

John's Prologue (1:1–20)

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1, verses 1–3 form a short introduction leading into the letter's prologue. Verse 1, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place." John tells his readers that the *apokalupsis* is "of Jesus Christ," the sense being that it is "concerning Jesus Christ." The letter itself *is* the revelation—that is, that which has been unveiled. The focus of the letter is Jesus, *not* the Evil One or the tribulations. When many twenty-first-century folk, both believers and unbelievers, speak of the Revelation, the primary topic on their lips is great and catastrophic evils befalling the world sometime in our future. Yet our attention must align itself with these opening words of John. *He* says that the entire focus of his letter is the rule of King Jesus, and therefore, it must be ours also.

Verses 1b–2: "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." Through the agency of an angel, God gave this highly symbolic visionary message to John, who had a certain quality; namely, he "bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ." This is to say that he was faithful to preach the gospel of the Messiah's kingdom. The Lord did this for a specific purpose—"to show to his [bondservants] the things that must soon take place" (verse 1).

He must "show" these things since its message is intended to be understood by its recipients. Many in the last hundred years have treated the Apocalypse as a book full of complicated riddles and hidden messages

that are nearly impossible to decipher. The takeaway is that since there are so many differing and contradictory interpretations (several being quite fanciful at that), what's the point of trying to understand this portion of Scripture? However, contrary to this popular view, we must not be afraid of this God-breathed letter. Why? Because *apokalupsis* means “a revelation,” “a manifestation,” or “a revealing”¹—it was meant to be understood by its original recipients in its very Jewish context.

Those who are being shown these things are His “bondservants,” those who truly belong to God in Christ. They are being shown the “things that must . . . take place,” which are those certain acts of the Messiah in history that are sure to take place. This is cause to celebrate with greater confidence in our Messianic King, rather than to fear! Why? Because He sovereignly orchestrates all events in history so that He keeps His promises right on schedule. Therefore, He can be trusted at every point along the way!

These are the things that “must soon take place.” In relation to the apostle receiving the revelation, scribing it, and then sending it to the seven churches, these events are truly imminent, even right at the door, as it were.² Futurist theologians have interpreted the majority of Revelation as taking place in our future, and have thus created the doctrine of the imminent second advent of Christ. The problem with this view is that it has been more than two thousand years since John penned his letter in the first century, a time period that cannot possibly fit within the semantic domain of “imminent,” “soon,” or “near.” We must understand the events written in this letter as being close at hand from the standpoint of John and the seven congregations in Asia Minor to whom he writes in order to properly respect what “soon” means.

Verse 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.” The original recipients are promised to be blessed if they both read the whole letter out loud and hear what is written therein and then live by it. Why? The text answers, “for the time is near”; that is, the events referred to in verse 1 are close at hand for them. Even though many of these events are in our past today, the divinely given blessing still remains for the

1 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Apokalupsis*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/apokalupsis.html>.

2 See Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Chesnee, SC: Victorious Hope, 2021) 437–438.

Christian who hears what is written in the Apocalypse and then lives in light of the truths revealed therein.

These introductory remarks must be kept in mind throughout this study of the book of Revelation. To continue without taking strict heed to these words will inevitably lead to forcing the apostle to mean things he never intended to communicate to his original audience.

SALUTATION

Verses 4–8 present John's prologue to the rest of his letter to the seven local churches. It is within this prologue that he indicates the main theme to his readers in verse 7, a theme that runs straight through the various and sundry visions he is shown and binds them all together.

Verse 4a: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace." First, the apostle John identifies himself as the writer and "the seven churches that are in Asia" as those to whom he writes. He greets them in a way similar to how Paul begins many of his letters—with the words, "Grace to you and peace."³ At this point, John begins to answer the question, "From whom does this grace and peace come?" He does this by mentioning all three persons of the Godhead—it is from these three divine persons that grace and peace come.

Verse 4b: "from him who is and who was and who is to come." Firstly, this grace and peace come from the God who is from everlasting to everlasting. This is another way of saying what was said to Moses in Exodus 3:13–15 when God revealed His name as *YHWH* (Yahweh)—He is the Self-Existent One, who is covenantal by nature.⁴ This is the same God who now gives this revelation to John via an angel.

Verse 4c: "from the seven spirits who are before his throne." Secondly, this grace and peace come from the Spirit of God, who is perfect and complete in every way, as represented here by the number seven.⁵ The third person of the Godhead is just as equally and completely Yahweh as the Father with regard to being, yet He remains truly distinct from the Father

3 See Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; etc.

4 See G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, (Grand Rapids Baker Academic, 2007), 1089.

5 Beale and McDonough, "Revelation," 1089.

with regard to personhood. The trinitarian formulation of this greeting ought to cause us to see how the unified work of the Father, Son, and Spirit is not only central to properly understanding redemptive history, but without it there would be no eternal *pactum salutis* (covenant of redemption),⁶ nor its gradual historical outworking in the *foedus gratis* (covenant of grace).⁷ Put another way, no one in all of history would be saved from their sins through the one Redeemer and King without this perfect unity in the Godhead.

Verse 5a: “from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” Jesus is God’s Anointed One, first named in Hebrew as *Meshiakh* (Messiah), and then translated into Greek as *Khristos* (Christ). But who is He really? Here John draws from Psalm 89:27 and 37, which psalm as a whole emphasizes the “anointed” king.⁸

Jesus is the “faithful witness.” He is the “true light” who has come into the world, the Word who “became flesh and [tabernacled] among us, and we have seen his glory,” the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the one who shows us the Father (John 1:9, 14; 14:6–9). He is the “eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us” so that we may have fellowship “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:2–3). We can trust in the Lord our God because, instead of giving up on us when we became His enemies in Adam, He has entered into our midst in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He has done this to faithfully show us the Father’s glory and make a way for us to permanently experience His presence!

The Messiah is also the “firstborn of the dead.” He is “the resurrection and the life” who is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” so that “in Christ shall all be made alive . . . at his coming. . . . He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (John 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:20–23; Col. 1:18). Without the Lord Jesus’s resurrection, nothing would ever be rescued from sin’s corruption, neither rebel-sinners nor creation itself, first progressively in the inter-advental

6 The Reformed doctrine of *the covenant of redemption* is not meant to suggest that each Person of the Godhead somehow has His own center of decision-making—for the Being of Yahweh has eternally existed in the three divine Persons, which Being is simple, not composite. Rather, it’s meant to defend the eternally unified and covenantal nature of Yahweh in those three divine Persons, specifically as it relates to the salvation of the elect.

7 *Pactum* and *foedus* can be used as synonyms in Latin, as they are in this context.

8 See Beale and McDonough, “Revelation,” 1089.

period and then in glorified, consummate form on the Last Day. Why? As the firstfruits of the final resurrection, Jesus's resurrection guaranteed that everything He fully accomplished in His humiliation would surely come to pass in His exaltation. His resurrection guaranteed all other resurrections in the universe! For this reason, we can fully trust that Jesus will indeed eternally rescue all for whom He died because His resurrection guarantees success!

Finally, John declares that God's Anointed One is the "ruler of kings on earth." While the word *ge* usually refers to "a tract of land" or "a country," it can occasionally be used to mean "the inhabited earth as a whole."⁹ The latter usage is intended here as Jesus is described as the ultimate Ruler over all earthy authorities everywhere. Indeed, He is the greater Son of David whose "kingdom has been made sure forever before Yahweh, and his throne has been established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16)¹⁰; He is Yahweh's Anointed King, who has asked and "the nations have been made his heritage, and the ends of the earth his possession in order to break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:7–9); He has "sat down at his Father's right hand, until he makes his enemies his footstool" (Ps. 110:1); His "government and peace will increase without end, who sits on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7); He "will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law" (Isa. 42:4); His dominion is like a "stone that . . . becomes a great mountain that fills the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35); He taught us to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10); He said, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28); He sent us out to make disciples of all the nations since He has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18); He is "destroying every rule and every authority and power because he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet, and the last enemy to be destroyed will be death" (1 Cor. 15:24–26). This means we can fully trust our Messianic King through our trials and suffering in this life because He is progressively dealing with all the evil

9 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Genesis*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/genesis-5.html>.

10 Passages in this paragraph are paraphrased, based on the ESV.

in the world as we speak and, on the Last Day, He will judge all the living and the dead once and for all. This also means we can be actively engaged in obeying Jesus as His salt and light in the earth with confidence since our King is actually being victorious in history and will indeed get all the nations as He's been promised!

Verses 5b–6: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” In response to these incredible truths about the Godhead, John breaks out in joy-filled worship. He directs his praise to the Son, the one of whom he's just finished speaking, by using active, participial forms of the verbs *agapa'o* and *eluthero'o*¹¹—giving the sense of “the one loving” and “the one freeing.” Just as John has described the Lord Jesus with three attributes, he now exalts Him for three ways in which He has blessed His people.

The Lord “loves us” with a peculiar love. He came to do the Father's will for our benefit—the Father gave us to Him, those who come to Him as the Bread of Life, so that He would be sure to lose none of us who were given to Him, but that all of us would be raised up on the Last Day (cf. John 6:35–44). He gave us the example *par excellence* of abiding in His love by He Himself abiding in His Father's love through keeping His Father's commandments. In imitating His perfect example, our joy in Him will be made full (cf. John 15:9–11). He prayed that we would be united together in Him, just as He and His Father have enjoyed everlasting perfect unity (cf. John 17:20–23). He always intercedes for us as our High Priest, which is to say that He now effectually prays into the reality of our day-to-day lives everything that He fully accomplished for us in His death on the cross (cf. Hebrews 7:25)—this is an aspect of how “his enemies [are being] made a footstool for his feet” (Hebrews 10:12–13). For this reason the Heidelberg Catechism begins with this question and answer: “Q. What is your only comfort in life and death? A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my

11 The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon, *Agapao* and *Eleutheroo*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/agapao.html>, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/eleutheroo.html>.