

Revelation 1:1-20 // Unveiled: A Heavenly Vision

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[0 : 00] 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, who testifies to everything he saw, that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia, grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father, to him be the glory and power forever and ever. Amen. 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.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God. He is, and he was, and he is to come, the Almighty. I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[1 : 40] On the Lord's day, I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said, Write on a scroll what you see, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Teotira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me, and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet, and with a golden sash round his chest.

The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze, glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me, and said, Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last.

[2 : 57] I am the living one. I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and of the seven golden lampstands, is this. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Well, thanks Amy for reading. Blessed are you for reading aloud the words of this chapter. And blessed are we too. That's what it says in verse 3, because we have heard the words that have been read aloud.

But only if we hear and take them to heart. In other words, we're blessed only if we're inwardly transformed by the words we've just heard.

So, to that end, let's pray again and ask for God's help, and ask God to do that work in us. Lord God, we want to see everything you want to show us in this chapter.

[4 : 12] Would you open our eyes, open our hearts, open our minds, awaken our souls to see the spiritual reality behind the reality of the world around us.

This Lord's Day evening, would you, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would you transport us by your word to where Christ walks among the lampstands, as it were.

That we might catch even a glimpse of him. That all who are here this evening would encounter the risen Lord Jesus, and that you'd lead us in this way to worship.

For we ask it in Jesus' name, and for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, you need a vision if you're going to know where you're going to progress towards a goal.

You need a vision in order to progress towards a goal. And you need a vision to capture your imagination, a vision to move you, a powerful vision.

[5 : 17] In 1950, my friend's grandfather, Basil Spence, was an architect working on his dream project, a competition to design a new cathedral in Coventry.

The old one had been bombed to a ruin in the Second World War. And during that winter of 1950, Basil Spence worked late every night into the early hours on the design of the cathedral.

But he didn't yet have a clear vision of what it should look like. Instead, the stress of overworking led to an abscessed tooth, and his dentist advised immediate extraction.

Unfortunately for Spence, he had a bad reaction to the local anesthetic, and he passed out.

However, while he was unconscious, he had a vision of what the building should look like.

And later on, he'd write this down in a book. He wrote, So he had this radiant vision of this cathedral doused in sunlight with the front of the cathedral.

[6 : 52] Awash with sunlight with zigzag walls, directing all the light to the front of the church like that. And when he came to, he'd been out cold for several minutes.

He asked the poor dentist, who was wiping away the sweat from his brow, to pass him his sketchbook. And he was furiously scribbling away the idea that he'd had in his dream. And he told the dentist of his dream.

And the amazing vision of the design for a new cathedral doused in sunlight. To which the dentist turned around and said, I'll send you a bill for that idea.

Well, Spence went on to win that architectural competition. To complete the project for the design of the cathedral, What Spence needed was a compelling vision of what the cathedral would look like.

What you need, what you need this evening, what you need most according to what we just read, is a compelling vision of Jesus.

[7 : 55] That's what we're given in Revelation chapter 1. A vision of Jesus, a portrait of Jesus like no other. And that's what you need if you're a Christian and you're going to persevere towards the goal of seeing Christ face to face.

And actually, that's what you need too if you're here and you're not a believer. And maybe you're here this evening because it's back to church Sunday. Or maybe you're just looking in on the Christian faith.

Or you're here because of the baptism. You get the chance this evening to see this vision of the risen Jesus for yourself. An opportunity for your eyes to be opened to the reality of who Jesus is and what he's done for you.

So we all need a vision of Jesus. That's what we're thinking about this evening. And we've got two headings. They're in the notice sheets if you find that helpful to take notes.

The first heading is hearing. Hearing the revelation of the risen Jesus. That's the first eight verses. Hearing the revelation of the risen Jesus.

[9 : 07] Second heading is seeing. Seeing the portrait of the risen Jesus in verses 9 to 20. So it's an audio-visual vision.

There's a hearing and a seeing component. And let's begin with the audio. Hearing the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. So Revelation.

The last book in the Bible. A book with a bit of a bad rep. Sometimes a book with a rep for being a bit difficult or confusing.

Or even just a little bit wacky. With all sorts of strange images and stuff like that going on. Maybe you're somebody who's avoided the book of Revelation up to now because of those reasons.

These first eight verses help us understand. They help us orientate us to what the book of Revelation is about. What the nature of the book is.

[10 : 07] And why we should listen up. So Revelation is an apocalypse. That's a big word. It basically just means it's a book about revealing things.

It's an apocalypse. Secondly, it's a prophecy. And thirdly, it's a letter. We're going to consider these in turn. Firstly, then, an apocalypse.

Look with me at verse 1 again. The revelation from Jesus Christ. More literally, the apocalypsis of Jesus Christ.

To apocalypse is to unveil, to uncover, to pull back the curtains on something previously hidden. It's the unveiling of the risen Jesus Christ.

Jesus is both the source and the content of the revelation. This book unveils Jesus. Now, if you've been about church any length of time, you'll have seen Jesus in the flesh through the lens of the Gospels around Galilee and Jerusalem.

[11 : 19] And now you get to see him as he is today. Resurrected from the dead. Ascended. Glorified. And in the throne room of his father.

Maybe this is new to you. Maybe you've not thought about Jesus in this way before. In contrast to its reputation, revelation is written not to obscure, but to reveal.

It discloses rather than conceals its message. God pulls back the curtain and invites John to look and see the reality behind the reality and see things from a heavenly perspective, from the vantage point of heaven itself.

And see things like that. You could think of it like watching a news report of what's happening on earth from a heavenly perspective as reported from heaven.

In Revelation comes, verse 1, in order to show his servants something. His servants. Not just experts or theologians or PhD buffs.

[12 : 34] His servants. That means you, if you're a follower of Jesus. This book's for you. You might not understand every last detail.

I certainly don't. But you can get the main message that God rules over history and is bringing all things to completion in Jesus Christ. One pastor tells of a 12-year-old boy who came up to him and said he'd been reading Revelation.

The pastor said, did you understand it? The boy said, yes. I read it like I read the Lord of the Rings, except I know it's true. The pastor thought, that's exactly it. Another story I heard was a group of theology students noticed a janitor in the corridor reading the Bible.

They asked him, what bit of the Bible are you reading? Revelation, he said. The students thought they'd help the poor soul understand it. Do you understand what you're reading? Yes, he said.

Astonished, they asked him, what does it mean? The janitor replied, Jesus is going to win. That's what it means. Revelation's not written to confuse us or frighten us.

[13 : 45] It's written to give servants of Christ in the first century and every century since confidence that Christ is going to win, that Christ is going to return.

And it's to give confidence to us in what God's doing to bring about his intended purposes for creation. God's chosen to reveal his perspective to us so that we can be faithful to him in a world that's rejected him.

Revelation is an apocalypse, an unveiling, but it's also, secondly, a prophecy. Look at verse 3. Blessed is the one who reads aloud this prophecy.

It is a word from God that shows the past, the present, the future. Did you notice the certainty in verse 1? It's not a prediction about a possibility.

It's about what must soon take place. And then the urgency in verse 3. The time is near. And so do you see how crucially important this prophecy is?

[14 : 56] It comes to you from God himself through a chain of people in verses 1 to 2. God gave the revelation to Jesus who made it known by sending his angel to his servant John who wrote it down to give to God's servants, Christians like us down through the centuries.

Do you see how important this prophecy is, the lengths that God went to to get it to you? It's an apocalypse, an unveiling. It's a prophecy, a word of God. And it's an apocalyptic prophecy, thirdly, in the form of a letter.

In chapters 2 to 3 of Revelation are contained letters addressed to each of the seven churches listed here. And we'll be looking at these over the next few weeks.

But Revelation doesn't simply contain letters. It is one big letter. So verse 4, John to the seven churches in the province of Asia.

Well, that's standard first century AD letter form. Also first, then recipient. John to the churches in Asia.

[16 : 08] So John's delivering revelation in the form of a circular letter to these seven churches. And he's emphasizing, if you look on to verse 9, his solidarity with them.

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and the kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Christ. United to them in Christ.

He partners with them in all their trials and tribulations. And encourages them to patiently endure with him the scorn of the world.

So John's in exile, imprisoned on the island of Patmos, a penal colony. Suffering because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Jesus was so real and so precious to John that he'd rather be exiled in a barren island than not to talk about Jesus. But we're not facing imprisonment here in the West, at least not yet, for talking about Jesus.

[17 : 20] But it's worth asking ourselves, isn't it? Is he so real to you that you're willing to look foolish? Willing to risk your reputation to speak up about your faith in Jesus?

Is to look for opportunities to share the gospel with those around you? The churches John was writing to in the first instance were facing serious, significant opposition to their faith.

And John gets what they're going through. He gets that they need to grasp the spiritual reality behind the reality. The cosmic battle that's going on behind the scenes.

Why these seven churches? Well, the number seven is super important in the book of Revelation. It's a number of completion. So the seven churches here, each with their own different problems and challenges and triumphs, are representative of the church as a whole in every generation.

[18 : 30] John's saying his letters written down to the church as a whole to Christians down through the centuries. To encourage us to persevere, to be faithful unto death in the face of opposition to the Christian faith.

And our realizing this about Revelation, our realizing that it's a letter written for that purpose, helps us see that Revelation isn't about puzzling speculation, but practical exhortation in the midst of trial and temptation.

It matters for us now that we have this book. It's not about us second-guessing the timings of future stuff. It's to encourage you to live faithfully now, in the here and now for Christ.

So that's what Revelation is. It's an apocalypse of Jesus, an urgent prophecy, and a letter to encourage us to persevere in our faith. That's what it is. Why should we listen and take it to heart?

Well, let's note just a couple of things. Firstly, it's God's word to you, and so therefore we should listen. We've thought about this a little bit already, but just note John's description of God in his greeting in verses 4 to 5.

[19 : 54] Grace and peace from the Father, the one who is and who was and who is to come. Grace and peace from the Holy Spirit, described here as the seven spirits before the throne.

Grace and peace from the Son, Jesus Christ, who's given here three names. He is the faithful witness. So you can trust him to be speaking the truth about your life, about the world, about the future.

He's a faithful witness. He's the firstborn from the dead. He's the first human who's risen from the dead to eternal life. He's the first human who's been risen from the dead to eternal life.

He won't be the last. And thirdly, he's the ruler of the kings of the earth. Sometimes it feels to us, doesn't it, that the governments and media and cultural elites have all the power.

Well, they don't. Jesus is ruling over them, even as we speak. So you hear and heed this revelation because you are addressed by God.

[21 : 15] Secondly, we need to listen up because it concerns your eternal future. Verse 6. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

It's a message about Jesus who died for you to free you from the slavery to sin. If you're not yet trusting in the Lord Jesus for your salvation, then let me encourage you to investigate for yourselves the claims of the Christian faith.

Why not come along, as Jamie suggested, to the life course in a few weeks. It's a great place to explore the Christian faith further. It's simply too much at stake just to dismiss it.

Because we're told in verse 7 that Jesus is coming back. Look, he's coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the people on earth will mourn because of him.

So shall it be. Amen. Amen. This verse is telling us that just as sure as Jesus came in the first place, he's coming back. This is very good news for those who trust in him.

[22 : 33] And very bad news indeed for those who don't. So you need to be sure that when he returns, you're on the right side. So that's what revelation is.

That's why we need to hear it. Now we're going to turn to our second heading and survey the portrait of the risen Christ. In verses 9 to 20.

One theologian puts it like this. Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book.

Not about us puzzling it out. It's about us getting captivated by its imagery. Getting a sense of the big picture becoming engrossed in the overall story.

Someone said it's more like studying an impressionist painting. You look too closely and you might lose sight of a big picture. Revelations are picture book full of textual sketches, pictures written in words.

[23 : 39] When I arrived in Glasgow to study architecture at the School of Art here, instead of being given a textbook on architecture, to my surprise, the first thing they were given to read was The Little Prince.

A children's book. A picture book. A children's book.

Because grown-ups need to have everything explained to them. We were given this book to recover as adults some of the wonder of a childlike imagination.

And revelations are a bit like that, I think. In church, we're so used to reading Paul's letters and tracing and unraveling the logic of a rational argument that we're not used to a picture book like Revelation.

We need our imagination stirred. We need to engage our imaginations. And when God pulls back the curtain inviting you to see the reality that you most need to see, the first thing we're shown front and center is this vision of Jesus.

[25 : 13] We're told about how this came about in verses 10 to 11. John describes having a profound experience. A bit like some of the Old Testament prophets.

On the Lord's day, I was in the Spirit. And I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet. We're to understand that John was taken up by the Holy Spirit in a kind of a trance-like state by the Spirit to receive this revelation from God.

And he hears this loud trumpeting voice telling him to write what you see. Write what you see. That's easier said than done, isn't it?

It's one thing to write what you hear. It's quite another thing to write what you see. Especially if you've seen the kind of things that John was shown. But that's what he was commissioned to do. Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches. John gets the vision. We get the book.

[26 : 25] The primary way for us today to gaze on Christ is through his word in Scripture. So let's focus your gaze on Jesus.

And let's look at what John saw of Jesus when the risen Christ came and revealed himself to him. And please, Lord God, may we all here who are gathered this evening share in something of that same experience.

Verse 12. John turns to see who the trumpet-like voice belongs to. And what he sees are seven golden lampstands and Christ in the middle of them.

And we don't have to guess. Verse 20 gives us an interpretation. The mystery of the seven golden lampstands is this. The seven lampstands are the seven churches. The lampstands symbolize the churches in their light-bearing capacity to witness the light of the gospel in a darkened world.

So the vision of Jesus that John gets is Jesus in there in the midst of it among the churches. And what's so amazing when we think of it is this.

[27 : 38] It's as true now as it was then. Christ is in the midst of his churches today by his Spirit, where two or three are gathered moving among the lampstands.

Since Silas is one of those lampstands, Jesus is here this evening. Jesus is with us this evening attending to his lampstand, breathing life into flickering flames.

He wants us to bask in the light of his own countenance. So he beckons us to engage our imaginations and look at what John saw. Read along with me from verse 13.

Among the lampstands, someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe, reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. He's resplendent in these royal priestly garments, befitting his exalted status.

Verse 14. The hair on his head is white like wool, dazzling white as snow. White hair is not literal, but symbolizing Christ's divine wisdom.

[28 : 51] And his eyes are like blazing fire. Just imagine that, looking into eyes that are like blazing fire. Just imagine what it must have been like for John to look into this burning glade.

Eyes aflame, penetrating his very soul, exposing all his innermost thoughts, exposing all that's within. Jesus doesn't just look at us. He looks into us and sees us in our innermost core, in all our innermost thoughts.

And there's more. Verse 15. Even his feet are glowing. His feet are like burnished bronze glowing in a refining furnace.

Pure, gleaming boots of victory. And his voice. Like the sound of rushing waters.

This voice John heard speaking to him, thundered with all its deafening power of a mighty waterfall, drowning out all other sounds. And the voice of the glorified Jesus is unavoidable.

[29 : 58] He cannot be ignored. And he's speaking here this evening to us. And when he speaks, you listen. Listen. Listen. Because his word is incisive.

It's deeply penetrating. Verse 16b. Coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. The sword's a metaphor for judgment.

It's two-edged. It cuts both ways. Jesus' word proclaims eternal salvation for the believer and judgment for the unbeliever. And then the last thing John describes is Jesus' face.

Verse 16. End of verse 16. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. This is the face we long to see.

The radiance we long to bask in for all eternity. So before we close by considering our response to this vision, let me make just three quick observations about it.

[31 : 08] Observation one. The radiance of the vision is dazzling. You need your sunnies on, don't you? You need your sunglasses because everything about the description is brilliant, dazzling, glowing, blindingly radiant.

Is there anything that exceeds or excels this amazing description of the risen, ascended Christ walking in the midst of the lampstands?

This is a glorious vision. Observation two. And this may be stating the obvious, but it's not a literal description.

This portrait of Jesus isn't photorealistic. It's symbolic. And don't hear me wrong when I say what he's describing isn't literal.

I don't mean that it's any less real. John's challenge in writing what he saw literally out of this world was finding the words to describe it.

[32 : 10] That's why we see the word like repeated. It's like this. It's like that. It's like. It's like. He's struggling to find the words.

It's not so much that he's showing us what Jesus looks like. He's showing us what Jesus is like.

A symbolic portrait of Jesus. Side observation. The description draws heavily on the Old Testament.

It draws heavily on Old Testament imagery. There's a table in the notice sheet that shows some of the Old Testament imagery that John draws on.

I was a little bit optimistic with thinking how much we'd be able to get through tonight. We're not actually going to have time to look at any of it in detail. But it's worth checking out these references at home or in your growth groups.

[33 : 07] You can do that. As you do that, if you come to Daniel, there's two figures in Daniel. The figure of the Ancient of Days. He refers to God the Father.

And the Son of Man, which is a reference to the Messiah. We'll have a look at how the attributes that relate to the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man are designated here in John's revelation both to Christ.

But the point is the Old Testament provides vocabulary, a grammar, the imagery that John uses to communicate and convey this extraordinary vision, these extraordinary things that he saw, in a way that's intelligible to his readers.

By the way, that goes for the whole of Revelation. Almost all the pictures we find in Revelation draw on Old Testament imagery. When you come to one of the bits in Revelation that we find weird or wacky or confusing, we should know in writing down what he saw, John's not plucking these images out of nowhere.

He's not whacked out in an allergic reaction to a local anesthetic or something like that. There's an Old Testament frame of reference that we can access and check out for ourselves.

[34 : 30] But how do we respond to such a glorious vision? How did John respond? We're told in verse 17 he was overwhelmed.

He was undone. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. That's the only appropriate response to seeing Jesus as he truly is, is to fall in worship at his feet.

That's what you need to do. And so John's lying there sprawled out on his knees. And then something amazing happens.

Jesus reaches out and touches them with the same right hand that held the seven stars. And Jesus places his right hand on him and he says, Do not fear.

That's what Jesus does. When gazing on the glory of Jesus and conscious of our own worthlessness, of our own sinfulness, you fall down in humility and repentance and worship and place your trust in him alone for salvation.

[35 : 45] He makes a move towards you. He tells you, you don't need to be afraid. Not anymore. I've got this. I am the first and the last.

I am the living one. I was dead and now, look, I'm alive forever and ever and I hold the keys to death and Hades. We're not to be afraid of anything anymore.

We can surrender ourselves fully to him. Confident that Jesus not only holds the keys in his hands to death and Hades, he holds us in his hands as well.

Well, you need a vision if you're going to progress towards a goal. That's what Basil Spence needed to build the cathedral from the rubble. And right at the very end of the book of Revelation, God shows us the new heavens and the new earth.

His design to renovate the eternal home he intends to share with his people. Central to that vision, we're told, central to that vision, one day we will behold Jesus face to face in glory.

[36 : 57] This evening in Revelation chapter 1, we've had just a glimpse, just a glimpse of what that will be like.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Let's speak to God. Lord Jesus, we need this revelation of who you are to do more than simply satisfy our curiosity.

We need this revelation to move us, to transform us. So day by day, as we gaze at your glory, would you transform us by your spirit into your likeness.

And uphold our faith in the days ahead until the end. Amen.