Welcome, introduction

Background – towards the end of 2021, Wayne asked me to work with him on a sermon series based on Revelation 1-3, today is the introduction to that series.

Prepare 2 things – your Bible & a pen (or notebook if using electronic)

How many of you have been reading in the book of Revelation this week? Month? Ever?

Typically when you announce a sermon series in Revelation, you get 1 of 2 reactions:

1. 2% will get all excited & start pulling out all their end-times charts and get ready to circle the date on the calendar that the preacher tells them Jesus is coming back on
2. The other 98% ‘s eyes will glaze over & they’ll start making plans to visit those relatives they don’t really like on those Sundays

So why do so many believers who claim that the Bible is God’s Word, ignore this book?

1. It’s too hard to understand – 7-headed dragons, beasts, …

I know there are some parts of Revelation that are harder to get your head around than other books, but can I be honest with you? The problem is not Revelation. frankly I bet that is because you also haven’t been reading your Old Testament as much as you should be. The style of Revelation, and many of the symbols used in it, would start sounding very familiar to you after reading the OT books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah. Because Revelation is a continuation of the “last days” prophecies from those books.

However, you can relax, because there are no 7-headed dragons in the chapters that we are going to be covering in this series. There are a handful of symbols, but the majority of those are explained within the text. In fact, chapters 1-3 are very practical, and not hard to understand if you are willing to hear. Or as Revelation puts it, “He who has an ear, let him hear”.

1. It’s too “judgy”.

Some people get just a little ways into Revelation and are like “Woah, what are all these judgement? Earthquakes, poisoned water, flying scorpions? What happened to the Jesus that loves everyone? Can I let you in on a little-known secret? God hasn’t changed. The God who sent 10 plagues on Pharaoh when he hardened his heart against God’s command is the same one who warns us 3 times in the book of Hebrews “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”. In fact, we don’t hear this often, but Jesus pronounced a lot of judgements during his earthly ministry, sometimes against entire cities. We have stories in Acts about people in the early church dropping dead as a result of God’s judgement, and in 1Co 11:27-32, Paul warns the church that “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. (28) Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (29) For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (30) That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (31) But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. (32) But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”. Sadly, we live in a culture that promotes the idea that calling any kind of behavior immoral is itself immoral. There are a few things that society still is willing to condemn, but frankly, the list is getting shorter every day, and some things that would have produced outrage & disgust a generation ago are not only acceptable today, they are actually celebrated with parades (homosexuality, abortion). Paul’s letter to the Romans sounds like he was watching our society - Rom 1:32 Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. The unfortunate truth is that today’s culture tells us to accept sin and condemn personal holiness, and that has crept into the church to the point that it has become shocking to hear that God still judges people. The vast majority of judgement we read about in revelation is directed towards unbelievers who stubbornly refuse to listen to God’s clear commands to repent, and to be clear, eternal judgement is only for those who reject Christ, but it doesn’t take much New Testament reading to learn that God also does not hesitate to discipline any of His children who are willfully disobedient. Again, a front to back consistent reading of our Bibles would bring us back to reality in a hurry.

1. It’s not practical. I need to know what to do today, not at the end of the world!

I’ve got some great news for you – revelation is very practical & is full of instruction for your day to day life. Perhaps you missed it because you don’t have the super secret revelation crypto-decoder ring? Just kidding. But I’m serious about Revelation being practical, and this series is going to focus on some of the most practical instructions given. Of course, then you will be expected to follow through on His commands. As Mark Twain once said, “It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand.”

Not being familiar with the book of Revelation is unfortunate, because you know that our Savior didn’t go to the trouble of sending us this letter just to confuse & frustrate us. In fact, at the beginning of the letter, He gives us a promise – Rev 1:3 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. And here’s a spoiler alert: The purpose of the book is to encourage believers who are going through struggles and need assurance that God is going to make everything alright in the end. If that describes you, then prepare to be blessed.

In order for you to get as much out of these chapters as possible, I want to help remove any obstacles to understanding Revelation in general and these chapters specifically. So today we’re going to walk through the who/what/when/where/why of the book, but first we are going to do what Rev 1:3 says will bless us – well, at least I know we will obey the reading aloud part, it is up to each of us to hear & obey after that.

Rev 1:1-20 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, (2) who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (3) 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. (4) 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, (5) and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood (6) and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (7) Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. (8) "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (9) I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (10) I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet (11) saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." (12) Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, (13) and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. (14) The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, (15) his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. (16) In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (17) When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, (18) and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (19) Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. (20) As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Now, to set the stage, lets answer some questions:

**Who & Where** – the author of the book is of course Jesus who instructed John to write what he was told. Most biblical scholars identify this John as one of the 12 apostles. That he was on the island of Patmos “on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus” is generally interpreted to mean that he had been exiled there as punishment for his faith. Who the letter is addressed to is actually a list of 7 local churches in the Middle East in the area of what is now the country of Turkey. But to read this book correctly you need to adjust your concept of what “church” means – the instructions in this book were not addressed to 21st century Americans sitting on padded seats sipping lattes in air conditioned million dollar worship centers. These churches were probably more like a collection of small groups meeting secretly in houses, with a set of elders/pastors who circulated among them. They didn’t have praise bands, they didn’t have big screens, they didn’t have VBS. They didn’t have access to the Bible as we do today. They didn't have religious freedom, and most of them were facing serious persecution for believing in Jesus and could not meet openly. This is a good time to remind ourselves that we are not guaranteed religious freedom, in fact scripture and most of history teaches us to expect persecution if you try to live a godly life. But we are commanded to follow Jesus regardless of what government or society we find ourselves in. I personally will be surprised if our grandchildren don’t face a level of persecution for living for Jesus that we haven’t seen in our country for 200 years. So prepare them now. (whisper – teach them to read their Bibles).

**What** – Just like most of the N.T. Revelation was written as a letter to real people in real churches. Revelation is unusual because it was directed toward 7 specific churches rather than just 1, so it was almost like what we would call an “open” letter. And just like the rest of scripture, properly interpreting Revelation depends on remembering that. We also need to keep in mind that Revelation is written in a specific style, similar to the book of Ezekiel, call “Apocalyptic” literature. This style of writing is not very common today, so it seems strange to modern believers, but it was quite common in that part of the world in ancient times, and the churches who received it would have recognized it immediately. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “Apocalypse”? Nuclear war? Floods? Zombies? Tornadoes that carry man eating sharks? Well, believe it or not, the original meaning of the word, and how it is used in Revelation, is not “end of the world doomsday”, but instead, to reveal something that has been hidden. Think back to that Christmas when your parents wrapped that super special present with your name on it and for 2 weeks you had to look at it sitting under your Christmas tree, wondering what it could be. Then, on Christmas morning, you were finally allowed to tear off all the shiny paper and you had an Apocalypse! The wonderful thing was revealed to you. Your parents knew all along what it was, and they wanted you to know too, but they had a specific time when they revealed it to you. That is the book of Revelation. The entire Old Testament is a story reaching it’s fulfilment in Revelation. Once God’s perfect creation was ruined by the introduction of sin, everything you read is about God revealing Himself to His fallen image-bearers, and orchestrating an unbelievably costly redemption that is finalized in the last pages of Revelation. So stop thinking of Revelation as “doom & gloom” and see it for how Jesus intended it – a brightly wrapped gift of encouragement for His followers that everything will be made right in the end.

**When** – 1st century writers didn’t put dates on their letters, but most biblical scholars believe that Revelation was written sometime at the end of the 1st century, probably A.D. 93-96. At that time, there were a series of Roman emperors in a family dynasty continuing the persecution of Christians begun by Nero. They had started a new policy of requiring everyone to worship their family as gods, which created an obvious problem for the believers in these 7 churches. As you read Revelation, try to put yourself in their mindset.

**Why** – The obvious answer is found in the first verse - Rev 1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. So the reason was to reveal God’s plan for the future. But Revelation is not just some cosmic timeline that we can use to guess when Christ is coming back (especially since Jesus already told us that we will not be able to know that, right?). So with most other apocalyptic writing, there is actually a “why” behind the “why”. Yes, we get a glimpse of future events, but why? Again, keep in mind the situation these believers were facing. It has been 60+ years since Jesus died & ascended, many of the early believers had expected Him to return by then, and some had become discouraged. All but one of the original apostles had been martyred for following Jesus, and the church everywhere was being bombarded with false teachers, calling many of their core beliefs into doubt. Also, the Jews staged a revolt 30 years prior that ended with the Roman army obliterating Jerusalem, so they were worse off now than before. And now they were facing a Roman government that expected them to show their loyalty by worshiping the family line of the emperor… or else. If you think you need daily encouragement in your life, imagine how the Jesus followers in these 7 churches felt. Revelation encourages, exhorts and challenges these believers to keep following Jesus no matter what. It also paints a progressive picture of Christ as the conquering, world ruling Messianic King who comes to finally rid the world of the devil, sin and death, and finish His fathers redemption of all creation. At the same time, this King knows the details of our situation, walks among us & calls us to partner with Him & reclaim our role as image-bearers of God. Do you think that was welcome news?

Ok, let’s talk symbolism. As is common in apocalyptic literature, there is a fair amount of symbolism used to represent either real people/places/things, or to represent a concept or type of something. For example, during the Civil War, General Jackson was given the symbolic nickname “Stonewall Jackson”, not because he had transformed into brick and mortar, but because his character in battle was so impressively courageous that a stone wall was the closest thing they could think of to compare him to.

In chapter 1, Jesus is described as follows: ) Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, (13) and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. (14) The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, (15) his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. (16) In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. This description is not designed to be interpreted literally, but to reveal the majestic power and glory of the Son of God. It is a much more poetic and powerful way of saying “Jesus is awesome!”.

In chapters 1-3, we see 2 main symbols related to the churches being addressed. Their interpretation is made easier by the fact that their symbolism is spelled out in chapter 1 - As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

So when we see lampstands in these chapters, we know the writer is referring to the 7 churches. In the O.T. there was a golden lampstand in the Holy place, which had 7 branches and was to be kept lit at all times. Jesus told his followers Mat 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. (15) Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. (16) In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Now Wayne & I had an interesting discussion about this when we were going over the outline. He said that we are not the light, that Jesus is the light. I replied that Jesus said we were the light. We finally settled it by using more symbolism – that Jesus is like the sun which produces light, and we are like the moon, which then reflects that light. It is clear in the context of Revelation that the churches (and us) are expected to be light in this world.

As for the starts being the angels of the churches, there are 2 schools of interpretation on that. One would take that to mean that each church has been assigned a specific heavenly being to watch over it. The other thought is that the term “angel” is itself a symbol for the head pastor of each church. I personally lean towards the pastor interpretation, but I would not fall on my sword over it, it does not affect how we apply the following verses, so do your best study and draw your own conclusion on that.

Ok, that covers the introduction, now for the meat of this message.

Not really, but there are some final points I want to give you that will help you get the most out of the next 7 messages.

First, repetition is significant, repetition is significant, repetition is significant, repetition is…

Here’s a general rule of biblical interpretation – if God repeats himself, it is His way of saying “Wake up! Pay attention!”.

In chapters 2-3, each of the churches receive their own unique apocalypse from the Lord, and they all follow a very specific pattern that we need to recognize:

* “The words of Him who…” – each church gets to see a different aspect of Jesus revealed, and together they give us a better picture of the Messiah King. Pay close attention to who Jesus is, and be prepared to adjust how you have pictured Him previously.
* “I know…” – reveals Jesus’ intimate awareness of each church’s circumstances. Notice how Jesus is sympathetic to the struggles while still holding them accountable for their obedience.
* Positive – Jesus encourages each church for what they are doing right. Remember that He is not just fault finding, He wants to commend them also. Note that there is one church who receives no positive affirmation, take note of what that church is like.
* “Yet I hold this against you…” – a stern rebuke for where each church is failing to follow Jesus. Notice that there are 2 churches who receive no rebuke, see if there is something common between them.
* “Therefor, repent, or…” – Jesus does not ignore our disobedience or pat us on the head and say “well, at least they tried”. He commands repentance, that means He expects the actions to match the profession. That doesn’t mean “flooding my altar with tears” as he says in Malachi, it means first a broken heart then changed actions. Recognize the difference between true and false repentance.
* “To him who overcomes, I will…” – specific promises are given to those who make the effort to overcome. Avoid the idea that it is God’s responsibility to keep us from sin and grow us spiritually. He expects us to fight hard in this battle.
* “He who has an ear…” – every church is exhorted to hear, and obey. So are we.

My final point is that we need to realize that how we live matters. Jesus is still walking among His churches, what is He seeing, and what does He want to tell us? More importantly, are we listening and are we willing to obey?