

Lesson 1: Revelation 1

Opening Prayer:

Holy God,

As we join together with our brothers and sisters across this campus and around the world to study Revelation, we pray that your Holy Spirit is our guide. Soften our hearts to the gospel message and strengthen our wills to live as this book calls us to live.

Through Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords we pray. Amen.

How Are We Approaching the Study of Revelation?

In this study, we will approach the text using the tools of Reformed, Christian scriptural interpretation. This is an approach that asks questions of the text to see which principles that are taught by someone from long ago are still applicable now.

The questions we ask of the text are these:

- Who wrote it?
- To whom?
- When?
- Why?
- Where?
- What was the historical context?
- What language was it written in?
- What literary genre is it?

For the book of Revelation, the answers are these:

- **Who wrote it?** John wrote it. This John here is probably not the John who wrote the gospel of John or the letters of John. He was a prophet who was in exile on the island of Patmos for proclaiming the truth about Jesus. Sometimes he is called John the Revelator.
- **To whom and where?** He wrote this letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor, now modern-day Turkey. (There is a bonus lesson on Revelation 2 and 3, which contain the letters to each church.)
- **When?** Most scholars believe that the letter was written toward the end of the first century, although some believe it was written earlier.

- **Why?** John wrote this letter because he received a vision from God that these churches needed to hear.
- **What was the historical context?** The Roman Empire had been working to limit and even eradicate the influence of Christians within the empire. Roman citizens and all who lived within the empire were required to offer incense to the emperor and declare that he was lord. Christians couldn't do this, as they knew that Jesus was Lord. This was viewed as rebellion within the empire, and exposed the Christians to persecution.
- **What language was it written in?** Revelation was originally written in Greek.
- **What literary genre is it?** Revelation is an apocalyptic book. The word "apocalypse" in Greek means "unveiling" or "revelation" (hence the name of the book.) One reason that Revelation is so perplexing to us is that the imagery used to describe events is so odd. Horns, stars, bowls of wrath, a dragon, a woman, and even the throne room of heaven itself are described by John. Some of it is explained, but much of it isn't. That's because apocalyptic writing, that is, writing that describes the return of God at the end of time, was very common in this time.

While parts of this book may seem odd to us, they would not have seemed odd to the people who first heard it. They did not need secret decoder rings to understand its meaning. The literary form is odd to us, but it wouldn't have been to them. Is Revelation *for* us? Yes, in that all scripture is for the church of all time. But was it written *to* us? No.

As we approach Revelation, we do not need to be wary of studying this book, thinking that it will be too hard or weird for us to understand. Will there be parts we don't quite understand? Sure, because it wasn't written to us. But it was written for us, that is, the Holy Spirit can use this letter written 2000 years ago to encourage, convict and comfort us now.

So as we study together:

1. Don't be afraid. While there are images in this book that are disturbing, remember that that goal of the book was to encourage Christians to be faithful even during persecution because God is working to make all things right.
2. Remember that it wasn't written to us. The images and prophecies meant something to the people who originally read them. They weren't written to predict events in 325, 576, 1516, 1776, 1865, 1944, or 2016.
3. "Current" events have always seemed bad. When Revelation was written, the Roman Empire had suffered a major defeat by the Parthians in 62, while wars were also being

fought in Gaul (68), Germania (69), and Judea (66-70). The tyranny and death of Nero in 68 was followed by further wars and three “emperors” in two years. Mount Vesuvius blew in 79, wiping out Pompeii and spreading a cloud of dark ash. In the early 90’s, there were famines throughout the empire.

So we can look around in 2016 and wonder if we are living in “the end times,” but the Church has asked this question in every age, because there has been no extended season of peace, health, and bounty anywhere for very long. This is what makes this letter in some ways timeless and applicable ever since it was written.

Opening of the Letter

It's important to note that this book was written to be heard. Because of that, through this study we will take turns reading aloud. (Please know that if you’d rather not read aloud, you’re free to say “pass.”)

Read aloud Rev 1:1-3.

Here’s the big theme of Revelation: ***Jesus is Lord, and he has won, is winning, and will win.***

Read aloud Revelation 1:9-20

Wright says: “For some, Jesus is just a faraway figure of first-century fantasy. For others, including some of today’s enthusiastic Christians, Jesus is the one with whom we can establish a personal relationship of loving intimacy. John would agree with the second of these, but he would warn against imagining that Jesus is therefore a cozy figure, one who merely makes us feel happy inside. To see Jesus as he is would drive us not to snuggle up to him, but to fall at his feet as though we were dead” (7).

Optional Discussion Questions:

1. How does the “snuggly Jesus” get promoted in 21st century worship, devotional books, and bible studies?
2. What correctives may be needed, and how could they be implemented?