronologically speaking, Exodus 20 and the Ten Commandments appear to be the first Scripture revealed to Moses and the first to be written. This would immediately be followed by Exodus 21–40 and Leviticus: the Lord’s statutes for the proper worship of God, his “regulative principles” for Israel. Moses would then backtrack and explain to his readers why God destroyed the country and army of the world’s greatest monarch of the time—Pharaoh. The reason was that God chose a man and his family to be his covenant people, and through Abraham and his descendants—especially Christ—all the families of the earth would be blessed. Genesis 1–11 tells us how mankind came to need the blessings of redemption brought by Eve’s son and Abraham’s seed: “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

The Old Testament books of history, prophesy, worship, and wisdom lay out God’s covenant plan, progressively unfolding toward the person and work of Jesus Christ. The four Gospels tell of this God incarnate and his once-for-all atonement: “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles written by the apostles tell of the gospel mission and how the “God story” (i.e., “gospel” from the old German *gotts spiel*, “God’s play” or “God’s story”) moved beyond Israel in blessing all the families

of the earth—Jew and Gentile. The Epistles make the God of Abraham, the work of Christ, and membership in the people of the Spirit accessible to all men, women, and children around the world and across all barriers of time.

This body of divine revelation has an *epilogue*: the Revelation of John. Genesis 1–11 tells the story of a mankind in need of salvation from the human perspective. Revelation recapitulates the story of redemptive history from a divine perspective. In Revelation 4:1, John sees “a door standing open to heaven.” In the Apocalypse, the veil between angels and men and between heaven and earth is removed. The great cosmic conflict (Rev. 12) that lies behind all human struggle, suffering, and sorrow is now removed. John is given the formidable task of unveiling the mysteries of redemptive history for the entire world to see.

In this study, my friend Sarah Ivill, a member of my congregation, will take you deep inside this wonderful book of mysteries revealed. In so doing, she will expose you to new ideas and age-old concepts that may well have been obscured by all our “last days madness.” Who is the Antichrist? How long is the millennium? What is the great battle of Armageddon? These types of questions have caused many to shy away from a marvelous book given to the church in times of great persecution. I encourage you to follow Sarah’s sensitive and balanced guidance through a book that promises a blessing to those who read it—the only book in the Bible to do so (Rev. 1:3)! Human history is linear: it moves from “in the beginning” to the end of history as we know it. Unlike all other religions, Christianity does not possess an unbroken circle and cycle of fertility as our paradigm for history. God is moving creation and mankind from Eden, paradise lost, to the City of God, paradise regained. The cycle of repetition in the book of Revelation merely recapitulates (restates) the linear flow of history—the story of the Hero of it all: “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:8).

Caution is called for. People have often used the Scriptures in a manner that reads into the text their own experiences or the current issues of their time. This is a dangerous thing to do, especially with the book of Revelation. Lesslie Newbigin comments on this: “The Bible is con-

cerned with the public history of the world; this reductionist conversion of it into religious psychology is a product of the contemporary western culture, which accepts another public ‘myth’ and ‘privatizes the gospel.’” Sarah Ivill will guard the reader against such tendencies. Remaining true to the historical context of John’s Revelation, and explaining the greater story (metanarrative) of Scripture, this Bible study will move from text to context and then into personal application. Let Revelation speak for itself:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18–19)

So, come! Come to this book, come to a great story of the kingdom of God, come to those things opened for us by this window in heaven. Most of all, come to the Lamb that was slain, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and drink of the waters of life! May you be refreshed by these things that are, have been, and are yet to come.

Michael F. Ross
Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church
Matthews, North Carolina

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I WISH TO THANK those in my life who have been a part of this writing process. Charles Dunahoo, Dennis and Cindy Bennett, Jane Patete, and Jim and Linda Bland have all been a great source of encouragement to me as I shared my hope of publication with them.

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Thank you to the women of Ivy Creek Church (PCA) who first encouraged me to publish Bible studies and who have prayed for me, encouraged me, and believed in the work that the Lord is doing through me.

Thank you to the pastors and women of Christ Covenant Church (PCA) who have been a part of this process and who have encouraged me to keep writing Bible studies for women.

Thank you to the men and women of Dallas Theological Seminary who taught me what it means to be a gracious student of Scripture and who instilled in me the importance of expository teaching and the love of God's Word.

Thank you to Westminster Theological Seminary and to the professors who have served there. The many books that have been written and recommended by the professors, as well as the many online class lectures and chapel messages, have been of tremendous benefit to me. They have taught me what it means to see Christ in all of Scripture and

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

to understand more deeply the history of redemption and the beautiful truths of Reformed theology.

Thank you to my many dear friends (you know who you are!) who prayed for me and encouraged me to make the dream of writing a reality.

Thank you to my mom and dad, who have always supported me in my love of the Word and encouraged me to do that which the Lord has called me to do. I love you both more than words can express.

Thank you to my husband, Charles, who has always given me his love, support, and encouragement in the writing process and in what the Lord has called me to do.

And thank you to my two children, Caleb and Hannah, whose sweet smiles, loving hugs, prayers for “Mom’s Bible studies,” and patience as I “finish another thought” before tending to one of their many needs are a constant source of encouragement to me as I pray for the next generation of believers to love the Lord and his Word with all their hearts and minds.

Finally, thank you to my heavenly Father, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to the Spirit, who helps me in my weakness. To the triune God be the glory for what he has done through me, a broken vessel and a flawed instrument, yet one that is in the grip of his mighty and gracious hand.

A Personal Note from Sarah

WHEN I WAS ASKED to consider writing a Bible study on the book of Revelation, I was very excited. I have always loved Revelation, though I have to admit that, like many I have talked with, the imagery in the book has often been confusing and perplexing. But even with all of the symbolism, I can never help being left breathless with the majestic picture that John paints of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ coming again to complete God's plan of judgment and salvation. As I studied, some passages made me want to get on my knees and worship alongside the saints and angels in heaven. Some passages made me want to go to battle against the evil of this world. Some exhorted me to be more obedient, holy, and faithful. And all of them pointed me to the ultimate purpose of my life: to be a witness and a worshiper of Jesus Christ to the glory of God. I hope and pray that as you read and study, you will be overwhelmed with the majesty of Jesus Christ and the glorious plan of God's redemption, which in turn will also lead you to a life of witness and worship.

My love for teaching the Word of God was inspired by my own hunger to study it. Longing for the "meat" of God's Word and finding it lacking in so many churches today, I enrolled in Bible Study Fellowship after graduating from high school. It was there that I realized my desire to attend seminary and was influenced and encouraged by a strong, godly woman and mentor in my life to attend Dallas Theological Seminary

(DTS). During this time I was leading women through in-depth Bible studies and caught a glimpse of how much women desired to be fed the depth of God's Word. This encouraged me even further to receive an education that would best prepare me to deliver God's Word to women who hungered for the truth.

Upon graduating with my Master of Theology from DTS, I took a position as assistant director of women's ministry at a large church where I served under a woman who shared my same passion to teach the "meat" of God's Word. Within the year, I had assumed the role of director and delved into teaching the Word of God in an expository and applicable manner. After three years, I resigned in order to stay home with my first child. During those years at home, the Lord used my experience in seminary and ministry to lead me back to my roots and the full embracing of Reformed theology. Raised for the first half of my childhood in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and a conservative Independent Presbyterian Church, I had been grounded in the Reformed faith and Reformed catechisms from an early age. But from middle school on I was not in Reformed churches. The questions in my twenties then became "Who am I?" and "What do I really believe?"

One of the first steps on my journey was contacting a Reformed seminary and asking for a list of books covering everything I would have missed by not attending a Reformed seminary. That began my reading of some of the most renowned Reformed theologians in the world. It was during those days that the question, "Who am I?" was finally answered, and I began teaching women based on my understanding of the historic Reformed and covenantal tradition. In fact, that is how my first Bible study came to be written. I had the incredible privilege of teaching that first study to a wonderful group of women for a morning Bible study at our Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) church. And it was from their encouragement and exhortation that I submitted the study for publication.

I know it is difficult to pick up a Bible study written by another author and either teach it or study it. It is for this reason that I offer you the following suggestions as you prepare to teach or study *Let the One*

Who is Thirsty Come. It is my practice that before I ever begin to study a book of the Bible I read it through several times. I try to read it as if I were reading a letter from a personal friend for the first time. This is reading to get a feel for the “big picture” of the book and how it fits into the rest of the books of Scripture. Then, with my own pen, paper, and Bible, I divide each chapter (or sometimes half a chapter or two halves from two different chapters) into my own divisions.

Next, I try to grasp what the divisions are saying in a nutshell and write that down. From that point, I move to writing application questions appropriate for each division, with at least one, if not several, questions for each division. This gives me “ownership” of the passage. Before going to read what anyone else has to say, I have studied it by myself and allowed the Holy Spirit to speak to my own heart about it. This adds “uniqueness” to your teaching. You don’t want simply to regurgitate what someone else has said. You want to make it your own.

Following this, though, it is important to enhance your understanding by studying what others have learned from the book. So, I try to have at least three good, solid Reformed commentaries for the book I am studying, as well as other study tools such as a Bible dictionary and concordance. One of my favorite tools for this particular study was *The Book of Revelation*, by G. K. Beale (see the Bibliography for information on this book as well as on other helpful sources for learning about Revelation). As I studied this and other commentaries chapter by chapter, I would highlight what I felt was important for the women I would be teaching to know in this study. Then I would begin writing the lesson notes, using my own outlines and notes, as well as what I had learned from others.

The final step is writing the questions for Bible study participants to answer. I always have them read and work on the questions for the passage that will be covered in the following week’s lesson. This gives them the opportunity to “own” it for themselves before they ever hear or read the lesson.

I want to encourage you as you embark upon the study of the book of Revelation. It will require prayer and diligence, but the reward will

be great. Revelation is the culmination of all of Scripture. It reveals the glorious plan of God's judgment and salvation. It shows the body of Christ where we have been, where we are, and where we are headed. It defines who we are as worshipers and witnesses for God. And it gives us a tremendous example of worshiping God to emulate in our own lives. So, let us join our voices together and cry out, "Hallelujah! For the LORD our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory" (Rev. 19:6b–7a)!

Introduction

AT THE BEGINNING of every lesson we will identify the *aim* of the lesson concerning our:

- *Mind*: What do we need to know from this passage in Scripture?
- *Heart*: How does what we learn from this passage affect our internal relationship with the Lord?
- *Hands*: How does what we learn from this passage translate into action for God's kingdom?

In the spring of 1802, Ludwig van Beethoven began losing his hearing. Even the finest doctors in Vienna could not help. It would not be long before he would be completely deaf. His days as a concert pianist would come to an end. But music was Beethoven's passion, so he set out to find a way to save his career.

Finally he thought of a solution: he would become a great composer. But he would need something or someone to inspire him to put his solution into a great symphony. During this time there was a war moving across Europe for the freedom of all people. There was one war hero, Napoleon Bonaparte, who rose above all the rest. A young boy gave Beethoven a magazine with Bonaparte's picture on it. Napoleon was portrayed as valiantly riding forward on a majestic stallion, fearless, and confident of victory. Beethoven pondered his own struggles with deafness and found the confidence to carry on in his own life and career. That was when a heroic tune came to his mind. He immediately began writing a new symphony. It wasn't long before the four movements took form.

The first movement is a battle scene. Napoleon fights the injustice in the world that touches us all. The second section is a description of the sorrows of humanity. The third movement is a dance of celebration. The battle is over. Fear and death have been conquered. Hope appears on the horizon, warm and bright, a joyous homecoming! The fourth movement is about peace and freedom.

Several weeks later, after putting the final touches on his symphony, Beethoven heard that Napoleon had betrayed the people and crowned himself Emperor of France. Angry, Beethoven ripped his symphony to shreds crying, “I did not write my symphony for a tyrant!”

Slowly, Beethoven’s anger subsided and he realized that his symphony was never about Napoleon, but about himself and humanity, the hero in each and every person. So, he named it *The Heroic Symphony*, and it was first performed in 1804. No one in the audience knew the story behind the music, but each person was moved by it. In the majesty of each movement, listeners discovered their own dreams and fears. *The Heroic Symphony* touched their hearts.¹

The book of Revelation could well be entitled *The Heroic Symphony*. But the melody came to John from Jesus Christ. And it was the revelation of Jesus Christ that inspired John to write this great symphony. A war is raging across the world, a war to free God’s people and judge those who are not his own. It is clear that one figure towers above all the rest, a war hero named Jesus Christ. He charges forward on his war horse, certain of victory, afraid of nothing. One after another we see the movements of John’s symphony take form. The movements all blend into another and interrelate. One cannot be understood nor appreciated without the others. Each movement builds toward a grand climax. And when the symphony is finished being written John does not have to fear that the Great War Hero will betray him. His Word is faithful and true. He did not write the symphony for a tyrant, he wrote it for the Lamb of God by the Spirit of God.

1. This story is adapted from Anna Harwell Celenza’s beautiful children’s book *The Heroic Symphony*, illustrated by JoAnn E. Kitchel (Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2004).

DATE

Most recent commentators view Revelation as being written about 95 A.D. during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, instead of around the late 60s prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and during Nero's reign. Several indicators in the book itself point to the date in the mid-90s.

First, the book seems to point to persecution that has recently grown bad and is soon going to get even worse, which fits better the circumstances around Domitian's reign than those of Nero's. Even John's exile to Patmos is more likely under Domitian's reign than under Nero's because persecution for not taking part in emperor worship was more strictly enforced under Domitian.

Second, the situations of the churches referred to in Revelation point to a later date. The Ephesian church most likely left its "first love" in the second generation of its existence rather than the first. The church of Laodicea, which is called "wealthy," would more likely have taken to the 90s to recover from the devastating earthquake of the early 60s and to establish the economic security that the book portrays it having at the time of John's writing. The church in Smyrna is thought to have formed in the 60s, so it would fit better with a late date for Revelation also.

Third, John refers to Rome as "Babylon," a title given to it only after Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., just as Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.

Fourth, many of the early church fathers, including Irenaeus, believe John to have been writing around 95 A.D. This evidence alone would be hard to overcome for someone holding to an early date.

PURPOSE

If God is on the throne, why does evil continue to reign? This question has come to the fore in evangelical Christianity in recent decades, but it has plagued all Christians from the very beginning. The first readers of Revelation struggled with it just as we do and

thus, this issue stood as one of John's main purposes for writing the book. He had to help people understand why persecution was on the rise, especially in light of the fact that he had been an eyewitness to the resurrection of Christ, which symbolized Jesus' victory, not his defeat. But the Lord himself had prepared the apostles for such a question when he said, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. . . . I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, or me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you" (John 15:20; 16:1-4).

John himself had dealt with antichrists that had come during the time when he was writing the letter we know as 1 John. He spoke of this when he said, "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come" (Rev. 2:18). And John had dealt with false prophets, as he noted elsewhere: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

With Christianity being seen as distinct from Judaism following 70 A.D., new temptations to compromise one's faith arose. Previous to 70 A.D. Christians were still considered part of Judaism, which was accepted by Rome and would have been an umbrella of protection for Christians. But after that date both Jews and Rome persecuted Christians. Since the cost of discipleship was so high, John was writing to Christians who were tempted to compromise, were facing persecution for standing firm in their faith, or were willing to deny and walk away from their faith. So, we see John throughout the book of Revelation exhorting Christians to stand strong as witnesses for Christ in the midst of a world that had no regard for Christ, and in the midst of so-called Christians who were willing to compromise their faith and worship idols under the pressure of persecution.

AUTHOR

As you can tell by the previous paragraphs, I believe that the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation. Though some have pointed to the differences in writing style between the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John as an argument against the apostle being the author, I see the similarities between these writings as a much more persuasive argument. Those who do not believe the apostle John wrote Revelation generally believe either that John the Elder, another disciple of Jesus, or someone using the name John as a pseudonym, which was popular among authors of apocalyptic writings, wrote it.

GENRE

Though the book certainly has elements of apocalyptic and prophetic literature, and is written in an epistolary form, the major thrust of the book is prophetic. In this light, it must be remembered that prophecy is not just about the future. The prophecies of the Old Testament had much to say to the people of their own day, as does Revelation. However, the book is put in the form of an epistle, which strongly points to its practical use for the churches of John's day. Nevertheless, the book deals with the future and climactic second coming of Christ and joins the ranks of the prophetic books in the Old Testament that also pointed to the consummation of the kingdom of God.

The book also has elements of apocalyptic literature, which is important for us to understand as we interpret the highly symbolic language. Like Daniel, Ezekiel, Job 1:6–12, certain parts of Isaiah, and Zechariah in the Old Testament, the book of Revelation is considered to be apocalyptic in its genre. Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton define apocalyptic as “that literary genre which interprets earthly events, especially the struggles of God's people, as manifestations of the heavenly warfare between God and the forces of evil, and depicts the coming victory of God over those forces by means of symbolic images.” They also list three distinctives of apocalyptic literature: symbolism, dualism, and messianism. Symbolism must be looked at

INTRODUCTION

in the context of the individual book as well as of the entire Bible, and in the context of the culture of the time in which the book was written. Though symbolism may be difficult to interpret, it points to God's victory, which we know is certain. Dualism is the element of apocalyptic literature that describes the battle between God and Satan, although unlike in true dualism, Satan is not the direct opposite of God, but the counterfeit of God. Finally, messianism means that God will win the battle with Satan through a messiah, a savior, whom we know to be Jesus Christ.²

INTERPRETATIONS OF REVELATION

When studying the book of Revelation, it doesn't take very long to realize that different people have interpreted the book in different ways over the centuries since it was written. In my opinion, this is one of the biggest barriers that keeps many people from studying the book at all. What a shame! Revelation was a gift to the church. It was not given so that we would argue over its meaning and application; it was given to inspire, to exhort, to inform, and, most of all, to lead us to be witnesses and worshipers of the triune God to whom all glory and honor is due.

Nevertheless, if we are going to be good students of the book, we need to be informed of the major ways in which people have interpreted it. No matter what study you do on Revelation, it becomes immediately evident what view the author of the study holds. That will be true in this study as well. But I would like to remind all of us to hold our views humbly and loosely, for among those of each view are devoted evangelical Christians who love the Lord and seek to do justice to the biblical text. Though we may not agree with one another's views, we must recognize that these are not to divide us but unite us, for we are all in need of encouragement upon this pilgrim road that has many trials and tribulations. We all believe that we are to be witnesses in this world for Christ, that Christ is coming again, and that we are to glorify God.

2. Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 240–42.

In the end, this is all that matters. The main views of Revelation that we'll look at are the *preterist view*, the *historicist view*, the *futurist view*, and the *idealist view*.

The *preterist view* takes two forms. The first says that Revelation was written for the seven historical churches of Asia Minor. It is seen as a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Preterists believe that the great tribulation and other judgment passages in the book occurred in the first century A.D. with the persecution by Nero, the Jewish war with Rome, and the destruction of the temple. They believe that the Antichrist also came in the first century. The second form of this view sees Revelation as a prophecy of Rome's fall in the fifth century A.D.

The *historicist* view sees the symbols in the book of Revelation—such as the seals, trumpets, and bowls—as being fulfilled by the unfolding of specific, identifiable, and chronological events in history, most of which have already occurred, but some of which are applicable to our own time.

The *futurist* view takes two forms. Both forms take Revelation 4:1–22:5 as referring only to the time immediately before Christ's second coming. The first form is known as dispensational futurism, which interprets Revelation very literally and chronologically. In this view, the order of events would go like this:

1. Ethnic Israel is restored to its land.
2. The church is raptured to heaven.
3. The seven-year tribulation begins.
4. The antichrist reigns.
5. The evil nations assemble to fight for Jerusalem.
6. The second coming of Christ occurs.
7. Christ reigns on earth for a literal one thousand years.
8. Satan rebels for one final time at the end of the millennium by assembling unbelievers to fight against Christ and the saints.
9. Christ begins his eternal reign with the saints in a new heaven and a new earth.

The second form of the futurist view believes that the church is the true Israel and that the church will go through the tribulation, but those who hold this view still see the majority of the book as referring only to the future.

The *idealist* view identifies Revelation as symbolic of the struggle between God and Satan. Some believe that the book is timeless and does not point to any particular historical event. Rather, it can be applied to all times and all situations as a representation of the struggle between good and evil.

I don't know about you, but I can see a grain of truth in all of these approaches, which again reminds us that we must approach with humility the task of interpreting the text, and we must be wise and discerning in deciding which texts are speaking about the past, or the present, or the future. As for the idealist approach, the book certainly does portray the struggle between good and evil. The futurists are correct in affirming that the book does deal with the second coming of Christ and the events leading up to it. The preterists are certainly correct in affirming that the book is written to and for the seven historical churches of Asia Minor. And even the historicists are correct in that the book surely has application for our own day. But we must recognize that to put ourselves in any one of these boxes exclusively does not do the best justice to the biblical text, which, if interpreted carefully in a grammatical-historical way, leads to the conclusion that the book speaks to realities of the past, present, and future.

SYMBOLISM IN REVELATION

Before we begin our study of Revelation, it would be helpful to discuss how to interpret the symbolism found in the book. When I first began my own study, I wanted to physically draw out each vision that John gave and try to figure out the “puzzle” by interpreting each picture I created. I quickly realized that this presented a rather confusing and sometimes contradictory and illogical picture of what John was really saying. I had my logical left brain turned on and my artistic right brain turned off. But when I turned my right brain on, sat back,

and “played the music,” John’s words made much more sense. I urge you to do the same.

The book itself tells us that most of the language is symbolic. In Revelation 1:1 we are told that what we are reading is “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” (the italics here are mine). The only other time in the Scriptures that the words in italics occur together is in Daniel 2:28–30, 45, which strongly indicates that John is alluding to Daniel’s symbolic vision and that symbolism will also be a key part of his writings as well. Furthermore, in the English Standard Version (ESV) translation of Revelation 1:12–16, the word “like” is used seven times, which tells us that these descriptions are not to be taken literally, but as portraying truth about Christ in a figurative manner.

Certainly not everything in the book is symbolic, but most of it is figurative; where we have difficulty deciding between literal and non-literal understandings, it would be better to err on the side of the figurative. As we read, we must remember to keep in mind several different aspects of the text. First, we must remember that verse 1:1 tells us to “hear” the words of the book. Second, we must remember that many passages are records of John’s real visions happening in real historical time. Third, we must remember that each vision speaks of true historical referents. Fourth, we must remember that each historical referent has a mostly symbolic meaning. Fifth, we must remember that John makes many allusions to the Old Testament throughout the book that inform our interpretation and understanding of his meaning.

The numbers three, four, seven, twelve, and their derivatives are also used in the book symbolically to convey completeness. Thus, though seven historical churches are in view in chapters 2–3, these historical churches are also symbolic for the complete/universal church. Additionally, the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls convey the fact that God’s judgment upon the world will be complete. Other such symbolic numbers include the 144,000 in chapter seven who are

sealed; these stand for all of the redeemed saints. In Revelation 13:8, the number 666, which is, in a sense, one less than 777 (the symbolic number of the perfect and complete Trinity), most likely stands for the lack of perfection of the counterfeit trinity (the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet), though, as some commentators point out, both a literal (the emperor Nero, for example) *and* a symbolic notion could be in view here. The 1,000 years mentioned in verse 20:1 is most likely referring to the entire church age between Christ's ascension and his second coming. The dimensions of the city (the people of God) in verse 21:15 and following connotes the completeness of God's people secured since the foundation of the world.

As we discussed with regard to the interpretations of Revelation, and specifically with regard to the dispensational futurist view, not everyone interprets the book in quite as symbolic a manner as I have been describing. Many wonderful, godly, evangelical Christian men and women believe the majority of the book is to be taken literally and that, unless absolutely necessary, the numbers and descriptions are to have a literal fulfillment, which is why in this view the majority of the book gets pushed to the timeframe of the future.

THE USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN REVELATION

The book of Revelation contains more allusions to the Old Testament than any other book in the New Testament. It is imperative to be familiar with the Old Testament background if we are going to understand the book. More than half of the Old Testament allusions are from Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, with Daniel being the most significant influence. In any given verse of Revelation, references to anywhere from one to five or even more different Old Testament passages may be collapsed into one portrayal. Not all Old Testament allusions are used with their original meanings. Like other New Testament authors, John takes the liberty to take Old Testament texts and apply them to his own purposes as the Holy Spirit leads him.

THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

As already noted, the book of Revelation is more like a piece of art or music than it is a textbook. As we read through the book, we see many words, phrases, and ideas that are similar to or are repetitions of earlier ones. In keeping with the numbers four and seven as symbolic for completeness, commentators have observed a broad four-fold division of the book as well as a smaller seven- or eight-fold division.³

Table 1.1 Structure of Revelation

FOUR-FOLD DIVISION	SEVEN-FOLD DIVISION	EIGHT-FOLD DIVISION
Rev. 1:1-20	Rev. 1-3	Rev. 1-3
Rev. 1:20-3:22	Rev. 4-7	Rev. 4-7
Rev. 4:1-22:5	Rev. 8:1-11:14	Rev. 8:1-11:14
Rev. 22:6-21	Rev. 11:15-14:20	Rev. 11:15-14:20
	Rev. 15-16	Rev. 15-16
	Rev. 17:1-21:8	Rev. 17:1-19:10
	Rev. 21:9-22:21	Rev. 19:11-21:8
		Rev. 21:9-22:21

Those who hold to a futurist position will see that the section of the book from verse 4:1 through verse 22:5 speaks of future events that will occur in a chronological and mostly literal manner. Those who hold to a progressive recapitulation (parallelism) position will see the structure more like a cone, where each series of seals, trumpets, bowls, and so on, are parallel but emphasize different dimensions, the seventh of each representing the final judgment. Thus, there are several places where the final judgment and salvation are portrayed before we get to the end of the book (see, for example, Rev. 11:14-18). They also hold that while the seventh seal, seventh trumpet, and seventh bowl each represent the final judgment, the previous six seals, trumpets,

3. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 114.

and bowls are not necessarily placed in chronological order. Again, we must “listen to the music” rather than logically diagramming it. Furthermore, there are many connections between the historical letters of chapters 2–3 and the visions of the later chapters, showing further that the section from 4:1 to 22:5 is not to be taken as referring to the future only. Thus, the first three chapters and the last two chapters of the book form a boundary around the five (or six) inner sections of the book that parallel one another.

The structure of the book serves to convey the themes of judgment, persecution, and redemption. The angel’s words in Revelation 14:7 sums up the entire message of the book: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.” And all of us who are seeking the Lord, no matter what position we take on interpreting the book, can join hearts, hands, and voices in fearing God and worshipping him.

OUTLINE: THE BOOK OF REVELATION, THE BOOK OF SEVENS

Prologue (Rev. 1)

The Seven Churches (2–3)

Ephesus (2:1–7)

Smyrna (2:8–11)

Pergamum (2:12–17)

Thyatira (2:18–29)

Sardis (3:1–6)

Philadelphia (3:7–13)

Laodicea (3:14–22)

The Throne in Heaven (Rev. 4–5)

The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5)

First Seal (6:1–2)—occurs throughout the church age

Second Seal (6:3–4)—occurs throughout the church age

Third Seal (6:5–6)—occurs throughout the church age

- Fourth Seal (6:7–8)—occurs throughout the church age
- Fifth Seal (6:9–11)—approaching final judgment
- Sixth Seal (6:12–17)—final judgment
- Interlude (7:1–8)—the servants of God are sealed (occurs during the church age)
- (7:9–17)—the great multitude worship God at the throne (church age)
- Seventh Seal (8:1–5)—final judgment

The Seven Trumpets (Rev. 8:6–11:19)

- First Trumpet (8:7)—occurs throughout the church age
- Second Trumpet (8:8–9)—occurs throughout the church age
- Third Trumpet (8:10–11)—occurs throughout the church age
- Fourth Trumpet (8:12)—occurs throughout the church age
- Fifth Trumpet (9:1–12)—occurs throughout the church age
- Sixth Trumpet (9:13–21)—occurs throughout the church age
- Interlude (10)—the mighty angel with the little scroll (occurs during the church age)

The Seven Thunders (Rev. 10:3–4)—occurs during the church age

- Interlude (11:1–14)—the measuring rod and two witnesses (church age)
- Seventh Trumpet (11:15–19)—final judgment

The Seven Signs (Rev. 12:1–15:4)⁴

- First Sign (12)—mostly during church age
- Second Sign (13:1–10)—church age
- Third Sign (13:11–18)—church age
- Fourth Sign (14:1–5)—final reward
- Fifth Sign (14:6–13)—final judgment
- Sixth Sign (14:14–20)—final judgment
- Seventh Sign (15:2–4)—final reward

4. Chapters 1–11 are now retold in chapters 12–22, but with more detail.

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The Seven Bowls (Rev. 15:5–16:21)

- First Bowl (16:2)—occurs throughout the church age
- Second Bowl (16:3)—occurs throughout the church age
- Third Bowl (16:4–7)—occurs throughout the church age
- Fourth Bowl (16:8–9)—occurs throughout the church age
- Fifth Bowl (16:10–11)—occurs throughout the church age
- Sixth Bowl (16:12–16)—final judgment
- Seventh Bowl (16:17–21)—final judgment

The Seven Descriptions of Babylon’s Judgment (Rev. 17:1–18:24)

- First Description (17:7–18)—final judgment
- Second Description (18:1–3)—final judgment
- Third Description (18:4–8)—final judgment
- Fourth Description (18:9–10)—final judgment
- Fifth Description (18:11–17)—final judgment
- Sixth Description (18:18–19)—final judgment
- Seventh Description (18:20–24)—final judgment

The Seven Last Things (Rev. 19:1–22:5)

- The Consummation of the Marriage (19:1–10)
- The Consummation of the Battle (19:11–21)
- The Consummation of Evil (20:1–10)
- The Consummation of Judgment (20:11–15)
- The Consummation of the New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–8)
- The Consummation of the New Jerusalem (21:9–27)
- The Consummation of the New Eden (22:1–5)

Epilogue (Rev. 22:6–21)⁵

5. I am indebted to Dr. Vern Poythress’s “Heptads in Revelation” for prompting my writing of this outline. See Vern S. Poythress, *The Book of Revelation: A Guide for Understanding* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary Bookstore, 2002), 3.8a.

THEOLOGY

As we study the theology of Revelation, we should seek to:

- Read it with a covenantal perspective in mind.
- Understand what the book is teaching us about God.
- Understand what the book is teaching us about his Son, Jesus Christ.
- Understand what the book is teaching us about God's covenant with his people.
- Understand how the book helps to further reveal God's covenantal story of redemption and restoration.
- Understand how the Holy Spirit would have us apply what we have learned to our own lives.

A Covenantal Perspective

First, God is fulfilling his covenant promises. We see each covenant represented in the book of Revelation and the fulfillment of all of them portrayed.

Covenant of Works. God made a covenant with Adam to work and keep the garden, to be fruitful and multiply, all leading to life in the garden. Through sin we lost access to the garden of Eden. But Christ paved the way back for us. The book of Revelation shows us the new Eden, the new heaven and the new earth.

God's Covenant with Noah. God promised that as long as this earth remained, a flood would never again cut off all flesh. His sign was a rainbow, which we see in Revelation 4:3 and 10:1. In this book we see that the period of common grace is over. The world will be completely judged and only the redeemed will be saved.

God's Covenant with Abraham. The Lord promised Abraham land, offspring, blessing, blessings on all nations through him, and a curse on those who cursed Abraham. The book of Revelation displays the fulfillment of the Promised Land in the new heaven and the new earth with God dwelling in the midst of his people, the fulfillment of the offspring in Jesus Christ as the One who came to redeem God's people, and the

fulfillment of the blessings of the nations as both Jew and Gentile who make up the redeemed people of God in the new heaven and the new earth.

God's Covenant with Moses. The law was added to govern a theocratic nation that would be a kingdom of priests in the land. The book of Revelation displays the true Israel, the church, as a royal priesthood and holy nation in the church age, but also reveals that this will not be consummated until the new heaven and the new earth.

God's Covenant with David. God promised an eternal kingdom and an eternal king on the throne of David, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. The redeemed make up the kingdom of God, which is inaugurated in the present age, but will not be consummated until Christ's second coming.

The New Covenant. God promised the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within his people, forgiveness of sins, the law written on believers' hearts and minds, and knowledge of God. The book of Revelation portrays God's people as able to stand firm through persecution because of the indwelling Holy Spirit and able to enter the new heaven and the new earth because of forgiveness of sins by Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

God

Second, the book teaches us that God has had a purpose and a plan from all of eternity to judge those who are not his own and to redeem those who are. He, along with Christ, is on the throne, and worthy of all worship, praise, and adoration. He executes his purpose and plan through the Son and the Spirit and is Creator over all.

Jesus, the Son of God

Third, Jesus Christ is on the throne with the Father, as King of kings and Lord of lords. He is worthy to judge because he was obedient to death on the cross and crowned as King upon his ascension. He is worthy of our worship and our praise and is the One who has gained us entrance into the new heaven and the new earth. He has provided an example for us of how to live on this earth and endure persecution for the sake of the kingdom, and how to stand firm as a witness for the kingdom of God.

God's Faithfulness to His Covenant Promises

Fourth, God is faithful to fulfill his covenant promises to his people that can be summed up in Revelation 21:3: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

The Climax of Redemption

Fifth, the book of Revelation stands as the final and climatic book in the New Testament to reveal God's plan of redemption and restoration. God has redeemed his people and restored them to Eden, the new heaven and the new earth. If Genesis is the kingdom prologue,⁶ Revelation is the kingdom epilogue.

Application to Our Lives

Sixth, the Holy Spirit wants us to apply what we learn from this book to our lives in many ways that will be discussed throughout this study. But I think the ones that come to the forefront are (1) to stand firm as witnesses for Jesus Christ in this world through persecution and tribulation, and (2) to fear God and worship him.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, it does not seem that Beethoven believed in the Christian God. More of a tragedy than his physical deafness was his spiritual deafness. He could not hear the voice of God. Repeatedly in the book of Revelation it is said, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is the exhortation before us: to open our eyes and listen to the music of the book, to hear the victory and see the battle scenes in our mind. And, ultimately, to hear the truth behind it all and be moved at the end to rise to our feet with loud applause in order to stand firm as witnesses for Jesus Christ, and to give our worship and praise to the One to whom all glory and honor is due.

6. I am indebted to Meredith G. Kline's book *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006) for this thought.



Revelation 1

PLEASE USE THE QUESTION paradigm from pages 353–54 as you work through the following. See the introductory comments there that explain each part of the process below in more detail.

- **Pray.**
- **Ponder the Passage.** Read Revelation 1 once a day from different translations for the entire week, looking for its:
 - Point
 - Persons
 - Patterns
 - Persons of the Trinity
 - Puzzling Parts
- **Put It in Perspective.**
 - Place in Scripture
 - Passages from Other Parts of Scripture

1. Based on your observations of the text, what is the basic content of this passage? Try to summarize it in your own words, using a sentence or two.
2. Whose revelation is this (Rev. 1:1)? What is the purpose of the revelation (Rev. 1:1)?

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3. What five parties are involved in the chain of communication (Rev. 1:1–3)?
4. What does the word “must” convey in Revelation 1:1?
5. Since John was living in the first century A.D. and it has been more than two thousand years since “what must soon take place” was written, what does this phrase mean (Rev. 1:1)?
6. What is the blessing in Revelation 1:3? Look up “blessed” in a concordance. Where are the other blessings in Revelation? How many are there total? Make a list of them.
7. Look up each of the seven churches in a Bible dictionary and write down what you learn (Rev. 1:4).
8. What type of genre does Revelation 1:4–8 convey that the book of Revelation is?
9. What person of the Godhead is “the seven spirits who are before his throne” (Rev. 1:4)?
10. Explain in your own words the titles used of Jesus Christ in Revelation 1:5.
11. What has Christ made us by his action on the cross (Rev. 1:6)?
12. Compare Revelation 1:4 with 1:8. What similarities exist?
13. When will the tribulation and the kingdom occur, according to Revelation 1:9?
14. Where was John? Why was he there and when (Rev. 1:9–10)?
15. What was John commanded to do (Rev. 1:11)?
16. Look up *trumpet* in a Bible dictionary or concordance. What did a trumpet usually signify in the Old Testament (Rev. 1:11)?
17. What are the “seven golden lampstands” in Revelation 1:12 (compare with Rev. 1:20)?
18. Compare Daniel 3, 7, and 10 with Revelation 1:13–15. What do you find?
19. What was John’s response to the vision of Revelation 1:12–15 (Rev. 1:17)? What was Christ’s response to John’s response (Rev. 1:18)?

20. Compare Revelation 1:4 and 1:8 with 1:19. What similarities exist?
21. Go back and interpret Revelation 1:12 and 1:16 in the light of 1:20.

• **Principles and Points of Application.**

1. It is so easy to read Scripture without hearing it. It's also easy to hear Scripture without doing anything about it. We can observe, but not interpret. Or we can observe and interpret, but not apply. But the Lord is telling us here in the introduction of Revelation that we must observe, interpret, and apply his Word in our lives. Use your lesson's questions to spend time this week in Revelation 1 observing, interpreting, and applying.
2. Make a list, title by title or description by description, of the names of God presented in Revelation 1:4–8. What does each name tell you about Christ? Which one is most meaningful to you? Most comforting for your season of life right now? Hardest for you to grasp? Easiest for you to understand?
3. How are you demonstrating your kingship and priesthood in God's kingdom? In other words, how are you ruling over that which/those whom he's put underneath you (children, those who are under your leadership environment, etc.) and how are you worshiping God and leading others to worship him? How are you interceding for others?
4. How does Revelation 1:9 make you feel connected to your brothers and sisters in Christ in the past? How does this encourage you? Read Hebrews 11 and then read verse 1:9 again. Pray that one day your life too will be an encouragement to others long after you've passed away. Then live each day in light of this.
5. When have you "seen Jesus" in such a way that you have fallen "facedown"? Write about the circumstances and pray about whether to share it with your group this week.
6. As we move through the book of Revelation this year, it will aid our worship to write down the names of God in each chapter

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as we study. I have separated the page into names for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Of course, some names apply to all three. At the end of each lesson, fill out the names you have seen in that lesson's text. Keep this page nearby and use it often as a reference for worship and adoration of God during your individual and/or group prayer time. Add as many pages of your own as you need to complete the list of names found throughout the book. I have done the first chapter for you below as an example.

- *Father*, you are God (Rev. 1:1), the One who is and who was and who is to come (Rev. 1:4, 8), the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 1:8), the LORD God (ibid.), the Almighty (ibid.).
- *Jesus*, you are Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1), the faithful witness (Rev. 1:5), the firstborn of the dead (ibid.), the ruler of kings on earth (ibid.), the one who loves us (ibid.), the one who has freed us from our sins by your blood (ibid.), the one who has made us a kingdom of priests to God the Father (ibid.), the one to whom belong glory and dominion forever (Rev. 1:6), the one who is coming with the clouds (Rev. 1:7), one like a Son of Man (Rev. 1:13), the first and the last (Rev. 1:17), the living one (Rev. 1:18), the one who died and is alive forevermore (ibid.), the one who has the keys of death and hades (ibid.).
- *Holy Spirit*, you are the seven spirits who are before God's throne (Rev. 1:4).

NOTES FOR REVELATION 1

Aim: Ponder the aim of this lesson concerning our:

Mind: What do we need to know from this passage in Scripture?

That John is instructed by Jesus to write to the seven churches in Asia concerning his vision on Patmos of the things that he's seen, that are, and that are about to take place.

Heart: How does what we learn from this passage affect our internal relationship with the Lord?

It prepares us to be kingdom disciples who read, hear, and keep the Word of God given through Revelation.

Hands: How does what we learn from this passage translate into action for God's kingdom?

It enables us to:

1. Make a list of the descriptions of God presented in Revelation 1:4–8 and meditate on them, thanking God for who he is and what he has done.
2. Demonstrate our kingship and priesthood in God's kingdom by leading those under our care in a Christlike way by the Spirit's power, and by interceding for those in our lives who need prayer.
3. Live each day in light of the fact that after we die our life legacy should be an encouragement to others in the faith.
4. Rely on the Holy Spirit to "see Jesus" in such a way in our lives that we fall "facedown" and worship him and lead others to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

The music began as a cue for people to stop talking and take their seats before the worship service. After a time of Scripture reading and singing, the pastor assumed his position at the pulpit to preach the Word of God. As he got under way, I purposefully looked around me to see what people were doing. Some were sleeping. Some were yawning. Others were reading their bulletins. A few were taking serious notes. A couple were tending to antsy children. Several were looking straight ahead at the preacher. I wondered how we looked to the One who was supposed to be the center of our worship. Was he pleased? I

couldn't help wondering if he was offended at our conduct. It seemed to be another Sunday morning that we showed up at church because we knew that was where we were supposed to be, but it seemed as if we were not impressed with the One we were worshiping. Perhaps we had grown too familiar with the church building and the preacher. Perhaps we were tired from the week before and trying to figure out how we were going to make it through the next one. Or maybe we were still thinking about this whole God idea and if we really bought into it. But few of us seemed overwhelmed to be in the presence of the Holy and Almighty God.

I knew it wasn't all of the many trials and pains and hardships that kept us from being overwhelmed. One of the ladies in the audience was on the verge of physical death and she looked more radiant and more engaged than anyone. She had battled cancer—a cancer that would take her life in a week—but she was ready to go home to be with her Lord and Savior. No, the difference among the people, biblically speaking, was, first, the presence (or lack of it) of the indwelling Holy Spirit. I knew that not everyone in the seats was saved. The second difference had to do with whether or not we had quenched the Holy Spirit in our lives or were attuned to the Spirit and ready to hear what God had to say to us through him. I knew that few of us had taken the time to prepare our hearts for worship before coming to church. And the third difference was in knowing God through knowing the Word of God so that we were able to worship in spirit and in truth. I knew that many had not opened the Word of God since last Sunday. These three differences—the indwelling of the Spirit, being attuned to the Spirit, and knowing God through his Word—are important for opening our eyes to the spiritual things taking place around us and preparing our hearts to worship God as he deserves on Sunday mornings.

Revelation 1 has much to say about embracing Christ, being attuned to the spiritual things around us, and knowing the Word of God. And the response is not to stay comfortably seated. John's response in this chapter is to fall at Christ's feet as though he, John, were stricken dead.

When is the last time that we saw Jesus and fell at his feet as though we were dead? When is the last time that we were so overwhelmed with who he is and what he has done that we have fallen facedown to worship him? When was the last Sunday that we spent time preparing our heart to meet with the Living God and worship him?

We will study this chapter by dividing our lesson into three main sections:

- I. The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1–3)
- II. John’s Greeting to the Seven Churches in Asia (cf. John 1:4–8)
- III. God Gives John a Vision on Patmos (Rev. 1:9–20)

I. The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1–3)

Revelation 1:1. The first thing we see is that this is a revelation of Jesus Christ—that is, it is about him and comes to John through him. It has been said that every book in the Bible whispers Christ’s name; in Revelation, we have a book that shouts his name. But that shout does not originate with Christ; it originates with God the Father. And God the Father had a purpose in giving his Son this revelation. The message was not only for the churches in Asia Minor during John’s day; it was for you and me as well, to show us the things that must soon take place. The word “must” here is an imperative. If we say this word in our own lives—“this must happen”—we reveal that we are being selfish and prideful. But for God to say it reveals that he is Sovereign over all things and that his plan and purpose is certain to come to pass. This should instill great hope in us that our Father’s plan and purpose will, indeed, *must*, come to pass. God made this known to believers like you and me by sending an angel to his servant John who recorded what he saw for the church. So, we see that there is a chain of communication involved here that looks like this: God the Father to Jesus Christ to his Angel to John to all believers.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:1. Daniel 2:28–30, 45–47 says, “But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries,

and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days . . . thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be . . . just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this.” This background helps us define “soon” in 1:1. What was future for Daniel, who is looking toward Christ’s first and second comings, has already been inaugurated in John’s day. John has been an eyewitness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is now living in a time when the kingdom has been inaugurated but not consummated, just as we do today.

Revelation 1:2. John was faithful in his task. He was a faithful servant and obeyed God’s command to write down the visions that he saw. How much we would have missed if John had not been obedient to his calling! How important it is for you and for me to be sensitive to the ministry that the Lord has for us as we join together to serve the kingdom of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. What is the “testimony of Jesus Christ”? It is defined by its parallel phrase in the verse, “the word of God.” John 1:1 tells us that the Word was God and this Word was Christ and he came to earth to be a witness to God’s Word, that we might know the Father since the Son has revealed him to us in our world. He stands as a witness to the truth of God’s Word.

Revelation 1:3. We see here the first “blessing” of seven in the book. John uses the number seven to connote completeness. Thus, the seven blessings in Revelation convey that the ones who follow the exhortations connected with the blessings will be completely and fully blessed in glory. The seven blessings in Revelation can be found in the following verses:

- Revelation 1:3: “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.”

- Revelation 14:13: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”
- Revelation 16:15: “Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”
- Revelation 19:9: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”
- Revelation 20:6: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection!”
- Revelation 22:7: “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”
- Revelation 22:14: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.”

All of the blessings have to do with embracing and persevering in faith so that we will receive the promise of eternal life. These blessings are important because they are glimmers of hope for us. The church in John’s day that was undergoing persecution and the temptation to compromise with the world especially needed to be reminded of the blessing that was theirs if they remained faithful to Christ. But we need such a reminder just as much today, as we are tempted to compromise our own faith with the world of materialism and false ideology around us.

Let’s look at the first blessing: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy . . .” We should not skim over that instruction too quickly. So many people find the book of Revelation difficult to study. They make it through the first few chapters and then put it down when the “weird visions” begin. But if we were to sit and read this out loud to our children and grandchildren and add pictures alongside it, ask them if they understood it, they would look up at us with wide eyes and say, “Yes.” They would say this because children are so good at seeing the big picture and using their imaginations and not getting

stuck on details. For example, when my son, Caleb, was four, we began reading *Dangerous Journey*, which is a children's book based on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.¹ Each page is illustrated with some of the most disturbing pictures to convey our journey through this life to the next. But Caleb loved the book and even when he was four understood the majority of the message. He wanted it read to him over and over again. So we would do well to pick up Revelation and read it all in one sitting, out loud, and if we have children or grandchildren, to read it to them too. Don't get caught up in the logic of it all; rather, remember that this is more like a piece of great art or a symphony composed by a master musician. It is to be read with emotion and flare, but the truth behind it is not embellished. The truth behind it is *truth* and will certainly take place.

The second part of the first blessing of the book is also found in this verse: "Blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it." We are not just supposed to read John's message; we are to hear it. That is a great difference. We can read something and not hear it, in the sense that the content quickly leaves our minds and we move on to the next bit of information in our world. But John tells us that we are to hear it in the sense that it touches our hearts and minds in such a way that we are moved to action to keep the exhortations written in it.

Our motivation for persevering in the faith is because "the time is near." This phrase will confuse us here and throughout the whole book if we think of it only in terms of the second coming of Christ. But Revelation is not only concerned with the second coming. The book is concerned with the period of time between Christ's first and second comings. We see in the book of Revelation what we see elsewhere in Scripture, the tension between the already and the not yet. Christ has already come and won the victory over Satan at the cross, but Satan is still allowed to roam around the world looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). He is not yet confined to the "lake of fire" for all eter-

1. *Dangerous Journey: The Story of Pilgrim's Progress*, selected from John Bunyan's original work by Oliver Hunkin, illustrated by Alan Parry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

nity. So, too, Christ has already inaugurated his kingdom with his death and resurrection, but it will not be fully consummated until he comes again. So, we can say that Christ will “come quickly” because this refers not just to his visible second coming, but also to the comings of judgment depicted in chapters 2–3, in which Christ removes those in the church who do not serve him faithfully. Of course, we should always recognize that the time of his second coming is near in the sense that it is the next main event in the history of redemption that God has revealed in his Word. And, we should always recognize that because we do not know the day or the hour of Christ’s return, it could take place any day of our lives and we need to be found faithful. Only if we are found faithful will we receive the blessing. And we should be faithful not only because of what Christ has already done for us through his death and resurrection, but also because of what he will do for us when he returns to establish his eternal kingdom in its fullest form and allow us entrance into it.

II. John’s Greeting to the Seven Churches in Asia (cf. John 1:4–8)

Revelation 1:4–5a. These verses clearly display that the book of Revelation is first and foremost an epistle. The book does use prophetic and apocalyptic genres, but it is primarily a letter to seven historical churches in Asia Minor, although these are most likely representative for all the churches in Asia Minor at the time and for all churches of all times.² We must not forget that Revelation not only had an application for the readers of John’s day, but has a message for the church of our day as well. Thus, the book is not just about the future, it is about today and yesterday and forever. We must be discerning as we try to understand which parts of Revelation apply to the past, the present, and the future. And we must hold our conclusions humbly and loosely, as we acknowledge that many in the church who love the Lord and seek to know his Word hold to different interpretations of the book.

2. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 37–39.

Figure 1.1. The Seven Churches in Asia³

The Asia Minor of John's day was an oppressive place for Christians to live. No longer did they enjoy the protection of being considered an offshoot of Judaism, which was tolerated by Rome. By this time, Jews had become increasingly intolerant of Christians as the beliefs of the two groups separated them from one another. In fact, Jews most likely were the ones accusing Christians before the Roman government of disturbing the peace, not being part of Judaism, and refusing to worship Caesar. The imperial cult of ancient Rome, which acknowledged the emperors as having divine authority, infiltrated every area of life at the time so that Christians who did not participate were left at a severe economic and social disadvantage. Penalties for not worshiping the Roman emperor would involve exile and death.

Ephesus was a significant city because it had been the center of Paul's ministry and because John had lived there and been influential in

3. I am indebted to Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 67–115, for specific information on the cities and churches.

the church. Geographically, it was located at the best entry point from the port in that region of Asia Minor. Three trade routes met at the city and a wide, column-lined street led from the port to the center of the city, which contained a stadium, market, and theater. The Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and several other temples built to emperors were a significant presence in the city.

Smyrna is the only one of these seven ancient cities that remains active and vital today (as Izmir). It too had a great entry point from the Aegean Sea and contained an important road to get exports out of the region. It contained a well-known stadium, library, and the largest public theater in Asia. Like Ephesus, it too had a large population. It too built temples in honor of emperors and gods. It held strong allegiance to Rome and was mainly made up of Jews who persecuted Christians. Polycarp, one of the early church fathers, was the twelfth martyr of Smyrna.

Pergamum was about ten miles east of the Aegean Sea. It was the capital city of Asia Minor and known as the most distinguished city of the region. Its library was the largest and it was the center of worship for the pagan cults of Zeus, Athene, Dionysos, and Asklepios.

Thyatira was the least elaborate and known city of the region, but did have a large number of trade guilds that developed and succeeded there. Since trade guilds were closely linked with allegiance to the imperial cult, it was difficult for Christians to be involved in these guilds without compromising their faith, which hurt them economically.

Sardis was a famous and wealthy city, as it was the first to strike gold and silver coins and discover how to dye wool. The environment was pagan, but there appeared to be no heresy or outside opposition coming into the churches.

Philadelphia was known as the “gateway to the East” for commerce and a “missionary city” for Greek culture to Lydia and Phrygia. It had many temples, cults, and religious festivals.

Laodicea was the wealthiest city in Phrygia. It was famous for the soft, glossy black wool it produced from its sheep. This fame and wealth brought the banking industry to the region. The city was also famous for its medical school and physicians. Two famous medicines invented

in Laodicea were an ear ointment and an eye-salve. However, the city had to bring its water in from an outside source through stone pipes, which could be cut off and did not provide the freshest water.

The phrase “grace and peace” is seen frequently in the New Testament letters, as the author knows that it will only be by God’s grace that readers will be able to keep and apply the words they are reading that were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and it is only the peace of God (which he alone can give) that will get them through external pressures. But grace and peace are theirs from “him who is and who was and who is to come.” This is an allusion to both Exodus 3:14 (“I AM Who I AM”) and Isaiah (multiple verses in which God refers to himself in a similar way) and would have instilled great confidence in the readers that the same God who was with believers in the Old Testament is with them today and is holding all of their tomorrows in his hand as well. This allusion serves the same purpose for us today. The God of the Old and New Testaments is the same God who today is bringing his promises to pass, filling our lives with his grace and peace as we walk through this world that is not our home. Not only are grace and peace and the book of Revelation from God the Father, but also from the Holy Spirit, “the seven spirits who are before his throne” (Rev. 1:4). The “seven” connotes perfection and completion. The Holy Spirit is not only the one who assists John in writing Scripture (2 Peter 1:21), but also the one who applies God’s grace and peace to our lives. We see in verse 5a that this grace and peace are also from Jesus Christ, who is given three descriptions here. He is the faithful witness because he has been sent from the Father to testify about the Father. If we know the Son, then we know the Father (John 10:30). He was faithful even unto death on the cross. Thus, despite the persecution that he faced, Jesus stood strong as a faithful witness to God in the midst of it, never wavering or compromising his faith. He is the example that the churches in Asia Minor were to follow and that we are to follow today. He is also the “firstborn of the dead.” Christ’s resurrection inaugurated the new creation, and thus he is the firstborn of the new creation in whose footsteps all believers will follow. Finally, he is “the ruler of kings on earth.” At the cross he defeated all of his enemies and thus rules over them.

Old Testament Background to Threefold Description. Psalm 89:27, 37: “And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Like the moon it shall be established forever, a faithful witness in the skies.”

This psalm speaks of David as the anointed king who reigns over his enemies and whose seed will be established on the throne for eternity. Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the ideal Davidic king who reigns forever on his throne that was established at his resurrection (Rev. 1:5b–6).

Now John breaks into worship, a theme we will see throughout the book. John’s worship stems from three things. First, Christ has loved us. The epitome of his love was shown to us on the cross. Second, he has freed us from our sins by his blood on the cross. He died in our place. Third, he has made us a kingdom of priests to his God and Father. Upon his ascension, the kingdom of which we are priests was inaugurated and we are thus participants in his kingdom as priests now although not yet in the fullest sense. It is because of these three actions that Christ is to be worshiped; his will be the glory and the dominion forever.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:6. Exodus 19:6: “And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Christ fulfilled what the Passover lamb could never do. He was the final and complete sacrifice. Christ’s death not only made him priest and king, but also made all believers priests and kings with him. Believers function in these two offices now by being witnesses to the world around us of Christ’s office of king and priest so that others, too, might become a part of the kingdom. We do this by standing firm in our testimony despite any persecution and temptation to compromise our faith. This will be revealed to us throughout the pages of Revelation. The church functions as the new Israel, which no longer has to offer the Passover lamb but proclaims and testifies to the true Lamb of God. And he alone is worthy to receive glory for the salvation that he accomplished for the people of God on the cross.

Revelation 1:7. This one who has loved us and freed us from our sins when he came the first time to accomplish his work on the cross is

coming again. But this time it will not be as a baby; this time it will be as the Son of Man coming with the clouds. And he will not be hidden in a stable, but every eye will see him and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. However, his ultimate coming is already inaugurated as all throughout the history of this interadvent age he continues to bless and to judge.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:7.

- Daniel 7:13: “And behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.”
- Zechariah 12:10: “When they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him.”

Revelation 1:8. All three titles in Revelation 1:8 convey the same idea. God is over all of history. He was at the beginning and he will be at the end, and consequently he will be over all that is in between. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and omega is the last. He is almighty over all things and is directing its end to accomplish his purposes.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:8.

- Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12: “I am the first and I am the last.”
- Haggai repeatedly uses “Almighty” to refer to God, as do Zechariah and Malachi.

III. God Gives John a Vision on Patmos (Rev. 1:9–20)

Revelation 1:9. John’s words here remind us that he is our brother as much as he was the brother of the Christians in the churches of Asia Minor. Also, the tribulation and the kingdom are spoken of as present realities so we know that they have been inaugurated. He is also a partner with his readers in “the patient endurance,” as is clear by his location on the island of Patmos. He was there because he had stood firm in his faith and testimony, which means he had probably been banished to the island because of his faith.

Revelation 1:10–11. Evidently John had his heart attuned to worship by the Holy Spirit’s working on a certain Sunday when he received this vision. What an appropriate model for us today who

have largely forgotten what it's like to be in the Spirit on Sunday morning. Rushing about trying to get ourselves and our children ready in order to fly out the door to make it to church on time, sometimes even having an argument with our spouse on the way, leaves us in a poor condition to hear from the Lord or worship him. But thankfully, John had prepared his heart and was able to hear from the Lord, and because he had done this and heard, he was able to bless the church with one of the most encouraging books of the New Testament. How many blessings we must miss on the Lord's Day by not having our hearts prepared!

The loud voice like a trumpet alludes to the many instances in the Old Testament where trumpets were associated with judgment (Ex. 19:16, 19–20 and Josh. 6), and thus gives us an idea that the book of Revelation will deal with judgment as one of its themes. Just as the Old Testament prophets were commanded to communicate to the people of Israel their visions, which also had judgment as one of their themes, so too John is asked to write down his visions for the seven churches of Asia Minor, and ultimately for the universal church.

Revelation 1:12–16. John turns and sees seven golden lampstands, which represent the church and in the midst of them, one like a son of man.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:12. Zechariah 4:2–6: “A lampstand . . . and seven lamps on it.”

Note that there was only one lampstand in Zechariah, whereas here there are seven. This is due to the fact that John is now applying the lampstands to the church universal and to all peoples, not just Israel. The long robe and golden sash (Rev. 1:13) around Christ emphasize his priestly role of tending to the churches. He is the one who speaks words of promise, words of affirmation, or words of warning or rebuke to them. The hairs of his head being white not only convey wisdom, but purity as well. His eyes being like a flame of fire describes Christ's judicial role (Rev. 1:14). His feet that were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace (Rev. 1:15) display his moral purity and set the precedent for what his followers should reflect as well.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:13–15. See Daniel 3, 7, 10. Note that the attributes of God the Father (Ancient of Days) is

here ascribed to Christ (“one like a son of man”), thus solidifying the deity and place of Christ alongside the Father on the throne. The seven stars in Christ’s right hand are the angels of the seven churches (Rev. 1:20), conveying that Christ is not only Lord of the earthly church, but the heavenly church as well. The sharp two-edged sword continues to convey his role as judge (Rev. 1:16a).

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:16a.

- Isaiah 11:4: “And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.”
- Isaiah 49:2: “He made my mouth like a sharp sword.”

The idea here is that his face was like the sun shining in full strength, which reveals a victorious warrior.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:16b. Judges 5:31: “So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.”

Revelation 1:17–18. John’s response to the vision was to fall face-down, as though dead. Isn’t that the response that God’s Word should evoke in us? When we are attuned to the Spirit as John was and are ready to hear his Word to us, we are overwhelmed by it. John lay before him as though dead, but you can almost hear Jesus say to John, “I died so that you don’t have to. Because I live you will live too. Because I broke the bonds of death, you do not have to fear. Because I am the first and the last, you do not have to worry; I have everything under my control. Because I have the keys of Death and Hades, Satan and his powers cannot destroy you. Thus, do not fear!” I don’t know about you but there have been moments in my life when I have been seized by fear. The news of layoffs coming in the company leaves us wondering if we will be next. The doctor leaves a message on the voice mail saying the test results are not good and we need to come in immediately. The pregnancy doesn’t seem like it’s going well and there is the possibility of miscarriage. The neighbor down the street tells us she’s seen our husband with another woman. We have reason to believe that our child has disabilities. We have evidence that our teen is struggling with an addiction. Our adult

child has abandoned the faith and is on the road of destruction. But Jesus takes us by the shoulder and lays his right hand on us, displaying his kingship over our lives, and speaks to us, saying, “Do not fear. I have died so that you may live. I am sovereign over your circumstances. I am almighty over the events in your life.” And he invites us to live as kings and priests with him.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:17–18.

- Isaiah 22:22: “And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”
- Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12: “I am the first and the last.”

Revelation 1:19–20. Again John is commanded to write. He is to write “the things you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.” In light of the threefold description of Christ in Revelation 1:4 and 1:8, it seems likely that this verse is referring equally to the entire book. “What will happen after these things” may very probably be an allusion to Daniel 2, which provides an already and not-yet tension, as we have seen exists in the book. To understand this verse as separating the book into three different chronological sections does not do justice to the literary genre of Revelation, the biblical text, or the already and not-yet tension found in the New Testament. The “mystery” in 1:20a further confirms the use of Daniel 2 in these verses.

Old Testament Background to Revelation 1:19–20. Daniel 2:29, 47: “Of what would be after this” and “a revealer of mysteries.”

Now the seven stars and seven lampstands are defined as the angels of the seven churches and the churches themselves. The angels here refer to the earthly church that they represent as well. They are in a sense accountable for the churches and the churches benefit from the angel’s activity on their behalf. They have heavenly assistance for the churches’ earthly trials. The churches are already seen as taking part in the heavenly realm, and the angels remind them of this. Though they are struggling on earth, they are already in a

sense taking part in the heavenly worship of heaven. Thus, it is even more imperative that they stand firm as witnesses.

CONCLUSION

John saw Jesus and fell at his feet as though he were dead. He was so overwhelmed with who Christ is and what he has done that John fell facedown to worship him. He was prepared to be in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. He was prepared in his heart to meet with the Living God and worship him. He had allowed exile to soften rather than harden his heart. He had joyfully embraced suffering for the cause of Christ. He was ready to be used by God to build up the churches. And he was able to do all of these things because he knew the one that he worshiped and he recognized the enablement of the Holy Spirit. He knew that Jesus was the Christ who had died and rose again. He knew the grace and peace that only comes from God. He knew that Christ was the faithful witness and he wanted to follow in his Master's footsteps. He knew Christ was the firstborn of the dead and that he too would receive a glorified body. He knew that Christ was the ruler of kings on earth and that they could not harm him even if they put him in exile. He knew that Christ loved him and had freed him from his sins by his blood and he wanted to be willing to give his blood for the cause of Christ as well. He knew that Christ had made him part of a kingdom and made him a priest to his God and Father. And he knew that his whole life was to glorify the Lord. He knew that one day Jesus would come with the clouds and every tongue would confess that Jesus is Lord. John knew Jesus and because he knew him, he was a faithful witness.

May we follow in the footsteps of John and see Jesus in such way that we fall at his feet in worship and stand as faithful witnesses for him in the midst of our world.

The book of Revelation paints a breathtaking, majestic picture of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’s coming again to complete God’s plan of judgment and salvation. This annotated, expository Bible study provides Old Testament backgrounds, commentary, and personal exhortations—distinguishing it from other Bible study guides.

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