

The Apocalypse

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It's good to see you. It's great to worship with you. If you have a Bible, please open it to Revelation. And if you don't have a Bible, please raise your hand.

We'd love to give you one that you can have and you can use while you're here. We most recently finished a full sermon series in the book of Exodus, and we took a short break for a month in the summer to go to the Psalms of Lament.

And we're now starting a new series in the New Testament book, the last book of the Bible, Revelation. So it's easy to find. Just flip to the very end and go back a few pages.

Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's Word. Father, we praise you because you are not a deaf or a mute God, but you are a God who hears, and you are a God who speaks.

And you are a God who reveals your will, your plan, your Christ, your salvation.

[1 : 14] So speak to us this morning from these first few verses of the book of Revelation.

Reorient us so that the way we perceive the world and the way we live in this world is adjusted to, oriented around what you say is true, what you say is real, and what you say is good.

Give us that heavenly perspective, an eternal perspective. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

Please stand, if you're able, for the reading of God's Word from Revelation 1, verses 1 to 3.

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, who bore witness to the Word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

[2 : 43] 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.

This is God's holy and authoritative Word. Please be seated. When I was in high school, there was a best-selling series of novels inspired by the book of Revelation entitled *Left Behind*, written by Tim Leary and Jerry B. Jenkins.

Have any of you guys read that or heard of that? Okay, still a good number of you. I read through the entire series in high school, all 12 books in the series. At the time, I've heard that they've added more since then. It's a throwback whenever I visit my parents' house, because I can see all the books on the shelves.

And the series has sold 65 million copies. Three of the books have reached number one on the New York Times bestseller list. And the books have been adapted into five different films to date, including one featuring none other than Nicolas Cage.

And the most recent one came out this year, I heard, 2023. So it still has a significant following. And at the height of the *Left Behind* phenomenon, a writer for the Washington Post openly wondered, and he's evidently not a believer, this is him wondering, what on earth is going on?

[4 : 07] How do you explain this national hunger for made-up stories about the book of Revelation? Is it because we live in a swerving world of widespread terror, spiritual weirdness, and extreme personal dysfunction?

Are we so scared to death of death that we hope to crack the code of the Bible and uncover secrets of eternal life? Does the book's success merely prove yet again that there are lots of good stories in the Bible?

The premise of the book and the series is that millions of born-again Christians are suddenly taken up to heaven in what the author calls the rapture, leaving those who are left behind to figure out what's going on, to repent of their sins, and to believe in Jesus, and to oppose the Antichrist in the ensuing seven years of tribulation, which is just persecution of believers, before the final judgment at Christ's second coming.

The idea of a rapture like that is actually not even from the book of Revelation. It's based on a misinterpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4.17, which speaks of Christ's second coming, and how believers will be taken up into the cloud to meet Jesus as he descends to earth.

In the same way, you go out of your house, you have your lodging onto the path to meet a foreign dignitary and important person that's coming in order to escort them back to your dwelling. That's the word that's used in 1 Thessalonians 4.17.

[5 : 27] So you're not disappearing with him. Actually, you're greeting him and then bringing, coming down together to earth. That's the idea in 1 Thessalonians 4.17. So there will be a rapture in the sense of the old original meaning of the word, a great delight and ecstasy when Christ comes back, but there's not gonna be a rapture like the kind that the book, the series Left Behind, envisions.

The Left Behind series subscribes to a system of theological beliefs called dispensationalism, which strictly distinguishes between Israel and the church. So they would disagree with the statement, for example, that I've said before from the pulpit that Christ is the new Israel and that we as New Testament believers are a part of that new Israel because we are in Christ.

So dispensationalism would deny that. They teach a literal and chronological understanding of the book of Revelation, which runs into interpretive problems as I'm gonna demonstrate in the coming weeks.

Even though the books were published in the category of fiction, LaHaye and Jenkins did not hide the fact that they actually believe that the events of the end times will be similar to what they wrote in the book.

So the unfortunate effect of that was that while the books did some good in getting people more interested about Jesus and the coming final judgment, it also has done some bad in popularizing erroneous views of the book of Revelation.

[6 : 53] The book of Revelation is not a code book that is intended to help us decipher the news and the world events with the fervor of conspiracy theorists.

For example, a couple years ago, there were people who were claiming that the COVID vaccine is the mark of the beast. Some of you guys are laughing, but a lot of people actually believe this. This is because the reason why they say is because the word corona has six letters. And if you add up the numerical value of all the letters in the word corona, so for example, C would be three because it's the third letter in alpha.

But you add up all the numbers, then you get 66. So there you go, 666, the mark of the beast. So that must be the mark of the beast that the Bible is talking about.

So that's what some people were saying. And so this kind of speculation is rampant. And it changes every generation because it turns out that what they said wasn't true.

[7 : 53] So they find a new thing to latch onto. And it's due to the difficulty of interpreting the book of Revelation and because of how the pictures and the symbols that it employs have captured our imagination, this book, more than any other book of the Bible, has suffered from an inordinate number of creative and sometimes downright bizarre interpretations and applications.

But if we get lost in these speculations and predictions about the end times, we're actually missing the point of the book. Revelation was written to remind us that we are in the midst of a cosmic spiritual war which has eternal consequences.

We live in a polite society that doesn't like to speak of enemies, but we have real spiritual enemies who are out to destroy us.

Our sojourn here on earth is not a sightseeing trip. We are not meant to be tourists, but conquerors, as it says again and again and again throughout the book of Revelation.

And I don't mean that in a military sense, but in a spiritual sense, by resisting Satan and his angels and by being faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ on to death. If you look at chapters 2 to 3, the letters to the seven churches, that's the exhortation.

[9 : 17] And again and again, to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat from the tree of life. To the one who conquers, will not be hurt by the second death. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna.

The one who conquers, who keeps my works until the end. To him, I will give authority over the nations. The one who conquers, who conquers will be clothed with dust in white garments. And I will never blot his name out of the book of life. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the

temple of God.

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on the throne. As I also, Jesus says, conquered and sat down with my father on his throne. The one who conquers, it says at the end of the book, Revelation 21, 7, will have this heritage.

And I will be his God and he will be my son. We are meant to be conquerors, not tourists. We are sojourners and exiles here on earth, not citizens or natives of this kingdom of this world.

Jesus was on, not Jesus, sorry. John was on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the book of Revelation, as it says in chapter one, verse nine. Not because he was on vacation, that's what we do when we go to islands.

[10 : 26] No, but he was there in exile as a political prisoner of Rome because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus that he was proclaiming. God has given us the book of Revelation so that we might be aware of these realities and to be, so that we might be spiritually vigilant.

And my prayer for this sermon series is that it would jolt us out of our complacency as believers.

This sinful world is full of false religions and ideologies that seek to deceive us.

It's also full of pleasures and temptations that seek to seduce us. It's also full of political and economic powers and authorities that seek to persecute and subdue us.

And every day, we are flooded with this sinful world's programming. Every day. And the book of Revelation is God's counter-programming.

You hear from the world that these things are real, that these things are good, that these things are beautiful, but no, here, this is what is actually true. This is what is actually real.

[11 : 34] This is what is actually good. So we're getting a glimpse into God's perfect vantage point. Revelation was also written to a suffering, persecuted church to instill courage and inspire faithfulness even onto death.

to remind them that God is still reigning, that he's still seated on his throne and he's not worried. He's in control.

And that the final victory of God and his Christ is certain. Being persecuted and killed for our faith and our obedience to Jesus might seem like a defeat.

It sure looks like that from a world's perspective. But Revelation tells us that it is, in fact, that is how, in fact, we conquer. Because we're following the pattern of the slain Lamb of God.

So Revelation imparts to us a glorious vision of the glory of God and his Christ so that we might hope and wait for that fulfillment. And it's that hope that is intended to sustain us till the end.

[12 : 40] So with these things in mind, let's now jump straight into the first three verses of Revelation which introduce us to the entire book. And the main point of this passage is this. God has revealed the testimony of Jesus to us so that we might keep his word in these last days.

And in these verses, we're going to learn about the source of the book of Revelation, the subject of the book of Revelation, the style of the book of Revelation, the structure of the book of Revelation, and the situation or setting of the book of Revelation.

First, we learn about the source of the book of Revelation in verse 1. 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. We see a four-step transmission process here. First, from God the Father to Jesus Christ.

Then from Jesus Christ to his angel. And then third, from the angel to John, his servant. And then finally, from John to the rest of God's servants, which includes us.

[13 : 46] People debate which John it is that wrote the book of Revelation. But as early as the second century, Justin Martyr notes in his dialogue with Trifile that John, one of the apostles of Christ, was the author of Revelation.

This is also confirmed by a now lost commentary on Revelation by Melito, bishop of Sardis, dated 165. Sardis is actually one of the churches, the cities where the church is that Revelation 2 and 3 is addressed to.

But that lost commentary by Melito is referenced by church historian Eusebius and that confirms also that this was written by Apostle John. Second century pastor Irenaeus also confirms the same.

So there's a lot of church tradition that confirms that this was written by Apostle John. And common sense also dictates that author is the John that we best know because he wrote here in chapter 1, verses 1 to 3, that he is the servant John.

Who else in the first century is well known enough that he could simply just go by servant John and he expects everybody to know who he is? This is John the apostle who wrote the gospel of John and the epistles of John, 1, 2, and 3 John.

[15:02] So John is the human author, but the ultimate source of the book of Revelation is not man, but God. This is confirmed in verse 3 where John calls his book the words of this prophecy.

2 Peter 1, 20 to 21 says that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but man spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

So all prophecies are from the Holy Spirit of God and prophecies in particular like Revelation that are recorded as scripture are infallible and inerrant.

God has ensured that they are not man's own interpretation and that they are not produced by the will of man. The word of God, the Bible, makes us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is authoritative and binding upon all people in all places at all times and that's what distinguishes prophecy that is scripture from other more situational prophecy that we sometimes encounter in our church.

[16:05] That's not for all people in all places at all times. So it's not authoritative and binding for all but scripture like Revelation is. That's the book of Revelation and indeed the whole of scripture is a revelation is foundational for our faith, for our Christian faith.

The Greek word that has been translated as revelation in verse 1 is apokalypsis from which we get the word apocalypse but the apocalypse in this context doesn't refer to a great disaster or a catastrophe in the way we use the word sometimes but it refers to an unveiling or a disclosing or a revealing of something.

Isn't that amazing? It's not meant to be cryptic. It's not meant to hide stuff from us. Revelation is revealing something to us. Christianity is not a religion that is based on a discovery. something that someone found or figured out. Christianity is a religion that is founded on revelation. Something that God himself revealed or gave to us.

So it's not a man-initiated religion but a God-initiated religion. If the Bible were something that man invented or developed then it would be open to rejection, open to critique and modification and improvement.

[17:30] But since this is something that God revealed the only proper posture for us as we engage with it is humility, acceptance, belief, and submission.

If a random passerby tried to talk to you about the state of our country, the United States of America, I mean, maybe if you're really nice you might indulge him for a few minutes and listen to him but eventually you're going to lose interest because I mean, what do you know?

You're just a random passerby. But if the President of the United States tried to sit you down and say, you know, I'm going to give you a detailed breakdown of the state of our country and the things that are going on, you'd probably pay attention because you'd expect him to know something that's going on.

So if when the creator of the universe, the cosmic ruler and sustainer of the universe, God himself reveals something to us and says, here is something that is real, then we pay attention to that. we listen to that. We obey that. Secondly, John tells us what the subject of the book of Revelation is in verses 1 to 2.

[18:36] He says in verse 1, the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. This is a key recurring phrase throughout Revelation that occurs at major transitional junctures in the book.

For example, 1:19 says, write there for the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 4:1 says, come up here and I will show you what must take place after this.

Again, at the end of the book, 22:6, these words are trustworthy and true, and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.

These phrases are an allusion to Daniel chapter 2, where the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, has a mysterious dream that frightens him, and he wants someone to interpret it for him.

In the dream, he sees a glorious human-like statue that has a head of gold and the arms and chest of silver and the middle and thighs of bronze and the legs of iron and the feet partly of iron, partly of

clay.

[19 : 39] But a stone suddenly appears out of nowhere, and it's obvious that the stone was not caught by human hands, so it's a stone of God's design, divine stone in a way, and that stone destroys the statue.

It breaks the iron legs and the feet, and then it brings all the rest of it crumbling down, and it crushes everything to fine dust, so it blows away like a chaff in the wind, and then that stone becomes a large mountain, it says, a great mountain that fills the whole earth.

So while no other diviner or wise man in Babylon could give the dream its interpretation, prophet Daniel, without Nebuchadnezzar even telling him what the dream is, tells him what the dream was, and then interprets it for him.

The various parts of the statue represent various successive kingdoms that diminish in glory from gold to silver to bronze, and then the fourth kingdom will be a strong kingdom like iron that crushes other things that strike against it, but it will become a divided kingdom so that it becomes partly of brittle clay and partly of strong iron, but eventually God says the God of heaven will, Daniel says one day, God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, and that shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and that kingdom of God shall stand forever just like that stone that became the great mountain.

And after giving that interpretation, Daniel says in Daniel 2.45, God has made known to the king what shall be after this. Same phrase as the recurring phrase that we see in Revelation.

[21 : 17] Revelation 1.9, the things that are to take place after this. John is intentionally using the language of Daniel to indicate that he is writing about the fulfillment of what Daniel prophesied about.

In Daniel 2.28, he tells Nebuchadnezzar that the dream describes what will be in the latter days, but here in Revelation 1.1, Daniel says that these things must soon take place, and in verse 3, that the time is near.

Throughout the book of Daniel, Daniel receives many visions from God and through his angel about the future, but the angel tells Daniel in chapter 8, verse 26, and chapter 12, to seal up the vision until the time of the end, for it refers to many days from now.

So God tells Daniel, here's all these things that are going to happen. He's showing him the vision, and he says, don't tell anybody, seal it up, because it's not for a long time. But then Revelation 22.10, angel tells John, do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. That's an intentional contrast from the book of Daniel. Because for Daniel, the time was far off, but for John, the time is near. In fact, it will soon take place.

[22 : 32] Sometimes we hear words like near and soon, and we hear not yet. That's the emphasis we hear. But actually, the point of those words in Scripture, like near and soon, is to emphasize the already aspect of the kingdom of God.

That's already begun. That's already here. Mark 1.15 is a case in point where Jesus says, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

That's the same word. The kingdom of God is near. The kingdom of God that is near means the time is fulfilled. It's already here. It's not yet fully here.

It's not yet consummated, but it's already inaugurated. So that's the emphasis here. So the time that was not yet for Daniel is now here with John in the book of Revelation.

That's why he has to not seal up the words, but instead reveal it. This has important implications for us for understanding this book. This means that Revelation was not written as a newspaper from the future.

[23 : 36] That would only have relevance for people who live 2,000 or 3,000 years later. Ed will talk about this more next week, but Revelation is written in the form of a letter.

Verse 4 says, John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne. That's an epistolary greeting.

It's what you write in a letter. Likewise, it ends with an epistolary farewell. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. While the book of Revelation was written for us, for our benefit as God's people, and therefore it applies to us and it is relevant to us, we need to note that the book of Revelation wasn't written to us as a letter.

It was written to the early church in the first century, who are the first recipients, the original audience of that book. So any interpretation of the book of Revelation that has all the relevance for us, but zero relevance for them 2,000 years ago is automatically suspect.

It doesn't conform to the actual form of the book of Revelation. From a biblical standpoint, the end times or the last days are already here.

[24 : 57] And they have been here for 2,000 years. In Acts 2, 17, Peter preaches that Joel's prophecy concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the, quote, last days has been fulfilled with Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

So that means since the death and resurrection and the ascent of Jesus to the right hand of the Father and the corresponding descent of the Holy Spirit to earth, to his people, we have been living, people have been living in the end times.

The book of Revelation, therefore, has had end time relevance for all Christians since the time of Christ's first coming and until the time of his second coming.

The hourglass has been turned over. The clock is ticking. The end has already begun. That's why Jesus Christ is the ultimate subject of the book of Revelation.

John says this explicitly in verse 2. What was John bearing witness to that got him, made him a political prisoner and an exile? It says, to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.

[26 : 07] Whether you interpret that as testimony that is from Jesus Christ or you interpret that as testimony that is about Jesus Christ, it's irrelevant because Jesus says plainly in John 8, 14 to 18 that he himself bears testimony or witness about himself.

So whichever way you slice it, what John bore witness to is Jesus. Who Jesus is, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and what he did in his death and resurrection to bring God's redemption and salvation to us. That's what John is bearing testimony and witness about in the book of Revelation. Jesus Christ is the one around whom the ages turn.

Right? We mark human history as either before Christ, B.C. or Anno Domini, A.D., the year of our Lord. Jesus Christ is the one who reverses the tide of death that has engulfed humanity in all of its history by being the first to rise from the dead permanently, permanently, forever.

He's the first fruit of the resurrection. He begins to reverse that tide. Jesus Christ is the ancient of days as we are singing. The Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

[27 : 31] And Jesus Christ is the one who canceled our debt of sin that stood against us by nailing it to the cross. Jesus Christ is the one who disarmed the spiritual rulers, the evil rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them.

Jesus Christ is the one who has been exalted and is seated at the right hand of the Father far above all rule and authority and power. His name is above every name.

The book of Revelation is not about us. And it's not about our time or our place in human history. It's first and foremost about Jesus Christ.

Revelation tells us that Jesus was the true and faithful witness who was faithful unto death. And that's what inspires us to follow him in his footsteps. That's the subject of the book of Revelation.

Third, verses 1 to 2 also give us hints about the style of the book of Revelation. We're told in verse 1 that this is the revelation of Jesus Christ. Remember that word is apocalypse revelation.

[28 : 43] We don't interpret all of scripture literally. I think most of you already know this. Rather, we interpret all scripture literally. According to its natural and plain meaning based on its literary genre.

So, for example, if you're reading the book of Leviticus, which deals with detailed legal stipulations for maintaining covenant holiness, you better not interpret that as just like a, oh, it's just figurative.

People back then didn't have to follow it. No, they really have to follow that. That's the law. You have to interpret that literally first for the original audience and then apply to us through Christ.

But if you're reading the book of Psalms, which is a collection of poetry and songs, you better be alert to figurative language, imagery, and metaphors. Otherwise, you're going to run into trouble.

Psalms 19 verse 10 says that the law of the Lord is sweeter than honey. But I don't think any pastor wants you to go home and start licking your Bibles. Likewise, we need to be aware of Revelation's genre.

[29 : 49] It's an apocalypse. And apocalyptic literature is not primarily rational or propositional, though it has both of those elements. It uses signs and symbols to engage our imaginations.

It's meant to be evocative and provocative. So think of it more as a picture book and less as a textbook. I know you guys are in Cambridge.

You guys all like textbooks. But look at it more like a picture book. A young American girl named Joanne Lancaster once wrote to C.S. Lewis asking for some writing advice.

And Lewis actually wrote back to her on June 26, 1956, and he said this, Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the things you are describing.

I mean, instead of telling us the thing is terrible, describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was delightful. Make us say delightful when we've read the description.

[30 : 47] You see, all those words, horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite, are only like saying to your readers, please, will you do my job for me? The book of Revelation does this well.

It doesn't merely tell us things. It shows us things. The description of Jesus in Revelation 1, 12 to 16 is a case in point. Instead of telling us that Jesus is both king and priest, it tells us that Jesus is clothed with a long robe, priestly robe, and a golden sash around his chest, which is a sign of royalty.

Instead of telling us that Jesus is ancient and wise, verse 14 tells us that the hair of his head wore white like white wool, like snow. It's a picture of wisdom in antiquity.

Instead of telling us that Jesus is a righteous judge who perceives and sees all things, verse 14 shows us that his eyes were like a flame of fire. Instead of telling us Jesus is pure and that he crushes his evil enemies underneath his feet, verse 15 shows us that his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, purified over and over again.

Instead of telling us that Jesus speaks with authority and might, verse 15 shows us that his voice was like the roar of many waters. Think of how mighty that sounds and how grand that sounds.

[32 : 10] Instead of telling us that Jesus is sovereign and that he holds the fate of the righteous in his hands, verse 16 shows us by saying that in his right hand he holds the seven stars. Instead of telling us that Jesus' weapon is no ordinary sword but the word of God with which he pierces souls and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Verse 16 shows us by saying that from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. Instead of telling us that Jesus is glorious, it shows us by saying that his face was like the sun shining in full strength. That's why I encourage you to just read through this book. It will leave you in tears when you read the description of Jesus and you see how glorious he is, how beautiful he is, how good and true and faithful he is.

It gives you a picture of that. That's what it's meant to do. And that's why he says in verse 1 that revelation is intended to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

Notice it says the word show, not tell. It's a verb that is derived from a Greek noun that means sign. Sign. And it literally means to show by sign or symbol.

[33 : 37] To signify something. Yes, it can more generically mean to make something known. But I think in this specific context, I think it refers to showing by sign.

And that's why it says in verse 2 that John bore witness to all that he saw. John saw visions and wrote them down in the book of Revelation so that we too who hear the word can envision it, see it in our mind's eye.

That word saw occurs 52 times with John as its subject. It's a key word. Revelation is a record of what John saw. And that's why we also need to try to see it.

It's a book for seeing. And the book of Revelation often surprises us by telling us that the way things seem to be or appear to be are not always the way things actually are.

And with its signs and symbols, it exposes the true reality of things. For example, the Lamb of God looks slain and defeated. But he is the conquering Lion of Judah.

[34 : 42] And because Revelation is apocalyptic and is full of signs and symbols, a good interpreted rule of thumb, which doesn't apply to other books of the Bible that are not apocalyptic, is that we should assume that John is being figurative rather than literal wherever possible.

To give you a foretaste of this, numbers are highly significant and symbolic in the book of Revelation. For example, the number seven, taken from the seven days in which God completed his creation, represents completeness.

So there are seven churches representing all of his people. And the Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, representing his completeness of his power and the completeness of his knowledge.

That God's judgments upon the sinful world come in series of seven. Seven seals and seven trumpets, seven bowls. Number four is also significant because it signifies universality or cosmic completeness.

For example, when it refers to the earth's four corners or the four winds, it's referring to the whole world coming from the east, east and west and north and south.

[35 : 57] When it uses the fourfold formula, it is referred to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. It's referring to all types of people, people from all kinds of places and backgrounds.

And number 10 is also significant. And its multiples, like thousand, is significant. It signifies the enormity or the immensity of something. So for example, the beast has ten horns to indicate the enormity or the immensity of its persecuting power.

And the saints in Smyrna, their period of tribulation is called, set to last ten days. Not literal ten days, because that's not so bad, ten days. But it refers to an extended period of time.

And one thousand years probably likely also represents a vast number of years. Number 12 is a significant number in the book, because it stands for the people of God.

From the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the Lamb, as we see in chapter 21. The new heavenly Jerusalem, which signifies the people of God, is 12,000 stadia in length and width and height.

[37 : 03] That's 12 times 1,000. It has a perfect dimension to refer to the people of God. And then its walls, the new Jerusalem's walls are 144 cubits long, which is 12 times 12.

And the full number of the redeemed people of God is said to be 144,000. You guys know the math. What's that? 12 times 12 times 1,000.

To refer to all of God's people. So this is what, it's a mistake if you like the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, take that number literally. Because Jehovah's Witnesses think that only 144,000 Christians will be resurrected in heaven, add to heaven as immortal spirits.

It's not meant to be a literal number. It's figurative. As you can see from this sampling, the symbols and pictures that Revelation employs primarily come from the Old Testament.

Revelation contains more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book. It depends on how you count and how explicit the allusion or reference has to be for you to count it.

[38 : 10] But some scholars claim up to 1,000 Old Testament references in the book of Revelation alone. And if that number is high, there's definitely more than several hundreds in the book of Revelation.

So if you want to grasp the book of Revelation, if we want to understand Revelation, we need to be steeped in the characters and the stories and the images and the patterns and the words of the Old Testament.

And so as we study this book together, keep that style of Revelation in view because we're going to try to interpret it according to its genre. Verses 1 to 3 don't tell us that much about the structure of the book of Revelation, but I still need to tell you about it because it's my first sermon in the series, and I want you to have some kind of roadmap as we go through this series.

I already mentioned to you how John emphasizes the importance of seeing in verse 2. Revelation is a series of visions that Jesus gave John through an angel. So tracking those visions is naturally going to provide a helpful outline for us.

And thankfully, John has very clear markers. Chapter 1, verses 1 to 8 is the prologue, and the chapter 22, 6 to 21 is the epilogue, those everybody agree on. And then within the body, there's four main divisions, and each of them begins with John saying something along the lines of, I was in the Spirit.

[39 : 30] He carried me away in the Spirit. So it's the beginning of a new prophetic vision when he was carried away in the Spirit. So if you see that, yeah, so that's the outline we're broadly going to follow.

And there's also kind of the corresponding matching vision. So if you actually take a more detailed look at it, you can also divide the book in a chiasmic way, so that the two halves of Revelation match up and reinforce one another.

And so if you have the next slide for that, it's a little smaller. I hope you can see it. The prologue has words and phrases that match the epilogue.

And it begins with the vision of the imperfect church and then ends with the vision of the perfected church. And then it starts the judgment of Christ upon the sinful world with the throne room vision.

And then it concludes Christ's judgment and ends with the throne room vision. And then it has the seven seals. And then it has the matching seven bowls. And it has 144,000 of God's people. [40 : 35] And then again, it has 144,000 of God's people. And in the middle is the seven trumpets, which includes the three woes, which includes the war of the ages, the final conflict that's depicted between the enemies of God and the people of God.

So it's an elaborate outline. Revelation is structured majestically. I mean, it's got so many ways you can outline it because it has so many parallels and interlocking elements in the book. It's really a magnificent piece of literary work, even apart from the fact it's the word of God. A significant feature of Revelation structure, as you can discern from these outlines, is a series of repetitions that the Bible scholars call recapitulation.

There's a series of recaps throughout the book. And this can create confusion if we're not aware of it. You'll say, well, wait a minute. Didn't this already happen a few chapters ago?

Didn't the wrath of the Lamb already come? Didn't it already say in Revelation 6.14 that every mountain and island was removed from the place? Well, then why does it say again in Revelation 16.32 that every island fled away and no mountains were to be found?

[41 : 49] Where did those islands and mountains come from? All of a sudden, I mean, if they were already removed. So, for example, the three sets of seven judgments, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls, they repeat a pattern of judgment and salvation in a cyclical way.

The seventh seal, the trumpet and bowl, each, the seventh, the last of those, each of them reach a climactic point of universal judgment. But then it begins the next series of judgments.

The seventh seal opens the way to the seven trumpets, and then the seventh trumpet opens the way to the seven bowls of judgment. It's like a Russian doll or like a nesting doll.

Like, you know, like you open one up, and then there's another Russian doll like sitting under it. You open that one up, and then there's another one. It's like a, it's like judgments again and again repeating that pattern. Except that analogy would be perfect if the Russian doll, every time you opened it, actually got bigger.

Because that's what happens in Revelation. It intensifies. And so, so you can see this cyclical aspect clearly in Revelation 11, 14, 18, with the final kind of seven trumpet blows.

[43 : 00] It describes the kingdom of the world becoming the kingdom of our Lord, his Christ. And there's praise and worship to God for his judgment. It describes like, like the end of the world has come.

Like everything's been fulfilled. The judgment and the wrath has all been poured out. And Christ has won. But then, it's not over. The series continues again.

So this is where people try to interpret Revelation in a linear, chronological way run into problems. Revelation is not linear. And not all of it, at least.

And it's more cyclical. But it's not an endless cycle. It's actually a progressive cycle that has a definite end point. My children have been playing recently with a toy called Marble Run.

Have you guys seen that? So it's like a, it's a kinetic toy that basically uses gravity and a series of slides and pulleys to make marbles run all over by itself. And it's really fun to watch once you set it up and you watch it run.

[44 : 05] And there's a section of it, you know, that has a cone. And a marble comes down a slide and then it, boop, it hops off the slide and then it goes into a cone. And then once it lands at the cone, it starts making this wide loop in circles.

At first, it seems a little slow because it's making a wide loop. And then it gradually speeds up. And then again and again and again. As it gets closer to the middle, it spins really fast until it drops down and sinks down to the next phase of the marble run.

And that's actually a really great picture of the way this progressive cycle works. The cycle of judgment and salvation getting closer, closer, closer, faster, faster, more and more intense, intense until the coming of Christ, the second coming of Christ.

It's like a conical spiral. And the effect of the structure is powerful. And I'll quote Bible commentator Gregory K. Beale here because I can't improve on his wording.

He says, one overall figurative effect of this repeated complex patterning is that the reader is left with the impression of God's all-encompassing will being like an elaborate spider web in which Satan and his forces are caught.

[45 : 15] Though they attempt to free themselves from divine sovereignty, they cannot escape. Ultimate defeat. The repetition of the numbers and the repeated series of numbers highlight the idea that nothing is haphazard or accidental.

The analogy of a chess game is also appropriate. The sacrificial move of Christ at the cross puts the devil in checkmate, deals the devil a mortal wound so that his defeat is inescapable. Nevertheless, the devil continues to play the game of rebelling in which he struggles to avoid final defeat. Isn't that amazing? Oh, I love this book.

This is a good place to mention the four main interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation. I'm sorry this is a little bit dense, this sermon. It's not always going to be this dense as we go through Revelation.

It's the first one. So give me a little bit of a break here. You guys are doing great though. And the four main interpretive approaches are preterists, historicists, and futurists, and idealists.

[46 : 20] Preterists think that the vast majority of Revelation was already fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. So they interpret most of Revelation to apply only to Israel, the nation, and not to God's people in general.

And historicists think that most Revelation has been fulfilled through the course of church history. And so they'll apply to various major events throughout church history.

Futurists think that the vast majority of Revelation has not been fulfilled. And in fact, it's still awaiting fulfillment which will happen shortly before Christ's second coming. That's left behind.

Now, the idealists think that Revelation doesn't depict specific events necessarily, but instead illustrate general principles that should function for Christians throughout the church age, throughout the entire church age.

So to give you a specific instance of how these different views take a part of Revelation, preterists will say that the beast of Revelation 13, the beast, is a Roman emperor that persecuted Christians.

[47 : 28] They will say probably that it was Nero, or Domitian, some people. Now, historicists will say that the beast was the Catholic pope during the time of the Protestant Reformation who persecuted the true believers.

And the Catholic historicists will say that the beast was Martin Luther, right? And the futurists will say that, no, the beast has actually not yet come.

And it represents the future Antichrist, the man of lawlessness described in 2 Thessalonians 2, 3, 8. And idealists will say that the beast represents any governing authority that persecutes Christians using their authority and power to do so.

The problem with the preterist view is that because it sees most of Revelation as pertaining to the first century Israel, it misses the clearly universal scope of God's judgment.

And it loses relevance for subsequent generations of believers like us. The problem with the historicist view is that its identifications and applications throughout church history tend to be very Western church focused because it doesn't know much of other history, other global church history.

[48 : 40] The problem with that also is that it's so subjective, no one can really agree on what's the beast and what's the dragon and what's the prophet, what's the great prophet.

It's like because there's so many events throughout church history that you can potentially apply it to. The problem with the futurist view is that it would have had no significant relevance for the first century believers, and we've already talked about why that's a problem.

It misses the reality that Revelation is structured as a letter to first century Christians. All three of these views, preterists maybe less so, but preterist, historicists, and futurists tend to interpret Revelation in a more linear and sequential way that doesn't fully grapple with its progressively cyclical nature.

That's why I primarily subscribe to an idealist interpretation, but I'm not a strict idealist that denies that these things in Revelation don't have any specific referent.

I believe that they can have real specific fulfillment and referent both in the first century and throughout church history and in the future beyond because it has relevance, timeless relevance, generation after generation.

[49 : 54] So this view, you can call it eclectic, you can in a way incorporate the preterist and historicist and futurist views because there are things in the Revelation that have already happened and are happening and will happen.

It has all of those things in it. Sorry if that sounds like a cop-up, but I don't think it is. I think that's the balanced point of view. Finally, let's talk about the situation or the setting of the book of Revelation. Most scholars now opt for the date of 95 AD as the date of composition during the reign of Emperor Domitian in the Roman Empire. A minority of scholars opt for an earlier date, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, largely because they want to support their interpretation of Revelation that it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem.

However, there are various arguments on both sides, but there is no compelling evidence to overturn the consensus of the earliest church fathers, like Irenaeus, Victorinus of Petau, Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, and possibly Origen as well, that Revelation was written during the reign of Emperor Domitian.

So that's a later date, 95 AD. Both Eusebius and Tertullian mention a major persecution of Christians during the time of Domitian, which would fit with the context that we're seeing in the book of Revelation.

[51 : 19] But the precise date isn't important. What's really more important is the situation or setting in which the Revelation was written. And it was clearly written to encourage and strengthen a suffering and persecuted church with, to infuse fresh faith and hope and strength and endurance.

That's why verse 3 says this, 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.

Notice that word, keep. That word suggests that Revelation is not merely predictive Revelation for us to know in our heads, but also imperative Revelation that we are to keep and obey.

Faith in Jesus and faithfulness to Jesus is not something that you just mentally, cognitively ascend to. It's something you keep. Something you hold on to.

Something you obey and follow. It should govern your life. And that blessing, so that statement of blessing, blessed is he who does this, blessed is the one who does this, occurs a number of times in the book of Revelation.

[52 : 34] Let me have you take a guess. How many times do you think it comes out? You can say it out loud. Seven. Yes, you guessed it. Yeah. It's not an accident. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors. Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed.

Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection, over such the second death has no power.

Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book. 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 beatitudes, all of the blessing statements in Revelation have something to do with encouraging us to be faithful and to persevere till the end.

[53 : 40] That's the burden of the book of Revelation. Not just for you to know, but for you to keep and to endure to the end with faith and obedience.

And here's why this is relevant for all of us. Like, we don't face overt persecution, but we are increasingly marginalized in the culture and society and look like crazies.

Looked at like crazy people. But if you go to other parts of the world, there are Christians who are dying for their faith. I was just on the update call with Abdullah Mohammed Emmanuel, who leads the ministry called Hebron Home, and I'm going to actually bring a proposal to you guys at our members meeting so that our church could financially support this invaluable, amazing ministry that's going on.

There is this man who's a convert through a sheer miraculous intervention of God. Jesus just appeared to him in a vision and told him how he can go and hear the gospel and be saved.

And now he's leading a charge in Nigeria and meeting a missions movement. And his great-grandfather was the one who brought Islam to Nigeria. Like, really prominent Islamic heritage and lineage.

[54 : 50] He's now a Christian. And in their five years of ministry, 5,000 people have come to faith in Jesus Christ. And they're now spreading beyond the borders, going to Niger and Chad. And now what's happening, but however, what's happening along with that amazing progress of the gospel is that 300 people have already been killed for the gospel in Nigeria.

300 people out of 5,000. Sorry, I'm missing it. 300 people have been exiled. They've been refugees. 100 people have been killed. That's a lot of people. When you become a Christian, and then you lose all your economic power, you lose your job, and you're disowned by your family.

And then you're being persecuted by people who literally want to kill you. Emmanuel was jailed by his dad for becoming a Christian. When that's the reality that you live with, you wonder, God, are you really sovereign?

Are you really king? Are you really coming back to redeem your people? Are we really the victors? Are we really the conquerors?

And you wonder that. And so the book is given to us to encourage us. When you start to doubt, when you start to wonder, yes. Because when you see the vision of Jesus, you see the lamb, but he looks like he's slain.

[56 : 09] Because he was. When you see the glorious vision of Jesus, the word of God, riding on that white horse. It says that his robe looked like it was dipped in blood.

Because he died. Because he was killed. So Revelation assures us, if that's happening to you, take heart.

Because that is how you win. By being faithful unto death.

For Jesus. And that's the title of our series in the book of Revelation. Faithful unto death. Pray that God would make us, all of us, but faithful unto death as we go through this book together.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we stand in awe of you.

[57 : 19] You're so glorious. You are seated on the throne. None can gainsay you. None can stand against you.

You are the beginning and the end. Everything is from you. Everything is redound to you in glory. And thank you for bringing us through Jesus Christ, in Jesus Christ, and through your Holy Spirit into that amazing story.

For making us a part of that. Your reign. And your triumph. Your glory.

Your victory. Help us as we go through this series. Help us now, today, to experience and believe more of that. In Jesus' name we pray.

[58 : 22] Amen.