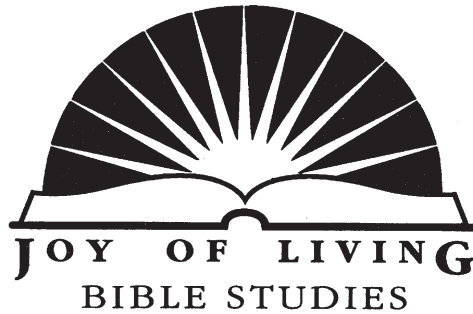


Revelation Lesson 2



A “Sign-ificant” Book

Revelation 1:1-18

The first three verses of Revelation form a prologue or preface which tells us the purpose of the book, the importance of the book, and the spirit or attitude in which it is to be read. There are two words in these verses that reveal to us the special nature of this book: it is called a *revelation* and a *prophecy*. The Greek word which is translated “revelation” is *apokalupsis*, which literally means “an unveiling.” A revelation removes the veil which obscures our understanding, it unravels the mystery, it makes the meaning plain.

Accordingly, as we move through the book of Revelation, we will find many mysteries made clear. We will learn why evil persists on the earth, and what the ultimate fate of evil will be. The mystery of godliness will also be explained, so that we can discover how to live a godly, righteous life in the midst of a broken, evil world. Many other mysteries will be unveiled in this book of revelation.

And then there is the other word: *prophecy*. This is a book that deals in predictions. It deals with people and events which lie in the future. Powerful personalities are waiting to make their entrance on the stage of human events. Extraordinary circumstances are waiting to unfold as the juggernaut of history rumbles toward its fateful consummation. We will meet these personalities and witness these events in the book of Revelation.

The book is called the “revelation of Jesus Christ,” and John says that Jesus Himself “made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.” The English phrase “made it known” actually has a deeper meaning in the original Greek, where instead of three words there is just one Greek word, *semaino*. This word should be translated “signified”—or, if you want to really get the true sense of this word, pronounce it: “sign-i-fied.” In other words, Jesus made His revelation known to John by signs or symbols.

Revelation is a book of symbols, and these symbols are important. Symbols help to simplify difficult concepts and to clarify things which are baffling or murky. I once heard of a boy who tried to explain to his little brother what radio was like. He said, “You know that a telegraph is a long wire that runs between two cities. It’s like having a big dog with his tail in Los Angeles and his head in San Francisco. If you step on his tail in Los Angeles, he barks in San Francisco. Now a radio is the same thing—only you don’t have no dog!” This boy tried his best

to clarify an idea with the use of symbols—though I doubt his brother was any more enlightened as a result.

The book of Revelation, however, uses symbols with great precision and clarity. The weird beasts and strange persons of Revelation are all symbols of things which are real and literal. As we journey together through the pages of this book, I think you will be surprised to see how many seemingly difficult images and events in the book of Revelation become clear.

The key to understanding the symbols of Revelation is recognizing that almost all of these symbols have been given to us elsewhere in the Bible. If you try to read Revelation without any understanding of the rest of the Bible, you are doomed to confusion. But if you use the rest of the Bible as a guide and interpreter of the symbols of Revelation, most of these symbols immediately become understandable.

The Key Number of Revelation

Once, during a trip to England, the renowned Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan was visited at his hotel by the English mathematician J. E. Littlewood. As the two men settled into their chairs to share tea together, Littlewood remarked, “You know, on the way over here, I happened to notice the number of the taxicab was 1729. I thought to myself, ‘That is certainly a dull number.’ I hope it’s not an unfavorable omen for our visit.”

“Oh, but you’re quite mistaken, my friend,” said Ramanujan. “In fact, 1729 is quite an interesting number! It is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways!”

Numbers which would escape the notice of you and me hold a strange fascination for mathematicians. Similarly, we find there are certain numbers which hold a fascinating significance in the book of Revelation.

Note, first of all, the greeting in verse 4, “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” These words describe God the Father as the Lord of all time and all eternity. His name in Hebrew, *Yahweh*, means “I Am.” In English, “I Am” sounds like a statement in the present tense, but in Hebrew it contains *all* the tenses used in Revelation 1:4—in effect, “I am he who is, and he who was, and he who is to come.”

Next we come to the key number of Revelation, the first of a series of *sevens*: “and from the seven spirits before his throne.” Why is

the number *seven* significant in Revelation? Because, whenever you encounter seven of anything in this book, it is a symbol of completeness and perfection.

Who is signified by the “seven spirits before his throne”? Here we find the first of many echoes from Old Testament prophecy. In Isaiah 11:2, the prophet speaks of the Spirit of God coming upon the Messiah. The Spirit of God is described in a sevenfold way. He is (1) the Spirit of the Lord, (2) the Spirit of wisdom, (3) the Spirit of understanding, (4) the Spirit of counsel, (5) the Spirit of power, (6) the Spirit of knowledge, and (7) the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. So the “seven spirits” of Revelation 1:4 are a symbol of the Holy Spirit in His sevenfold completion, perfection, and fullness.

This greeting of grace and peace comes from God the Father, the eternal “I Am”; from the Holy Spirit; and from Jesus Christ, the central figure of Revelation, who is introduced as (1) the faithful witness, (2) the firstborn from the dead, and (3) the ruler of the kings of the earth.

He is called “the faithful witness” because what He says is true and reliable. When He speaks, He utters absolute, trustworthy reality. In a confusing, chaotic, dying world, Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the truth-teller.

He is called “the firstborn from the dead” because of the resurrection. Though there were others (such as Lazarus, whom Jesus called forth from the tomb at Bethany) who died and were raised again, they were merely raised to the same earthly life they had before. Eventually, they died again and were buried. Only Jesus was raised to eternal, incorruptible glory. It is this same eternal, incorruptible life that Jesus gives to those who believe in Him. He is the life-giver.

He is called “the ruler of the kings of the earth” because He has ultimate sovereignty over the whole world. There are many rulers and leaders who claim to be sovereign in their own countries, but Jesus exercises ultimate authority over them all. He is the great law-maker, the king of kings.

So, in this passage, Jesus is introduced in threefold fashion as the *truth-teller*, the *life-giver*, and the *law-maker*.

The First Doxology

This introduction is followed in verses 5 and 6 by a threefold doxology to (1) “him who loves us,” (2) who “has freed us from our sins by his blood,” and (3) who “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” This paean of praise to God concludes, “to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” This is a powerful declaration, and its three essential themes deserve closer examination.

First theme: *He loves us*. This is a statement in the present tense. It’s an amazing fact. Despite all our foolishness, waywardness, selfishness, and sin, the Lord Jesus loves us. He is always on our side. That is how John wants us to see ourselves in relationship to Jesus Christ: *He loves us*, in the present tense, despite our rebellion and sin. When

the truth of this statement begins to seep into our hearts, then our lives can be transformed.

Second theme: *He has freed us from our sins by His blood*. Jesus breaks the shackles of sin and destructive habits in our lives. He sets us free from the addictions and dependencies which harass us, enslave us, and chain us down. It is true that many Christians continue to struggle with evil habits even after coming into a relationship with Christ. Some struggle with drug or alcohol dependency, some with selfish attitudes or sexual temptations, some with an angry temper or a malicious tongue. But the blood of Christ gives us the *power* to break the chains of sin—if we will but turn the control of our lives over to Him.

Third theme: *He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father*. We are all sinners, estranged from a holy and just God because of our sin. The role of a priest is to bridge the alienation between the people and God, to bring the people near to God again. In the Old Testament, priests explained the meaning of sacrifices, called the people to repentance, and thus brought the people near to God.

Today, *all* believers are called to perform the function of a priest. Do you ever think of yourself as a priest? It’s a high and holy calling, given to us by Jesus Himself. We are to reach out to others in their pain and lostness. We are to explain to them the sacrifice that Jesus has made on their behalf. We are to share with them the fact that God loves them and longs to draw them to Himself, to heal their loneliness and alienation.

The Splendor of His Coming

Some years ago, I was visiting with a number of rabbis in Southern California. The subject of our discussion was the differences between Judaism and Christianity. “You know,” one rabbi said to me, “when the Messiah comes, we Jews will say, ‘Welcome!’ But you Christians will say, ‘Welcome back!’”

“And what will the Messiah say?” I asked.

“I think,” the rabbi replied without missing a beat, “He will say, ‘No comment.’”

In Revelation 1:7, the Lord is introduced to us not only in terms of who He is, His attributes and His glory, but also in terms of what He will do in the future: “Look, he is coming with the clouds.” This is the focal point of human history, the single event toward which all human events—and heavenly events as well—are moving. One day Jesus Himself will break through the skies, and He will appear again in glory, just as when He left the earth. His coming will have planet-wide impact, for, as Revelation 1:7 says, “every eye will see him.”

This account of Jesus’ return accords with that of Matthew 24:30. There, Jesus said, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.” No one will miss this spectacular event, not even those without

televisions. He will appear everywhere, and He will be visible to everyone in the world at once. In 2 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul calls this event “the splendor of his coming.”

Jesus’ appearance will be so unmistakable that even the Jews will recognize Him. John tells us, “even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” This is a reference to the prophecy in Zechariah 12:10–13:6, where we are told that when the Messiah appears, those who pierced Him shall look upon Him and mourn greatly. The Jews shall ask Him, “What are these wounds on your body?” and He will say, “The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.”

From these passages, I have to conclude that my rabbi friend was mistaken when he said the Jews would say, “Welcome!” when Messiah comes. I am convinced that even they will say, “Welcome back!” because they will see Him, they will know Him, and they—along with all the peoples of the earth—will mourn, knowing that the Messiah has visited this planet once before, that He was despised, rejected, and crucified.

One of the great puzzles of history is the fact that the Jewish people have so resolutely turned their backs on the evidence that Jesus is their promised Messiah. At the beginning, of course, the early church was almost entirely Jewish, but over time, increasingly more non-Jewish converts came into the church, while the number of Jewish converts dwindled to a trickle. Why? Because the Jewish people are “hardened” (as Paul so convincingly argues in Romans 9 through 11) by long-standing unbelief.

But Jewish unbelief will not last forever. The day will come when the Jewish people will recognize—and mourn—their Messiah. They will mourn, just as all the peoples of the earth will mourn, because of the tragic and terrible way they have treated Jesus and His work for all mankind upon the cross.

The Alpha and the Omega

In these opening verses God takes the pen in His own hand and signs the book with His own signature: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God,” using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to symbolize the beginning and end of all things. He continues, describing Himself in this inscription as the One “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

In no other book of the Bible do we find this wonderful imprimatur of God. When we read these words, we are reading a copy autographed by the Author Himself!

The Prisoner of Patmos

The first chapter of Revelation concludes in verses 9-20 with John’s explanation of how and where he received this prophecy from God. Here, even in the first chapter of Revelation, we discover truth imparted in the form of symbols. Jesus is described in a way that is

not intended to convey His actual physical appearance but various aspects of His character, His attributes, and His role.

The setting for the vision John received is a tiny island in the Aegean Sea. This island, called Patmos, is located just off the coast of Turkey. It was a dreary little place in John’s day, containing a stone quarry, some mining excavations, and very little else. John had apparently been banished to Patmos by the Romans in order to silence his preaching—hence his statement that he was there “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” John was a prisoner on Patmos.

On one Sunday morning (or “the Lord’s Day,” as John calls it), John was “in the Spirit.” This does not mean that John was in some state of religious ecstasy, but rather that he was worshiping God and meditating on God’s greatness and majesty. It is the state of mind and spirit that Jesus described in John 4:24 when He said, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

While John was in this worshipful attitude, a voice like a trumpet said, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches.” Upon hearing this voice, John did what you or I would have done: he turned to find the source of this powerful, trumpet-like voice. What he saw was the Lord Himself, standing among seven golden lampstands, holding seven stars in His hands. Note the significance of the number seven again, the number of completeness.

John’s Encounter with the Lord

Now let’s look at each of the symbols which characterize John’s vision of the Lord Jesus:

1. Jesus is dressed in a long robe, bound across the chest by a golden sash, a priestly garment symbolizing His role as the Great High Priest. In Scripture, gold symbolizes deity. This robe with its golden sash speaks of the fact that Jesus is a priest who is Himself God. He is the Lord, sovereign over all of history, healing the breach between God and man.
2. His head and His hair are white. These are symbols used in the book of Daniel to denote wisdom and purity.
3. His eyes are like blazing fire, from which nothing can be hid. Fire speaks of judgment.
4. His feet are like bronze, glowing in a furnace. Again, the image of furnace-hot fires of judgment.
5. His voice is like the sound of rushing waters, like the roar of surf as it dashes against the rocks. The sound of His voice is the sound of power, inspiring our awe.
6. The sword which comes out of the mouth of Jesus is the Word of God, by which Jesus reveals truth to us.
7. His face is like the sun shining in its strength. This symbolizes the burning intensity of truth.

Perhaps this vision of Jesus in Revelation 1 explains an interesting episode at the end of the gospel of John. In John 21, Jesus com-

missioned Peter with the words, “Feed my sheep,” then prophesied that Peter would one day die a martyr’s death. At this point, Peter indicted John, and said, “Lord, what about him?” Peter wanted to know what sort of death was prophesied for John. And Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” Because of a misunderstanding of this conversation between Peter and the Lord, word went out among the disciples that John would never die until the Lord returned.

Here, in Revelation 1, is the explanation: John did remain alive to see the coming of the Lord. He foresaw the Lord’s coming as an event in history, but he saw it in the form of a vision from God. Though historical tradition holds that John died at the age of ninety and was buried in Ephesus, he did live to see the coming of the Lord. He saw the Lord’s coming in symbols of priestly garments, of brilliant light, of blazing fire, of thunderous sound, of supreme power, purity, wisdom, and holiness.

Throughout the remainder of Revelation, we will see other symbolism employed to describe various aspects of Jesus’ character, power, and position. In chapter 5, He will appear as a lamb—and also as a lion. In chapter 19, He will appear as a rider on a great white horse. He is a bridegroom coming for His bride in chapter 21. But it is the image of Jesus, which John describes in chapter 1, that is the most startling and graphic of all.

Before such an awesome sight, what could John do but fall at the feet of Jesus as though dead? This, indeed, is the reaction of every human who experiences this kind of profound encounter with the living God. John’s reaction is identical to that of Isaiah when he sees the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, with the long train of His robe filling the temple (see Isaiah 6:1). John’s reaction is the same as that of Job when he is awed and humbled in the presence of God (see Job 1:20-22).

And as John lay prostrate before the feet of Jesus, the Lord did something that was completely typical and characteristic of Him: He reached down and *touched* John! He placed His right hand on the trembling shoulder of the beloved disciple.

As you read through the gospels, you see that Jesus was always touching people. When He healed a leper, He touched him. When He restored sight to the blind, He put His hands upon their eyes. Now, in Revelation 1, Jesus touches His friend John and reassures him with the words, “Do not be afraid.” He is saying to John, in effect, “I am your friend, not your enemy. I am the First and the Last. I set the boundaries of time and history. All people and all events are enclosed within the limits that I have determined in my sovereignty. I hold the keys of death and hell, the keys of both physical death and spiritual death. I am sovereign over all that is, so you have nothing to fear, my friend.”

“Write!”

Having reassured John, Jesus then commissions him. “Write, therefore,” says the Lord, “what you have seen, what is now, and what

will take place later.” First, John is to write what he has seen, which is that vision we have just examined, recorded in Revelation 1.

Second, John is to write “what is now.” That is, he is to write seven letters to seven churches about existing conditions in those churches. These letters comprise Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

Third, John is to write “what will take place later.” This is the prophetic vision of the future contained in Revelation chapters 4 through 22. These are the three divisions of the book of Revelation, as given to us by the Lord Himself. If we will follow these divisions carefully, we will be able to understand God’s message to us in this challenging, rewarding, symbol-laden book. That, of course, is our goal as we keep before us God’s promise from verse 3, “Blessed is the one who reads 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.”

The point of the first chapter of Revelation is to focus our attention on Jesus. He is the central figure of Revelation, just as He is the central figure of all history. Our lives can never be lived realistically, triumphantly, and joyously without reference to Him. We, as Christians, are called to live as though we see Him who is invisible. He is the One we must take to work with us each day. He is the One who will be beside us as we drive our cars, as we go to sleep, as we face our trials, as we experience our joys. He is the source of our courage, our peace, our wisdom, and our forgiveness when we sin, our help in time of need.

In this first chapter of Revelation, John takes up the commission given him by Jesus and performs it with dramatic force: he elevates our hearts and focuses our attention upon Jesus, upon who He is and what He is doing in human history. The Lord, through His servant John, has lifted the veil from the obscured face of the future. He invites us to look behind the scenes of history and see the great and awesome things He is doing—and is about to do!—upon the earth, and within each individual life.

So come with me. Let’s venture a step closer and look upon the face of Tomorrow.

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the commentary on Revelation 1:1-18.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the commentary on Revelation 1:1-18, or from your teacher’s lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, or post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Revelation 1:19—2:7, concentrating on 1:19-20.

1. What is John to write? (Revelation 1:19)

2. a. From our last lesson we learned that the book of Revelation has to do with “an unveiling,” or a disclosure of that which was previously hidden or unknown— with mysteries and their meaning. In Revelation 1:20 two mysteries are revealed. What were the seven stars in His right hand?

b. What were the seven lampstands? (Revelation 1:20b, and see Revelation 1:11 for specific names.)

3. Challenge: Read Ephesians 1:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 12:27. Who is the church?

4. Read Exodus 35:14. What is the purpose of a lampstand?

5. a. Read Matthew 5:14-16. What are believers in Christ to be to the world? (verse 14a)

b. How do we let our light shine (Matthew 5:14b-16a)?

c. How will people respond when we let our light shine? (Matthew 5:16b)

6. Personal: Have you been letting your light shine by the way that you live? What areas of your life might be hiding God’s light? Write a prayer asking Him to help you let His light shine through you.

Third Day: Read Revelation 1:19—2:7 again, concentrating on 2:1.

1. Who is being written to? (Revelation 2:1a)

2. a. Read Ephesians 6:12. Who is our struggle against?

b. Daniel 10:7-13 is an example of the angels that have authority over various regions (both for good and evil). What evil angelic-being resisted and delayed the angel sent to Daniel in Daniel 10:12-13? What angelic-being helped the angel sent to Daniel?

3. Find Ephesus on map B on page 8. Read Acts 18:19 and 19:1-10. Who did God use to establish the church at Ephesus?

4. From the previous lesson we learned that the One holding the seven stars in His right hand is the Lord Jesus Christ. From Revelation 2:1, where is the Lord?

5. Personal: We see that the Lord is closely watching over His church, not distant but near, actually walking among His churches. You never need to feel fearful and alone. What promise does He give us in Hebrews 13:5b? Personalize this promise by inserting your name into it.

Fourth Day: Read Revelation 1:19—2:7 again, concentrating on 2:2.

1. a. How does our Lord commend the Ephesian church? (Revelation 2:2)

b. Write Revelation 2:2 again in your own words.

2. a. In Acts 20:29-32 Paul is speaking to the church in Ephesus. This was nearly 40 years before the book of Revelation was written. In Acts 20:29-30 what did Paul warn them would happen?

b. What were the Ephesian believers to do? (Acts 20:31)

c. How were they to guard against false doctrine? (Acts 20:32)

3. What does 1 John 4:1 encourage us to do and why?

4. From the following verses how are we to know what is truth and what is error?

Matthew 22:29

Isaiah 8:20

2 Timothy 2:15

5. From Revelation 2:2, had the Ephesian church been obedient to what Paul asked them to do nearly 40 years before?

6. a. Read Acts 17:11. What were the Bereans like and why?

b. Personal: Do you accept that whatever is taught to you is truth, or do you personally search the Scriptures to see if it is true? Ask God to help you to be like the Bereans.

Fifth Day: Read Revelation 1:19—2:7 again, concentrating on 2:3-5.

1. a. The Lord continues to commend the Ephesian church. In Revelation 2:3 what does He praise them for? Put this into your own words.

b. The Ephesian church seems to be an excellent church, doing all the right things, yet the Lord has something against them. What does the Lord say is wrong? (Revelation 2:4)

2. From the following verses, who is to be our first love?

Mark 12:30

Exodus 20:3

3. a. Read 1 John 2:15-16. What does 1 John 2:15 say regarding loving God?

b. From 1 John 2:16 explain what it means to love the world.

4. a. What does the Lord command those who have lost their first love to do? (Revelation 2:5a)

b. What will be the consequence if they don't obey?

5. Their lampstand is a church's ability to shed the light of truth. Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 and describe the result of a person's deeds, no matter how good, when they are not springing forth from a heart filled with love for God and the love from God.

6. Personal: When our deeds do not spring from a heart filled with God's love, they don't profit us and they are like a loud irritating noise to others. No one likes a self-righteous person. Take a moment to look at yourself. Who is really first in your life: God, others, or yourself? What really is the motivation behind your actions? God wants to be our "first love." When He is first, everything else falls into place. Write a prayer asking God to help you make Him your "first love."

Sixth Day: Read Revelation 1:19—2:7 again, concentrating on 2:6-7.

1. a. What positive statement does the Lord make about the Ephesians in Revelation 2:6?

b. How does David express this same sentiment in Psalm 139:21-22?

2. a. What does the Lord exhort them to do in Revelation 2:7a?

b. Challenge: The Lord repeats this phrase a number of times within the first few chapters of Revelation. What do you think this phrase means and why do you think He repeats it?

3. The Nicolaitans had brought false, worldly doctrines into the church. Read 1 John 5:4-5. Who overcomes the world and its false doctrines?

4. a. Read 1 John 5:10. A person must choose to believe God. If a person does choose to believe Him, what proof is given them?

b. In contrast, what is God being called by the person who does not believe what He has said about Jesus Christ? (1 John 5:10b)

5. What blessing will be given to the one that overcomes the false doctrines by choosing to believe God? (Revelation 2:7b)

6. Personal: Read John 14:6. Do you have eternal life and have you entered into a relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ? If not, why don't you do it now? Write a prayer thanking Him for this wonderful privilege.