

Blessed are Those who Keep the Prophecy
Revelation 1:1-8

Turn to Revelation 1. When I first started teaching in the seminary, more than 30 years ago, the first course I had to teach was Revelation. I despaired. I had been to Bible College, and Seminary, and done doctoral studies, and had taken Bible courses in all those schools. But I had never taken a course on Revelation. I did not know anything about Revelation.

When I was about 13, the pastor of my home church did a long series of Sunday evening sermons on the book of Revelation. He had a long chart like a banner, and it stretched right across the platform, and it was up there for a long time. He talked about the rapture and the 7 year tribulation and the antichrist and Israel being restored, all things like that.

That was all I knew about Revelation when I became a seminary teacher. My job started August 1st, I had about 5 weeks until classes began. (Revelation was not my only course, but it was the most frightening to me.) So that first week of August I read right through Revelation. I read through Revelation two or three times the first week.

After I had read Revelation a couple of times, I thought to myself, “from reading Revelation, it would never occur to me to understand this book the way that chart showed.” I had no idea how to understand Revelation, but it felt like that chart was about a different book.

Revelation never mentioned 7 years of anything. It never mentioned the rapture, no one left behind, believers are on earth through the whole book. It never mentions the antichrist. Not much interest in the signs of the times. No interest in the actual land of Palestine, or earthly Jerusalem.

So by the end of that first week, in my mind I threw the chart out, I threw that whole system out, and started over, going through Revelation carefully to find out what it was about. I found many commentaries to help me, good sources I’d not heard about before.

Here are the questions Revelation wants to answer: What is really going on in this world? What explains the spiritual battle? Why does the world attack believers? How should we live?

And I discovered something else: John wrote Revelation to 7 churches in the Roman province of Asia, somewhere in the second half of the first century. The whole book was to answer those questions for *them*. *Their* world, *their* spiritual battle, *their* persecution; how should *they* live?

The first three chapters are clearly to those 7 churches. There is not much doubt about that. But let’s pretend we were one of the 7 churches. Is there a place in Revelation where it says, “OK 7 churches, the rest is not for you, no more for you, the rest will not be any use for 2,000 years”? No, nothing like that. The beast was alive and well and terrible in the first century.

Where those 7 first century churches naïve to think the whole book was written to help *them* make sense of *their* hostile world? No, they were not naïve. That is exactly what old John wanted, what Christ wanted, what God himself wanted.

Let's read 1:1-4a

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and keep what is written in it, because the time is near. ⁴ John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia:

The Blessing (v3) *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and keep what is written in it, because the time is near.*

Revelation was written to be read aloud in a church, which is how all the Biblical writings were used. It is a prophecy, among other things. Prophets often predict the future, but always to guide the present, not so the readers would know what was coming. We're told about the future so we will respond to God *now*. All prophecy, OT and NT, encourages the hearers to obey God.

Blessed are those who keep what it written in the prophecy. At the end of Revelation (22:7), we have the same words, there from the Jesus himself: *“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”* Keep the prophecy.

The NIV has translated it “take to heart” in 1:3, but it is the same word “keep” as in 22:7. In John's writings, “keep” means “obey.” In John 8:51 Jesus says, “whoever *keeps* my word will not see death.” A few sentences later, “I know my Father and I *keep* his word.” In John 14 Jesus says, “whoever has my commands and *keeps* them loves me.” And so on. Many times in John.

We could read “keep the prophecy” this way: *Blessed are those who hear this prophecy and obey it, because the time is near.* And Jesus says the same thing at the end: *Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who obeys the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.*

People, we want this blessing. We want to hear the call of Revelation, and keep it, obey it, and receive this blessing. We could understand every symbol of Revelation perfectly, and know the signs of the times, and still miss the whole point of Revelation, and miss this blessing.

The call of Revelation is not complicated: Keep worshiping and obeying when the pressure is on to deny Christ. To get the blessing, be faithful to Christ to the end. God offers us a blessing here, and we want it. “Worship God and obey Christ, be faithful to the end, in a hostile world.”

Something Soon: *What must soon take place (1:1); the time is near (1:3): John to the seven churches in the province of Asia.* Twice in the first 3 verses we read that something will happen soon. From the rest of Revelation, we know that it is severe persecution.

These churches were about to experience persecution from the Roman government, and God gave a revelation to Jesus to give to his servants, so Jesus gave it to John who wrote it down and sent it to those churches. We will read all of Revelation as guiding those people through their persecution, but with a message from God for us.

That is how we read every other book of the Bible, and we'll understand Revelation that way as well. Like every Scripture, Revelation has been kept for us, because God still speaks to us and guides us through these old writings. Are some things in Revelation not yet fulfilled?

Of course. But every book of the NT has promises in it that have not been fulfilled yet, there is nothing new about that. Revelation was written to guide those people through their troubles. And we have much to learn, and that blessing to those who hear and obey is still available. The Spirit still speaks to whoever has an ear to hear.

1:4b - *Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is coming, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

The Kindness of God To whoever reads this book, God sends to you, to us here, his grace and his peace. God sends his grace and his peace to all of us here, now, because I am reading this and you are listening. Grace and peace to all of us, sent from God and the Spirit and Jesus Christ.

And remember, in a world with hostile governments, Jesus Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth. He rules the kings, the queens, the prime ministers, the presidents, the dictators, all the committees and all the rest. The world is never ever out of control.

Jesus was a faithful witness, and those hostile rulers put him to death. He knows about that. But he rose, and so will we, and he now rules those kings. The kings are never out of control.

We don't know why John portrays Holy Spirit as seven spirits. There is not really any doubt that he means the Holy Spirit. Why seven? Don't know, but think: in the same verse, John sends Revelation to seven churches. Seven spirits might mean that the Holy Spirit lives in each of the seven churches.

Glory to Christ John bursts into praise to Christ: *To him who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom, and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

Christ has done four things for us at his first coming: he *loves* us, he *freed* us from our sins by his blood, he made us a *kingdom*, and he made us *priests* to serve God.

The followers of Christ are already a kingdom, but for now it is lying low, it is camouflaged, a cloaked and veiled kingdom. But a real kingdom no less, we the followers of Christ will rule the earth when all the other kings and kingdoms have disappeared.

We are already loved by the ruler of the kings of the earth, we are freed by him, we are kingdom under him, and we are priests, our whole lives are lived in holy service to God. Christ has done all this for us: *to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

Revelation has more songs of praise to God than any other NT book. Revelation has more praise and worship to God than all the other NT books put together. Revelation is the closest thing the NT has to the book of Psalms.

“Keep the prophecy” includes praising Christ in this way: *Lord Jesus Christ, to you who love us, to you who freed us from our sins by your blood, to you who made us to be a kingdom, to you who made us priests to serve your Father – to you be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

The Return of Christ (v7) *“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.*

Let’s just go with the first line (Zech. 12:10-14): *Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.* This is the second coming of Christ. Christ will come with the clouds, and every eye will see him.

These are not rain clouds. This is one of the many places where “cloud” goes right back to the cloud of God’s presence that was over wilderness tabernacle during the day to tell the Israelites that God was in the tabernacle.

When Jesus ascended into heaven in front of the disciples, in Acts 1, it says a cloud received him from their sight. That is the presence of God. Jesus went up into the presence of God. *He is coming with the clouds* means he is coming with God’s presence, he is bringing God’s presence with him.

Verses 5-6, the praise to Christ, gave Christ glory because of he did for us the first time he came. Verse 7 promises that Christ will come again, and he will bring God’s presence with him, and every eye will see him. No more veiled and cloaked kingdom.

Jesus said in Mark 13, “If someone says, ‘here is the Messiah,’ or ‘there he is,’ don’t believe it. People will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.

So right here at the beginning of Revelation, vv5-7, we get a clear picture of Christ's first coming, he loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood; and we get a clear picture of his second coming: he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.

And as Revelation goes on, we see that our response is to keep worshipping God for what happened at the first coming of Christ, and to keep worshipping God for what will happen when Christ returns. The two comings of Christ are the two anchors of our life, they are the two anchors we have received already by Rev 1:7.

Life is hard. Do not forget what Christ did at his first coming. Give him glory for this. Do not forget that Christ is coming again, and what will happen then. Give God glory for that also. That's what the seven churches in Asia were to pick up, and the same for us. To this point, that's what it means to keep the prophecy.

To him who is and who was and who is coming (v8)

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty." That's the second time we've heard this name of God. It was also in v4: *Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is coming.*

The God who is, and who was, and who is coming. This is just a bit awkward. We would expect that if God was the God who is, and who was, then the last line would be, the God who will be. The God who is, and who was, and who will be. He exists now, he existed in the past, he will exist in the future.

But that's not what it says: *from him is, and who was, and who is coming.* What is the most important thing to know about the future of God? He's coming. God will come to earth. That is the one thing we need to know about the future of God. He will come to earth.

In Revelation, people do not end up in heaven. God makes a new heaven and earth, and then God comes to earth, to be with his people on the new earth. That's in Revelation 21. *Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is coming to earth. I am the Alpha and Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is coming to earth, the Almighty.*

Summary: 4 basics: the blessing, the first readers, the kindness of God, our two anchors.

(1) *Blessed is the one who hears and obeys the words of this prophecy.* In Jesus' words in Rev 22: *Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who obeys the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.* We want this blessing, so we will listen for the call of this prophecy, and keep it.

(2) *John to the seven churches of Asia.* This letter, the whole letter, was designed to help first century churches in their time of persecution. They had every reason to take it that way, and they did take it that way. But also has a timeless message for all God's people, as all Scripture does.

(3) The kindness of God. Grace and peace to you from God and Spirit and Jesus Christ. Our church and every church is carried along by a never ending supply of grace and peace from God. To the one who loved his, and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, and priests to serve God, sacred people devoted to holy service.

Most of those seven church were not doing very well. Lots of problems. But there was still great kindness from God to all those people.

(4) Lastly, the two anchors of our life, the first coming of Christ and the second. We remember what Jesus accomplished for us in his first coming, and what will happen at the second coming. We worship God for what he's already done for us, and we worship him for what he has promised to do when he comes.

Amen.