

## ***Re-Reading the Apocalypse***

### ***Lesson 1: "The Beginning of the End"***

#### **Overview:**

More so than any other work in either the Hebrew Bible or Christian Scripture, the Book of Revelation is filled with context, nuance, and complexity that are often either misunderstood or looked past for simple answers. This difficulty often catches the reader off guard, most often ending with frustration and confusion. Over the next few weeks, we will engage in this difficult book and see what new understandings we can glean through study and prayer.

1. When you hear "Revelation", what is the first thing that comes to mind?
2. Have you ever taken the time to read it in an intentional manner? Why or why not?
3. What is the most common interpretation of Revelation? Where have you heard it?

*(Open with prayer)*

#### **Historical Overview:**

Revelation has a complicated and difficult history. Most scholars place the date of composition between 95 and 115 CE. This is some 70+ following the departure of Jesus and is later than any of the gospel or undisputed letters of Paul. Revelation is written during a time when Judaism and Christianity have clearly split from one another, the realization of the loss of the Temple is now a settled matter, and the growing specter of being a marginalized group reshaped Christian understanding. While the writer is said to be "John of Patmos", this is never clear as to which John this is, though there are connections to the John epistles. Some important notes to keep in mind:

- Contains three major sections:
    - Opening and Epistle, 1:1-3:22
    - Vision of Heaven, 4:1-18:1
    - Final Reign of God, 18:1-End
- Finally, there are generally three different views and interpretations, though there are also many other interpretations beyond these four.
- A Future Prophecy
    - View that Revelation is yet to come
    - A vision of a future final judgment and reign of God
  - An apocalyptic book
    - Written for the era in which it was written
    - Meant to encourage and uplift the faithful in time of trial
  - An Allegory of Discipleship
    - Written to show the difficulties of following Jesus
    - Shows the difficulty, as well as the promise of heaven

1. Which view do you most identify with? Why?
2. Why does the background of Revelation matter?
3. How can understanding the different perspectives aid us in understanding our faith?

### **Scripture lesson: Revelation 1:1-8**

A revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. Christ made it known by sending it through his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup> who bore witness to the word of God and to the witness of Jesus Christ, including all that John saw. <sup>3</sup> Favored is the one who reads the words of this prophecy out loud, and favored are those who listen to it being read, and keep what is written in it, for the time is near. <sup>4</sup> John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace and peace to you from the one who is and was and is coming, and from the seven spirits that are before God's throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ—the faithful witness, the firstborn from among the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To the one who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup> who made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and always. Amen. <sup>7</sup> Look, he is coming with the clouds! Every eye will see him, including those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of him. This is so. Amen. <sup>8</sup> “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and was and is coming, the Almighty.”

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. How does this passage prepare the reader for the difficult passages ahead?
3. Where else have we heard the “alpha and omega” reference before?

### **Discussion**

The opening of the book of Revelation reads very similarly to the epistles found throughout the rest of the New Testament. The writer, seeking to show the importance of the work, emphasizes the nature of the “prophecy” he is going to share by pointing to the nature of God's eternal nature and that the reader will be greatly blessed by the prophecy. As Revelation begins the stakes are already high. The nature of Jesus' ministry is named, early churches in Anatolia and Greece and mentioned, and the summary is completed by a proclamation of God's eternal glory. This quick and rough declaration of purpose and of God's glory serves to prepare the reader for the nature what is to follow. It is not just “some prophecy” or revealing, it is an in depth revealing of the reign of God.

1. Why do you think this passage is so full of imagery and substance?
2. How do you think an early reader from an early church would have read this?
3. What do you think is the most important aspect of this passage?

### **Conclusion**

Whether you view Revelation as future prophecy, a look at the apocalyptic world of the late first century, or as an allegory of your walk with Christ, one thing is clear: the reign of God is paramount. The book of Revelation, even when seeming to speak of the most difficult matters, remains firmly ensconced in the hope of God's final reign.