

## God's Planned Future

### (2) Revelation 1-3

Usually, the first book of the Bible that comes into a believer's mind when thinking about end time events is the Revelation. Revelation is an exciting book written for God's people, especially for those who want to see how everything turns out in the end. Revelation tells us that in the end, Jesus Christ is victorious over all His enemies. Therefore, all believers in Christ are also winners. Satan and sin lose! Christ is victorious! The wicked are judged, and sin is eradicated, never to rear its ugly head again. **Hallelujah!**

We learn these wonderful truths as we read Revelation literally, which is how God intended it to be read by the first century churches.

Stepping back in time, we see that eschatology was part of the normal New Testament teaching program in churches. Paul often reminded believers of Christ's return and the surrounding events, and he did this with great certainty, as we read in 2 Thessalonians 2:1,5. *Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him... remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?* Therefore, eschatology should never be avoided, nor should it be down-played or overlooked as of secondary importance. Proving this to be true, God concluded His written Word with a remarkably detailed and

easy to understand Revelation of His Son's future calendar details (Rev 1:1).

Revelation is the only book in the Bible that begins and ends with a blessing for the reader. *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* (Rev 1:3). *Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book* (Rev 22:7). *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* (Rev 22:14). *Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near* (Rev 22:10).

Revelation should be an open book, read publicly, and discussed openly by God's people. God never intended for us to keep it to ourselves. We are not to avoid Revelation, nor should we ignore it or change any part of it. Revelation brings great blessing to its readers as they study and obey it. Happiness, security, and resolute hope in Christ for the future come from believing the Revelation. Faith will be strengthened, and love for Christ will be deepened.

The challenge for us today, is allowing Revelation to speak for itself without us adding our preconceived 21<sup>st</sup> century ideas into it. When the apostle John recorded the Revelation on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1:9), it was clear in

his mind why he was writing it down, who the recipients were to be, and how they would understand it. This was because he personally knew the readers, he knew the churches, he spoke their language, and he lived in their culture.

Revelation 1:4 tells us that John wrote to 7 actual churches in the geographical area of Asia (Modern day Turkey). In verse 11, Jesus told John to *write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and to Laodicea.* John's written Revelation from Jesus was not mystical, it was not a secret, and it was intended to be understood by the readers in these 7 churches. These 7 churches were literal congregations of real Christians. These 7 churches are not symbolic of future periods of time, and they are not allegorical or representative of a spiritual reality which we cannot be certain of.

For this short series, we shall consider the Revelation in a summary format, pausing at times to observe how other Scriptures fit into the context. We shall always look for divine clarity and not mysticism.

Revelation chapter 1 is critical to our understanding of the entire Revelation. It sets before the reader the divine authority, the biblical context, and the method of understanding, that is, the method of interpretation as intended by Jesus Christ.

### **The authority**

Revelation 1:1a *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.*

First and foremost, this reveals Jesus Christ. Jesus, speaking to John, testified of Himself, *I am the first and the last,*<sup>18</sup> *and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades* (Rev 1:17-18). Throughout this final Revelation of Scripture, Jesus presents Himself as sovereign Lord. He is the eternal one who conquered death by rising from the grave. He was before the beginning, and He shall remain after the end of this world. He is supreme ruler over death and hades with all creatures answering to Him. Matthew 28:18, *Jesus said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

The Lord Jesus Christ bows before no-one other than God the Father who He is coequal with (Php 2:6). So, as Jesus

reveals Himself to John, it needs to be understood that there is no higher authority. As the Eternal One who intrinsically possesses all power and all knowledge, He can communicate truths which are understandable. Jesus does NOT need our help in saying what He means. We must simply believe what He says.

Therefore, there is no need to change the meaning of Jesus' words. No reinterpretation is required. Jesus says what He means, and He means what He says. As the ultimate authority, Jesus wraps up Scripture and this final Revelation with the words... *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,*<sup>19</sup> *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.*<sup>20</sup> *He who testifies to these things says, Surely I am coming soon.* (Rev 22:18-20).

### **The Context**

Revelation 1:1b-2 *He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,*<sup>2</sup> *who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.*

This Revelation of Jesus was given to Jesus from God the Father and delivered to John by an angel. The purpose for this Revelation was to show God's servants the actual events which He is going to cause to take place through His Son Jesus (Future).

This entire Revelation is primarily about disclosing Jesus Christ and His plans for humanity. God wants people to know who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing. God didn't want the readers of Revelation to know the Jesus of world religion, but the Jesus who God says is ruler, and the Jesus who explains Himself with understandable words. God's point is this, if you want to know Jesus Christ, the Revelation is a great place to start reading.

Of significance, is that John recorded this revelation in approximately A.D. 96. This was about 67 years after the Holy Spirit's initiation of the Church in Acts 2, and about 36 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. It's important to note that this Revelation was delivered AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem, meaning, the descriptions of future events shown to John could NOT be referring to the past destruction of Jerusalem. A simple fact, but critically important.

John received this revelation *on the Lord's day* (Rev 1:10), which is a Sunday. John was about 90 years of age and was close to the end of his earthly life having been exiled as a prisoner to the Island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). This was Rome's response to John being a preacher of God's Word and Jesus Christ (Rev 1:9). Patmos was not a peaceful place where John would finish his life in relaxation. Patmos was about 12Km long and 10Km wide, rocky and with little to no vegetation. It was a small Roman penal colony which had a temple for the worship of the goddess Artemis.

There was little to no earthly comfort for John there. Yet, as we see many times in Scripture, in the harsh environment of the world, Jesus Christ reveals Himself. John wrote down the Revelation and had it delivered to the 7 literal churches in Asia Minor. *To Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea* (Rev 1:11).

### **The method of understanding**

Key to understanding the straightforward meaning of Revelation is chapter 1 verse 19. *Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.*

Revelation is written with a contextual flow that is to be understood chronologically and literally. The entire Revelation is progressive in the way it unfolds and moves

forward. It is sequential in that it begins with that which was John's past (Rev 1), it then speaks of John's present time (Rev 2-3), and then it looks to John's future (Rev 4-22). The text of Revelation has a forward movement of truth with self-explanation. It is not muddled, it is not confused, and it is not fuzzy or vague.

Like all well written books, Revelation uses various grammatical styles, including parenthetical sections, which are qualifying or explaining sections. For the purpose of this series, I shall call these parenthetical sections "**Textual Interludes.**" In 4 places within the Revelation John pauses his storyline to add detail to the context before moving on with the next progressive vision of the Revelation. Even today, many of us do this when telling a story. Part way through the story we pause, we add more information to the things we have just been explaining, then we continue telling the story.

### **Textual Interludes:**

- #1** Rev 7:1-17
- #2** Rev 10:1-11:14
- #3** Rev 11:19-14:20
- #4** Rev 17:1-18:24

(We shall cover these in greater detail later in the series).

You will notice that in Revelation chapter 1, John uses the word “*like*” 7 times in verses 13-16. This is because human language failed to explain or express with sufficient accuracy what John saw, so he writes an understandable parallel, forming a picture in our minds to help us. This style of writing uses a metaphor to help the reader understand the meaning. This is not allegory or spiritualizing the text. John is simply making a parallel with words for the purpose of clarity.

An example of this is the 7 Stars of Revelation 1:16, *in his right hand he held seven stars*. Then in verse 20, John explains that *the seven stars are the angels* (messengers) *of the seven churches*.

The word for *angels* in the original Greek language is *aggelos*, which means messenger, especially an angel. Whether these messengers were angelic, or human, makes little difference, they remain the messengers who delivered this written Revelation to the 7 churches of Asia Minor.

## **Revelation 2 and 3**

Now that the foundation for the Revelation has been laid in chapter 1, Jesus moves on to send His messages to each of the 7 churches in Asia Minor which existed in John’s time.

*To Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea* (Rev 1:11). For each church Jesus had a specific message which was applicable to them.

While there are lessons from each church which could be applied to almost any church that has ever existed, these messages were personal to the congregations John knew. Likewise, churches of all ages could easily be found to have similar qualities as these churches, both good and bad. These 7 churches could easily represent the different types of churches which can be found in any age; therefore, the lessons remain relevant for us today.

**To the church in Ephesus**

Rev 2:1-7

**The loveless church**

**Complaint from Jesus**

The Ephesian church worked hard for the Lord, and they were patient in their perseverance of faith. They did not tolerate false teaching or evil behaviour by those who claimed to be apostles but were proven to be false. These believers endured difficulties and being attacked for the name of Jesus Christ, and they did this without growing tired. Spiritual fatigue was not for them, they stood their ground for Christ without getting blown over in their faith.

Sadly though, while giving their energies to fighting for the truth, they failed in one major area of Christian life. Jesus

confronts them with it, *you have abandoned the love you had at first* (Rev 2:4). Passion for Christ had faded until it could not be found. Affectionate and compassionate love for their Lord and Saviour was nothing more than a memory.

In the end, this church was known as the loveless church. What a sad tragedy, when God's people lose their love. The cost of being loveless attracted a stern warning from Jesus. *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent* (Rev 2:5).

**\* The church in Smyrna**

Rev 2:8-11

**The church willing to suffer**

**No complaint from Jesus**

This is the shortest of all the letters with only 4 verses. Smyrna is the 1<sup>st</sup> of only 2 churches that Christ has no complaint against, the other being the church of Philadelphia. In fact, Revelation chapters 1 and 2 are the only times this church is spoken of in the New Testament.

These believers understood what faithfulness to Christ really looked like, and they lived it. Their love for Christ expressed itself through everything they did, so that when persecution arrived, they stood firm in Christ. Faithfulness is

loyalty to the One who saved you from an eternity of something far worse than what you are presently having to endure (Hell).

The church in Smyrna had tribulation, they suffered imprisonment and even death, they lived in poverty, and they were accustomed to being slandered by those who were energised by Satan. Yet Jesus tells them that in His eyes they were truly rich (Rev 2:9). This was a pure church, and Jesus' reward for them was to give them *the crown of life*. As those who conquer sin and persecution, their eternal reward was to be that they would *not be hurt by the second death* (Rev 2:11; 20:14).

**The church in Pergamum**

Rev 2:12-17

**The worldly church**

**Complaint from Jesus**

Although being a centre of worship for 4 deities (Athena, Asklepios, Dionysos, and Zeus), the city of Pergamum was devoted to the cult of Roman emperor worship.

Consequently, Christians were endangered here more than anywhere else. Jesus acknowledged that Pergamum was *where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful*

*witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells* (Rev 2:13).

However, the Lord knew that some held to the false *teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality* (Rev 2:14). *So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans* (Rev 2:15. Cf. 2:6).

These false teachings focused on compromise which blended pagan life-style with Christianity. That's what made it so attractive to people. You could carry on with your old non-Christian sinful behaviour while calling yourself a Christian. You could feel good about your sin while pretending to be a Christian. The goal was to allow the pleasure of sin without the pain of a guilty conscience. Jesus' response was righteous in gospel appeal, *repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth* (Rev 2:16).

## The church in Thyatira

Rev 2:18-29

## The sin tolerant church

## Complaint from Jesus

Thyatira was well known for its 'Guilds' (Unions), which incorporated idol worship with feasts and festival celebrations, which were nothing short of demonic orgies. Thyatira mainly worshipped the Greek sun god Apollo.

As is often the case, a spiritually sick church may have some good parts to it. And this was true of the church in Thyatira. They had some good *works*, they had some *love, faith, service, and patient endurance*, and they did more good works now than in the beginning (Rev 2:19). This was a saved church, without doubt. But they had a terrible weakness that they knew of but would not do anything about.

Jesus tells them plainly, *you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols* (Rev 2:20). Toleration of serious sin was a major compromise of their righteousness, and they had become comfortable with it.

Jesus had graciously given *Jezebel* time to repent of her immorality (Rev 2:21), but she refused. Consequently,

sickness, great tribulation, and the death of some of their children would be Jesus' judgement on them (Rev 2:22-23a). Their judgment was to be a testimony to the other churches of Jesus sovereign and purifying engagement with His churches (Rev 2:23b).

To the faithful believers in the Thyatira church, Jesus exhorts them to *hold fast what you have until I come* (Rev 2:25). It's important for faithful believers to keep their eyes fixed on the Lord so they do not become discouraged by the compromised living of people who tolerate serious sin.

### **The church in Sardis**

Rev 3:1-6

### **The dead church**

Complaint from Jesus

The city of Sardis had a church that appeared, from the outside, to be lovely. They put much effort into their external appearance but totally neglected their internal heart condition before holy God. While they had a reputation for being vibrant and appealing, Jesus could see the rotting stench of their sin.

Jesus' all-seeing and all-knowing presence finally caught up with them and spoke out against them. *I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead* (Rev 3:1). Jesus' warning came to them with a gospel command to *wake up*, remember the truth taught to you in the past, and *repent* of your sin (Rev 3:3). Jesus warned them that *if you will not wake up, I will come like a thief,*

*and you will not know at what hour I will come against you* (Rev 3:3). Unrepented sin attracts the Lord's judgement, and He gives no warning of when it will arrive.

However, despite being spiritually dead overall, there were a few genuine believers nestled amongst the corpses (Rev 3:4). Jesus' words of comfort and assurance would have inspired perseverance and faithfulness. Revelation 3:5, *the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.*

These few loyal believers need the comforting words of their Lord to give the assurance of salvation needed to survive in such an evil and hostile church environment.

**\* The church in Philadelphia**      Rev 3:7-13

**The faithful Church**      No complaint from Jesus

Jesus affirms His love for this wonderful church even though they were not impressive by human standards. These believers had something far greater than any earthly resources. Jesus praised them in Revelation 3:8, *you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

Many in this church would have admitted that they were weak people, yet they remained faithful to the cause of

Jesus Christ. Jesus' reward for them was amazing, *since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.* (Rev. 3:10).

The definitive wording of Jesus' reward tells us that there is a literal time of trial and testing coming upon the entire world in the future. The fact that the church will be kept from going through that trial means that the trial is not theoretical or symbolic. It also means that Jesus was NOT speaking of a past event from history, namely the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

This church of Philadelphia was not faithful because their lives were comfortable or easy. No, these believers were acquainted with strong opposition. Philadelphia had people *of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie* (Rev 3:9). This church was surrounded by false religious teaching by people who put an unhealthy emphasis on their Jewish heritage. This was energised by Satan, who used these people to attack the true church.

The church of Philadelphia endured their difficulties with great perseverance. Therefore, Jesus promised to spare them from the coming 7 year Tribulation which John begins

recording in Revelation 6:1. Jesus further affirms His love for them by reminding them that *I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown* (Rev 3:11). Their reward for conquering Satan's attacks would be great and it would be eternal.

**The church in Laodicea**

Rev 3:14-22

**The half-hearted church**

Complaint from Jesus

Finally, the Laodicean church pictures a common problem within churches of any age. They were half-hearted and lukewarm in their affections and living for Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus tells these believers that, *I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot* (Rev 3:15). They could not hide or disguise their serious lack of zeal for the Lord. They did not have the depth of conviction to inspire hot passionate service for Christ. Nor were they so cold or indifferent to the Lord that they could abandon Christ altogether.

They had a seriously wrong emphasis on acquiring worldly possessions, worldly comfort, and worldly popularity. Jesus' confrontation with this church was severe and to the point. Jesus quotes them arrogantly saying, *I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked* (Rev 3:17). This

church had focused on all the wrong things. Their treasures were earthly, corruptible, and fleshly (Luk 12:29-34). They really did think that they were self-sufficient, determining their own status in life and their own future. How wrong they were!

The world would have looked at the Laodicean church and thought that it was a great place with a great bunch of nice people who had succeeded in life. **But they were wrong!** This church was a failure in Christ's eyes. Yes, they were saved, they were the body of Christ, and they did have eternal life, but they were unholy, powerless, and had no desire for Christlikeness.

To the Laodicean church, Jesus applies the teaching of Hebrews 12:5-6, *my son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.* <sup>6</sup> *For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.*

In their pursuit of self-gratification this church had seduced themselves by developing self-deception (Jer 17:9). This was based on an inaccurate self-assessment, a false sense of self-security, and prideful self-importance. They had exchanged the truth of Christ for the error of self. They

were rich in pride and bankrupt of humility. They had forgotten Matthew 5:3, *blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus tells the Laodicean church that *those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent* (Rev 3:19). Jesus was commanding them to repent of their half-hearted and lukewarm attitude towards Christ. Repent of their worldly, earthly affections. Repent of their attitude which did not care about Christ with any depth of sacrificial love or obedience.

### **Moving forward in Revelation**

As John concludes the 7 letters to the 7 churches, he issues Jesus' repeated invitation for the 4<sup>th</sup> time. Revelation 3:22, *he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

It is always Christ's desire for belligerent believers and compromised churches to *lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,* <sup>2</sup> *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God* (Heb 12:1-2).

Sanctification requires self-inspection, an examination of spiritual fruit, or the lack of it. Both Jesus and John understood this as they prepared to start mapping out God's designed future for this world and His church.

The eschatological landscape which they were about to deliver was so broad and divinely inspired that God's people needed to have clean hearts and sharp minds. As the Revelation unfolds before the readers, they shall view staggering heavenly and earthly scenes from God's perspective which will stretch them past natural thought or imagination. Faith shall be the only lens through which they will be able to see, understand, and accept, the predestined future God has willed for this world.