



BLESSED

EXPERIENCING THE PROMISE OF
THE BOOK OF REVELATION



NANCY GUTHRIE

“Some Christians avoid the book of Revelation, thinking it is only for the brilliant or the paranoid. In this clear and engaging book, Nancy Guthrie walks us through the meaning of this crucial book of the Bible, showing us how it is about blessing. This book wouldn’t fit in a conspiracy theorist’s underground bunker, but it is needed for people who wonder how the fears and worries and regrets of our lives can be transformed by what Jesus showed John on the island of Patmos two thousand years ago. After reading *Blessed*, you will never again skip past Revelation in your Bible reading but will turn there with wonder and confidence, expecting to see Jesus. It will leave you informed, pondering, and, yes, blessed.”

Russell Moore, Public Theologian, *Christianity Today*; Director, *Christianity Today’s* Public Theology Project

“The book of Revelation is daunting and even discouraging for some believers, and we have a tendency to ignore it. Nancy Guthrie has written a wonderfully clear, accessible, and faithful interpretation of the book. The theological vision of the book is captured in her exposition, but the book doesn’t stop there. Guthrie explains in a remarkable way how the book of Revelation applies to us today. Laypeople, students, and anyone who wants to understand the book of Revelation will profit from reading and studying this book.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The only thing more frightening than the book of Revelation is Christian books about the book of Revelation—the deluge of cross-references, the eye-wateringly complex predictions about the future, the various millennialisms. Not so with this book. Nancy believes that, like all of Scripture, Revelation is intended to make sense to ordinary Christians. Its meaning is well within reach to anyone who is willing to read—prayerfully and carefully in context—the words on the page. Nancy makes it seem so simple, vivid, heart-warming, and practical—surely that’s what God intended when he gave the prophecy to his servant John as a blessing for all who read it and take to heart what’s written in it.”

Andrew Sach, Pastor, Grace Greenwich Church, United Kingdom; coauthor, *Pierced for Our Transgressions* and *Dig Deeper*

“This guide through the book of Revelation is exactly what is needed for individuals and groups who want to study Revelation without being intimidated. It is solidly researched and sound but written with a wide audience of readers in mind. It is engaging and winsome, with attention to personal applications. Guthrie commendably stands with readers in admitting when there are challenges and difficulties. But she encourages people not to stop when confronting challenges, but to continue to learn from what is clear in the message of Revelation. As the title indicates, the book shows us the blessings to be found in Christ.”

Vern S. Poythress, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Biblical Interpretation, and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I was helped tremendously by this book. Nancy carries us through Revelation with anticipation and wonder. While some readers will not agree with all of Nancy’s conclusions, we will all stand with her in awe of a great God. We will leave with a renewed sense of endurance to flee evil and to cling to Christ until we reach the end.”

Colleen McFadden, Director of Women’s Workshops, Charles Simeon Trust

“What I often mean by the word *blessed* is not even close to what Christ secured for us. If you want to know how much better, read this book.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“Nancy Guthrie reminds us that Saint John wrote about dragons, eagles, and beasts—not to fuel twenty-first-century speculation about their precise physical referent, but to motivate the church toward godliness in the midst of a pagan culture. Revelation invites the church to gather around the throne of the holy God, Lamb, and Spirit and worship in every aspect of life. We need more books such as this on the capstone of the Bible’s storyline, and I’m eager to see how God will use this volume for his glory!”

Benjamin L. Gladd, Associate Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

Blessed

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*Experiencing the Promise of
the Book of Revelation*

Nancy Guthrie

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Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation

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In profound humility, and with deep admiration, I dedicate this book to my brothers and sisters around the world who live under constant threat and have experienced significant loss because of their bold allegiance to Jesus and their refusal to compromise. You are among those of whom the world is not worthy (Heb. 11:38).

I will not likely meet you in this lifetime. But one day I will gather with you around the throne of God and the Lamb. We will sing together about the worthiness of the Lamb and praise the Lord God Almighty for the way he has executed his justice. One day we will be face to face with our Savior, and I anticipate he will look you in the eyes and say, “You conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of your testimony, for you loved not your life even unto death” (Rev. 12:11).

Until then, I’m praying for you. I’m asking God to fill you with grace and peace. I’m asking him to strengthen you for patient endurance as we wait for our King to come.

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Introduction

I SHOULD PROBABLY begin with a confession.

A number of years ago, when I was first asked to help teach a study of Revelation at my church, I began looking for a way out of it, a good excuse to say no. I was completely intimidated. I thought of Revelation as an impossible-to-understand collection of strange creatures and events that I would not be able to make sense of myself, let alone teach to anyone else.

But then I thought, *I should probably read through it before I say no.*

So I started reading. And just three verses in I read 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” (Rev. 1:3). When I read that, I thought to myself, *Would I ever want to say that there is a blessing from God that I’m not really interested in receiving?* I kept reading, all the way to the end, and there it was again: “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:7) and “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:10), which Eugene Peterson paraphrases, “Don’t put it away on the shelf” (Rev. 22:10 MSG). When I read that, I thought to myself, *That’s essentially what I’ve done. I’ve put this book on the shelf assuming I won’t be able to understand it, and don’t really need to.* I realized I needed to take Revelation off the shelf and invest myself in reading, hearing, understanding, submitting to, and rejoicing in this book.

Perhaps you sense in yourself the same need. If so, I’m really excited to open up this book with you in the pages ahead.

Before we begin, however, I want to do three things. First, I want to explore some reasons we have for ignoring or neglecting the book of Revelation. Second, I want to make a case for why investing in understanding this book is worthwhile. Third, I want to present a few basics for grasping the message of this book that will help us as we work our way through it.

Reasons We Avoid Revelation

1. We're afraid we won't be able to understand it.

Revelation is filled with strange creatures, other-worldly imagery, and scenes that we find difficult to imagine and decipher. It demands that we use our imaginations, and we're not really used to doing that when reading the Bible. Revelation is written in a genre of literature we're not used to reading and therefore don't instinctively know how to read and understand. This means that if we're going to rightly understand it, we've got to develop our skills for reading the literary genre of apocalyptic prophecy. As we do, we find this book opening up to us.

Revelation was not written for scholars, so you don't have to be a scholar to understand it. It is a letter written to ordinary believers in the first century with the expectation that they would understand its message. It was written to unveil or reveal hidden realities, not to make them harder to see and understand.

Revelation was not written to create confusion, conflict, or fear in those who read it. Rather, it was written so that ordinary believers who hear it and embrace what is written in it will not only be able to understand it; they'll be blessed by it—blessed in a countercultural way that the world simply cannot understand and does not value.

2. We know there is lots of disagreement about Revelation.

The fact that there is lots of disagreement about Revelation is true. There are a variety of approaches to how to read and understand Revelation, some more valid than others. And there are lots of people who have very strong opinions about how to read and understand

Revelation. Sadly, the varying approaches of interpretation can tend to create a barrier that makes this a closed book to many. And I think that's tragic.

Let me just tell you upfront: if you start into this book hoping to find either an ally or sparring partner for your thoroughly convinced interpretive or eschatological views, you may be disappointed. While my views on some disputed things may be evident in places, it is not my goal to make an argument against opposing views. I simply don't have the space or inclination for that. In most instances I'm not going to present a variety of views and make a case for my own view. I'm just going to state what I think the Scriptures present to us. I'm not interested in critique or controversy or speculation; I'm interested in presenting what is clear and cannot be ignored.

3. We think Revelation is mostly or completely about the future with nothing practical for us today.

Most people assume that Revelation is primarily or even exclusively about the future. But think for a minute. Would it really make sense that John would address a letter to seven churches in the first century that was mostly about things only the generation alive at the return of Christ would need to know and recognize? Doesn't it make far more sense that John wrote to believers in his day as well as to believers in every era between his day and the day of Christ's return about what they need to know, how they are to live, and how they can cope with the harsh realities of life in this world?

Revelation presents a past, present, ongoing, and future reality that servants of Jesus living in between his ascension and return need to see. It sheds light on history as it has unfolded in the past and is unfolding right now. It serves as a corrective to any assumptions we might have that the status quo will continue, and that resistance to the world's system is futile.

Clearly there are things described in this book that are yet to happen. There is a future culmination of the ongoing conflict that has been a reality in our world ever since God put enmity between the serpent

and the woman in Eden. There will be a final battle. Jesus will return. And Revelation is going to help us to see these things more clearly. But that doesn't mean it is entirely or even primarily future focused.

Revelation is actually less about *when* Jesus will return and more about *what* we are to do, *who* we are to be, and *what* we can expect to endure as we wait for Jesus to return to establish his kingdom.

We tend toward being very pragmatic. We want to walk out of Bible study with a to-do list and may assume that the cosmic struggle represented in Revelation doesn't lend itself to practical application. But that simply isn't so. Revelation presents a repeated call that is urgent for every one of us to respond to right now, today. Revelation has everything to do with how we invest the capital of our lives, what is worth getting excited about, or being afraid of. Revelation speaks to our big and little compromises with the world around us, how we view political and governmental systems, and what we expect our money can provide for us.

If we are concerned with what's practical, the day will come when we will look back and it will be clear to us that there was nothing more practical than prayer, nothing more practical than perseverance, and nothing more practical than praising the triune God even when evil was pressing in on us. We'll discover that worship was the "ultimate subversive activity" in a world of idolatry and materialism.¹ Enduring in our allegiance to King Jesus even when it costs us, and living as if we do not expect this world to applaud us, approve of us, or satisfy us, is subversive. It's shocking. And at the same time, it is the ordinary Christian life. It is what is expected of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven living in the kingdom of the world.

4. We know that there is a lot about persecution of believers in Revelation, and that makes us uncomfortable.

Maybe it isn't so much the strangeness or the controversy of Revelation that keeps us from this book. Perhaps, for many of us, it is our love

1 Iain Duguid, "Doxological Evangelism in Practice: Preaching Apocalyptic Literature," Westminster Conference on Preaching and Preachers, Westminster Theological Seminary, October 21, 2020.

of comfort and our lack of ability to relate to being under assault as a believer. The threat of being exiled to an island prison for declaring allegiance to King Jesus is so very far away from the comfortable lives many of us live. We simply find it hard to relate to the tension, the threat, the life-or-death consequences in this book. It is hard to relate to crying out “How long?” when we have the security of a nice house and a good job, a football game to watch on a big-screen TV, and food being delivered to our front door. If we’re honest, perhaps our comfortable lives and all we’re looking forward to acquiring and accomplishing and experiencing in this life make us perfectly content for Jesus to wait a while before he comes back to intervene in the affairs of this world.

Perhaps it is not until we dare to allow ourselves to be moved by the reports of believers in other parts of the world being tortured or killed for their faith, or when we sit with a woman who has been raped or saw her husband killed in front of her eyes by Islamic extremists, or when we consider real people whose churches have been burned and their pastors executed that we finally feel the ache expressed in Revelation by the believers asking how long it will be until Christ comes to set things right. Revelation invites us to share the ache of the persecution endured by our brothers and sisters around the world and throughout history. And it speaks into this ache, telling us that the days of evil having its way in this world are numbered.

Reasons We Should Study Revelation

1. We might not be able to understand everything in Revelation, but we can understand its central message.

If our goal in studying Revelation is to nail down what every image portrays, what every symbol stands for, what every detail means, we’re likely going to be frustrated. Our goal, instead, should be to listen for and take to heart what is really clear.

To help you grasp the central message of Revelation, I’ve prepared a personal Bible study to go along with this book that you can find at nancyguthrie.com/revelation. You will get much more out of this book

if you have spent some time answering a few questions on the biblical text before you read each chapter. At my website you'll also find a complete leader's guide that includes discussion questions to help you if you are leading a group through Revelation using this book.

We're living in such a divided time. We all have our opinions, as well as opinions about whose opinions are worth considering. And that is certainly the case regarding the book of Revelation. Some of us may be more comfortable focusing on interpretive issues or nailing down the details than opening up our lives to the self-examination this book demands of us. You and I can understand the central message of this book. The more significant question is whether or not we're willing to embrace and live in light of it.

2. We need to see this world, and our lives in this world, through the perspective of heaven.

We sometimes foolishly assume we have all of the data we need to evaluate what is happening in our world. But we don't. Our perspectives are limited by our humanity and our earthly vantage point. In the book of Revelation, we find that a curtain was pulled back for John so that he could see beyond the time and space of this earthly life into the heart of ultimate reality. He was enabled to see what is happening in this world, not from the perspective of this earth, but from the perspective of heaven. As we take in what he saw, we find that we are better able to see the true nature of things. Rather than view this world's offerings as attractive, from heaven's perspective we can see how ugly and unsatisfying they are. Rather than seeing the persecution of a faithful believer as a tragic defeat, we're able to see it as a glorious victory.

3. We want the blessing that is promised to those who "hear and keep" this book.

Many of us have a rather lightweight perception of what it means to be *blessed*. Revelation is going to correct some of our assumptions about what the blessed life looks like for ordinary believers like you and me. And since the blessing promised in Revelation is reserved for those

who “hear and keep” what is written in this book, we’re going to be challenged to think through what it will mean and require for us to hear and keep it. Revelation is going to add some meat to the bones of our understanding of what the blessed life really is.

4. We need to live out of the story Revelation tells.

Every one of us lives out of the story that we believe is true. Some of us live out of the story called “the American dream.” Some of us live out of a story that must end with “happily ever after.” Some of us have come to think that we can craft our own life story toward the end that most appeals to us. There is a story that you and I should be living out of, a story that should shape how we live today and every day to come. According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is the story. And the book of Revelation helps us to see where that story is headed so that we can live out of it in joyful anticipation.

What We Need to Get the Most Out of Studying Revelation

1. We need to be ready to use our visual imaginations.

In many places in Scripture the biblical writers tell us what they *heard* the Lord say to them. But Revelation is different. John writes about what he *saw* in four different visions—a vision of Christ, a vision in heaven, a vision in the wilderness, and a vision on the great high mountain. John draws magnificent pictures with his words, pictures that are intended to make an impression and communicate a reality.

You and I live in a world that is vivid to us. We are inundated with images throughout the course of a typical day. And these images threaten to define reality for us. But they are not a full picture of reality. Revelation is presenting to us a fuller picture of reality that we cannot see with our physical eyes. It is providing for us an opportunity to see beyond the time and space of this world, and to see all of it from heaven’s perspective.

The pictures Revelation sets before us can be strange or, in some cases, nonsensical. But these startling, compelling, even shocking images

are intended to jolt us out of our complacency regarding the evils of this age and the unimaginable blessedness of the age to come. As we process Revelation's vivid pictures we're meant to feel the hot breath of the beast and smell the sulfur from the pit and see the rainbow around the throne. These images are intended to shake us out of our sleepiness and apathy and the *détente* we may have made with the world's ways. Our prayer should be that as we see these things, they will make a deep impression on us, changing how we feel and what we fear and what we want. That's their intended purpose.

2. We need to develop our skills in interpreting symbols.

Revelation uses a lot of symbolism. John's visions include descriptions of physical objects or phenomena that actually represent something else. Of course Revelation is not the first place symbolism is used in the Bible. For example, in Exodus 19:4, when God says to Israel, "I bore you on eagles' wings," he is not saying that he used eagles to fly his people out of Egypt. The symbol of an eagle communicates something about the speed and strength of his rescue. Jesus used many symbols to represent aspects of his own person and work, saying that he was a good shepherd, the bread of life, and the vine. Similarly, but perhaps more pervasively, John uses symbols to communicate sometimes complex realities. Babylon as a symbol of worldly idolatry and immorality. The sea is a symbol for the chaos and threat of evil. Colors and numbers have symbolic meaning.

Sometimes the meaning of Revelation's symbols is plain or is even stated explicitly. For example, we're told that lampstands represent the churches (1:20), white linen represents the righteous acts of the saints (19:8), and the ancient serpent is the devil (20:2). And sometimes it's more challenging to grasp with confidence what is being communicated.

Some interpreters insist that if we don't read every image in Revelation literally, we're not taking the Bible seriously. But an important aspect of taking the Bible seriously is recognizing and interpreting each part of it in the literary genre used by the human author as inspired by the divine author. To interpret symbols symbolically

is not spiritualizing the text; it is rightly interpreting the text. For example, when we read about the Lamb standing as though it had been slain, we instinctively know that John is using symbolism to communicate something about the crucified Christ. When he speaks of God and the Lamb being seated on a throne, we know that he is using symbolism to communicate something about the sovereignty of God over the universe and over history. When he speaks of the beast, he is communicating something about the nature and intentions of Rome in his day and in every government that has set itself against God and his people since then. When he describes a dragon with seven heads and ten horns, he is communicating something about the terrifying power of Satan. In using symbols this way, John reveals the true nature of things.

Our first and best step to rightly interpreting various symbols will be to explore if and where a symbol appears in earlier books of the Bible and allow that to significantly inform our understanding. Then we must consider what the symbol would have meant to the first-century audience of this book. Many of the symbols in Revelation find resonance in the specific social, political, cultural, and religious world of the first century. They are not a system of codes waiting to be matched for meaning with people and events in our current day. Rather, they have theological and spiritual meaning pertinent to the first readers of Revelation, and that meaning must inform how we interpret their meaning for us today.

3. We need to have our eyes and ears open for Old Testament imagery and allusions.

In the book of Revelation, John was clearly writing down what he saw and heard. But his book is filled with allusions to the Old Testament, and there are at least two reasons for that. The first reason is that John saw into and wrote about the same heavenly reality that Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zephaniah saw into and wrote about. No wonder the throne John saw is a lot like the throne Isaiah saw. No wonder the kingdom crushing other kingdoms is a lot like the kingdom Daniel

saw. No wonder the new Jerusalem John saw is a lot like the city Ezekiel saw. They were seeing the same things!

The second reason Revelation has so many images from the Old Testament is that John was thoroughly saturated in the Hebrew scriptures. These images were implanted into his consciousness and imagination. It makes sense that he would draw upon words and images he was familiar with to write down descriptions of what he saw. Unlike other parts of the New Testament that set off quotes of the Old Testament, Revelation doesn't call attention to its Old Testament quotes and allusions. It's more subtle. It assumes that those reading and hearing it will recognize its Old Testament allusions and make the connection. So rather than constantly quoting the Old Testament, John simply sees everything and describes everything through the lens of the Old Testament.

4. We need to have a sense of how the book is organized.

There are a number of ways to understand how the book of Revelation is organized.² Kevin DeYoung presents several possible approaches, including seeing Revelation as divided into two main sections: chapters 1 to 11 introducing the story of God's triumph, and chapters 12 to 22 explaining the story in greater detail; or divided into four main sections, each beginning with John writing "what must soon take place" or "what must take place after this" (Rev. 1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). Another way DeYoung suggests it can be divided into four parts would be to organize it into the times John says he was caught up in the Spirit and was given a vision (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).³

We're going to see that numbers are very significant in the book of Revelation. They express the sovereignty of God over history. The number four speaks of completeness in a universal, global, or worldwide sense. The number six refers to humanity. The number seven speaks of

2 Vern Poythress presents numerous ways to outline Revelation in "Outlines of Revelation," Westminster Theological Seminary, accessed October 6, 2021, <http://campus.wts.edu/~vpoythress/nt311/nt311.html>.

3 Kevin DeYoung, "Revelation, Coronavirus, and the Mark of the Beast: How Should Christians Read the Bible's Most Fascinating Book? (Part 1)," Kevin DeYoung blog, The Gospel Coalition, May 26, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

completeness, perfection, and salvation. It represents God's sovereign plan in its perfection and completeness. The number ten speaks of completeness in the human experience or dimension. And the number twelve speaks of completeness in terms of the community of God's people, a unity in diversity.

The number seven is especially important in Revelation (used 53 times), so we shouldn't be surprised that another way the book could be organized is in seven sets of seven:

Prologue (1:1–3)

1. Seven churches (1:4–3:22)
 2. Seven seals (4:1–8:5)
 3. Seven trumpets (8:6–11:19)
 4. Seven great signs (12:1–15:4)
 5. Seven bowls of wrath (15:1–16:21)
 6. Seven messages of final judgment (17:1–18:24)
 7. Seven last things (19:1–22:5)
- Epilogue (22:6–20)

The most important thing we need to understand about the organization of Revelation is that it retraces the same events from different angles, each with a different emphasis or focus. As modern thinkers and readers, we tend to expect events depicted in a piece of writing to be in chronological order. In fact, many interpreters attempt to force the events depicted in the book of Revelation into chronological order. But if we try to do that, we find that Jesus is depicted as coming again numerous times and there are numerous "final" judgments. If we were to attempt to impose a chronological reading on it, we would see a back and forth between people persecuting the people of God and being judged for it and then persecuting them again. And we know that doesn't make sense.

Instead of reading through Revelation as a chronological depiction of events, it helps us to recognize that John repeatedly rehearses events taking place between the first and second coming of Christ. In this

way he brings us to the end of history repeatedly in the book and then starts over again, showing the same period of time from a different angle. Earlier in the book he focuses more on the time leading up to the second coming of Christ in final judgment and salvation. And later in the book, the focus is more on those final events. In “each series of seven (seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls), and also within the interlude of Revelation 12 to 14, the reader is brought to ‘the end.’”⁴ So as each of these sections begins, it is as if John picks up his camera and moves it to another location or angle and shoots the same scene again, each time adjusting his lens to focus in on different aspect of the scene and with a greater intensity. This means that Revelation is made up of seven sections that are parallel to each other—seven sections that depict the same period of time—the time in between Jesus’s first and second coming—from a variety of angles.⁵

5. We need to replace an unhealthy fascination about the future with a determination to follow Christ in the present.

While some people want to avoid Revelation, others are enormously interested in it. But sometimes that interest isn’t particularly healthy. Some are fascinated by the possibility of matching up what they hear about on the news with strange details or images in the book. If that’s what you’re hoping for in this book, I might as well tell you that you are going to be disappointed, perhaps even annoyed. But, more impor-

4 Joseph R. Nally Jr., “Recapitulation: Interpreting the Book of Revelation?,” Third Millennium Ministries, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://thirdmill.org>.

5 For more about Revelation’s recapitulation of sections that are parallel to each other, see William Hendrickson, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), 25–26, who writes, “Different sections ascribe the same duration to the period described. According to the third cycle (chapters 8–11) the main period here described is forty-two months (11:2), or twelve hundred and sixty days (11:3). Now, it is a remarkable fact that we find that same period of time in the next section (chapters 12–14), namely, twelve hundred and sixty days (12:6), or a time and times and half a time (3 and 1/2 years) (12:14). A careful study of chapter 20 will reveal that this chapter describes a period that is synchronous with that of chapter 12. Therefore by this method of reasoning, parallelism is vindicated. Each section gives us a description of the entire gospel age from the first to the second coming of Christ.” See also, Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 223–26, and G. K. Beale with David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 22–25.

tantly, if that is what you want most to get out of studying the book of Revelation, you're going to be too preoccupied with the future to grasp its implications for you in the very real present.

Revelation wasn't written to entertain, or to set out a timeline for the future, or to satisfy our curiosity about when Christ will return. Revelation was written to fortify Christians to live in the world, enduring its harsh treatment and alienation, with a firm confidence that this world is not all there is, and that, in fact, what may seem like defeat is going to give way to victory.

If, when we finish this study, we can explain every symbol, identify every Old Testament allusion, and trace every connection but are still intimidated by the world's opinion of us, still enamored with the world's wealth, still attracted by the world's comfort and pleasure, then we will not have truly heard and kept its message. We will not have truly understood and embraced the book of Revelation.

My goal is to open up this text to you, taking away the intimidation or fear factor. I want to focus your attention on the Lamb standing as though it had been slain, to help you listen to the voice of him who is Faithful and True, to encourage you to open the door to him who knocks, to challenge you to welcome the authority of the King of kings, to invite you to pull up a chair at the marriage supper of the Lamb, to direct you to find your home in the new Jerusalem.

It is my goal to cut through the confusion and help you to see the beauty, the hope and help, that is uniquely presented in this book. I want to focus your gaze on the glorious Son of Man and to instill in you a determination to overcome the world. I want you to be drawn into the worship around the throne. I want you to feel the relief that someone was found worthy to open the scroll. I want you to sense the reality of the judgment to come to all who refuse to become joined to Christ as well as the relief, the rest, and the reward to come to those who belong to him. I want to help you to see this world for the Babylon that it is so you'll be motivated to flee from it to the new Jerusalem where God himself will make his home with you. I want you to get goose bumps because you can almost taste the food that will be served at the

marriage supper, and can almost feel your tears being wiped away, and can almost see the eyes of your Savior looking into yours as you finally see him face to face.

I've realized something as I've been studying Revelation. We begin our study of this book thinking that our biggest challenge is going to be understanding it. And it isn't. The biggest challenge is opening ourselves up to the adjustments in our lives that this book calls for. Yet this biggest challenge is also what promises the greatest blessing. So let's work our way through the book of Revelation, stopping at every step along the way to consider what it means for us to hear and keep what is written in it so that we can anticipate experiencing its promised blessing.

Seven “Blessed” Statements in the Book of Revelation

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.

—Revelation 1:3

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

—Revelation 14:13

(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!)

—Revelation 16:15

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

—Revelation 19:9

Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

—Revelation 20:6

“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

—Revelation 22:7

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.

—Revelation 22:14

Blessed by Hearing the Revelation of Jesus

Revelation 1:1–8

THE BIG REVEAL. That's what home makeover shows are all about. It all starts with a property that has . . . potential. Of course, it also has problems. The renovators make a plan. Unexpected challenges like rotted subfloors and sinking foundations pop up along the way. The clock is ticking. The budget is stretched. An unnumbered crew of electricians, woodworkers, and decorators have been at work behind the scenes. And then we finally get to what we've all been waiting for—the big reveal. On *Fixer Upper*, Chip and Joanna Gaines position themselves at the far ends of two panels that feature a life-sized photo of the property before they began work on it. And then the panels are pulled back. What has been hidden is finally revealed.

That image of pulling back the curtain so that we can see what renovation experts and their crew have been working to re-create helps us to understand what the book we are beginning to study is all about. God has been and is now at work in a realm that we can't see into with human eyes. But so that we could know what he has done, is doing, and will do to renovate the home he intends to share with us, God pulled back the curtain and invited John to look. John wrote down

what he saw for us. Revelation is John's written record of what he saw behind the veil that separates heaven and earth. This is the biggest of all big reveals, especially when we consider who is revealing it to us. The book begins:

The revelation of Jesus Christ. (Rev. 1:1)

If we were reading this book in Greek, it would tell us that this is the *apokalypsis* of Jesus Christ. To apocalypse is to unveil or uncover something previously hidden. It's helpful to begin our journey through this book here because so many of us have come to think of Revelation as a mysterious book, a closed book, a book that is hard to make sense of—even a book that people seem to like to argue about more than understand or apply. But evidently this book was not written to confuse us or frighten us or divide us into opinionated camps. Rather, it was written to give servants of Jesus Christ in the first century, and servants of Jesus Christ living in every century since then, confidence in what God is doing to bring about his intended purposes for his world.

Of course, unveiling or uncovering what is hidden isn't what most people think of when they hear the word *apocalypse*. Most people think of apocalypse as a cataclysmic event that will usher in the end of life on earth as we know it. And, yes, the book of Revelation does reveal some things about the way in which life on earth as we know it will come to an end as it gives way to a new heaven and a new earth. But this book is not merely or perhaps even primarily about the future. It has some significant things to reveal to us about the present.

To help us understand what John meant when he spoke of this book as an apocalypse, it can be helpful to recognize that this isn't actually the first time this word has been used in the New Testament. Jesus used the word two times when he declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed [apocalypsed] them to little children. . . . And no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal [apocalypse] him" (Matt. 11:25–27). Later in

the Gospel of Matthew we read that after Peter affirmed that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said that flesh and blood hadn’t revealed [apocalypsed] this to Peter but rather, “my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:16–17).

When the apostle Paul sought to describe how he came to understand the gospel, he wrote, “I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation [apocalypse] of Jesus Christ” and that God “was pleased to reveal [apocalypse] his Son to me” (Gal. 1:12, 16). Even though Paul had spent his whole life studying the scrolls of the Old Testament, he couldn’t see who Jesus really was until God supernaturally revealed, or “apocalypsed,” it to him on the road to Damascus.¹

John was given an apocalypse of Jesus Christ and wrote down what he saw in the pages of Revelation. Here, what has been hidden will be revealed—the hidden resurrected and glorified Christ, the hidden angelic and demonic hosts, the hidden hypocrisy of false believers, the hidden beauty of the bride of Christ, the hidden ugliness of the world’s system, the hidden plan for the renewal of all things. As we study this book, we’re going to discover that an apocalypse can reveal to us that some of the things that we thought were important, beautiful, or secure are actually fleeting, ugly, and destined for destruction. Some of what we’re investing our lives in, counting on, hoping for, and depending on is not as significant or certain as we thought it was. As we work our way through the book of Revelation, the true nature of these things will be uncovered so that we can see them through the lens of reality, from the vantage point of heaven itself.

Hearing Revelation as Apocalyptic Prophecy

So the word *apocalypse* simply means “uncovered” or “revealed.” But after John wrote the book of Revelation, the word *apocalyptic* also came to describe the unique genre of literature that is reflected in Revelation

1 Tim Mackie presents these previous New Testament uses of the Greek word *apokalypsis* in “Apocalyptic Please—Apocalyptic E1,” *The Bible Project* (podcast), April 27, 2020, <https://bibleproject.com/>.

as well as some other prophetic books in the Bible such as Daniel and Ezekiel, and in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew and Mark. Biblical apocalyptic, as a subset of prophecy, emphasizes the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth in order to allow the prophet to see a fuller picture of the way in which God is working out his plans for his world.

In apocalyptic literature we often read accounts of dreams, visionary experiences, or journeys to heaven in which the writers use vivid symbolism to describe what they saw and the message that was mediated to them by a heavenly or angelic being. Apocalyptic is generally otherworldly so that when we read it, we feel like we are “lost in a fog of imagery.”²

Perhaps the most succinct way to describe apocalyptic literature is to say that it describes earthly events from a heavenly perspective. Common features and characteristics in apocalyptic prophecy in the Bible include:

- heavenly visions
- angels and demons
- bizarre creatures
- symbolic imagery and numbers
- abundant use of metaphor
- cataclysmic events
- scenes of judgment and destruction³

It’s safe to say that most of these things are outside of our everyday life. Sometimes you and I need something out of the ordinary to really shake up our thinking and adjust our perspective. It has to be bold, dramatic. And that’s exactly what we’re given in the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic prophecy. Revelation shakes us out of our complacency and out of what may have become a deeply entrenched way of looking at the world and our lives.

2 Tim Mackie, “The Jewish Apocalyptic Imagination—Apocalyptic E4,” *The Bible Project* (podcast), May 18, 2020, <https://bibleproject.com/>.

3 This list is adapted from a similar list by David R. Helm in “An Approach to Apocalyptic Literature: A Primer for Preachers,” Charles Simeon Trust, 2009, <https://simeontrust.org/>.

In biblical apocalyptic prophecy the secret things of God that are inaccessible to normal human knowledge about the outworking of his plans for history are revealed. The curtain is drawn back so that we can see that the powers of this world will be overthrown and replaced by the kingdom of God. We could think of it as a news report on what is happening on earth as reported from heaven. Angels and demons that are active on the earth are in full view. We see past, current, and future events in cosmic technicolor, communicated to us in the form of images and impressions, metaphors and symbols.

For some of us, the otherworldly nature of this type of literature is off-putting. As soon as we start reading about dragons and beasts with many eyes or locusts with human faces, some of us think, “Forget it. Let’s study something more straightforward. Let’s be comforted by the Psalms or challenged by Jesus’s teaching in the Gospels. Let’s trace Paul’s argument in Romans.” But we have much to gain by stretching ourselves to rightly interpret what the divine and human authors chose to write to us in the form of apocalyptic. Revelation has its own unique way of pressing us into Christ, illumining the person and work of Christ, nourishing our love for Christ. It simply won’t allow us to rest on the laurels of seasons in the past when we lived by faith and were bold in our testimony to Jesus Christ. It demands fresh obedience and boldness from us today. It won’t allow us to settle for a go-to-church-on-Sunday-and-live-like-everyone-else-all-week kind of faith. It intends to shake us out of apathy and compromise. It intends to infuse our worship with wonder.

While the creatures and events in what John has written about may seem fantastical, perhaps even the product of a vivid imagination, John wants to be clear that he isn’t making this up. He is testifying to what he saw. In fact, in the very first verse, he tells us where his visions originated and how they came to him:

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. (Rev. 1:1)

God the Father gave this revelation to Jesus, who made it known to John by sending his angel to John. And by writing down what he saw and heard, John passed it along to the servants of Jesus. From God the Father → to Jesus → to Jesus's angel → to John → to the servants of Jesus. And what was contained in what was given through this chain of provenance? "The things that must soon take place."

What does that mean? Actually, to speak this way of the age in between the ascension of Jesus and his bodily return is consistent with what is written throughout the New Testament. Paul ended his letter to the Romans saying that "the God of peace will *soon* crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20). James exhorted his readers to be patient and establish their hearts because the Lord "is *at hand*" (James 5:8) and the Judge is "standing at the door" (5:9). Peter warned his readers to be sober and watchful in prayer since "the end of all things is *at hand*" (1 Pet. 4:7).

When we read that this book is about "things that must soon take place" and that "the time is near," we're meant to see that what is written in this book about the coming of the kingdom of God was set in motion by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. As John wrote, the kingdom of God was spreading throughout the world as the gospel went out, and those who once belonged to the kingdom of darkness were being transferred to the kingdom of Jesus (Col. 1:13). The opposition to the kingdom of God portrayed in Revelation wasn't merely something off in the future. It was a present reality for those who first heard this book read to them, and it is a present reality for us now.

[John] bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (Rev. 1:2)

John saw into heavenly realities and then, similar to prophets in the Old Testament, he was charged to write down all that he saw.⁴ He was

⁴ In the Old Testament book of Daniel, we read that God sent the angel Gabriel to lift the veil so Daniel could see how the angel Gabriel was delayed because he was doing battle with a demonic force. In Ezekiel, we read that a voice from heaven told Ezekiel to write down his visions of the

invited into the heavenly throne room to see who is there and what they are doing, out to an earthly wilderness to see the world's system, and onto a high mountain from which he could see the new Jerusalem. Revelation is a written record of all that John saw in these visions.

Can you imagine seeing into heavenly realities and then trying to put it into words that people who hadn't seen it themselves would be able to understand? How would you have the vocabulary for it? You'd have to compare what you saw to things your readers were familiar with. You'd be trying to paint pictures with words, which is exactly what John does in this book.

Hearing Revelation as a Promise

These pictures painted by words in this book are intended to affect us deeply. In fact, there's a promise in this book for those who will open themselves to be changed by what they see:

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. (Rev. 1:3)

Blessing, according to this verse, is first for those who would read this book aloud. Revelation was originally intended to be read out loud to the seven churches it was addressed to. It was written in such a way that when those in the churches of John's day heard it read to them, they would be able to get its message. That means it was written to convey a message and stir the imagination rather than to trace an argument. It was written to evoke worship, confidence, anticipation, and hope in those who heard it read to them. It was written for listeners to get a sense of the big picture rather than obsess over the details. And the same goes for us. For some of us, the idea that we would not try to nail down with certainty the meaning of every word of the text we're studying goes against our instincts in what we would define as "serious Bible study."

glory of God on the move. In Zechariah, the prophet records eight visions that include horses, horns, lampstands, and a flying scroll.

We want to come away from our study with a clear understanding of every detail in our text. But studying Revelation requires a different set of skills. “It is more like studying an Impressionist painting; if we look too closely, we might lose sight of the big picture.”⁵ If we insist on owning every detail of its fantastical images, we’ll be in danger of missing the message.

Imagine that you are part of one of those seven churches in Asia who first received this letter. A reader has stood up in the midst of your gathering to read a letter that John the apostle has addressed to your church. You’re on the edge of your seat. And then he begins to read. Very quickly you realize you have some adjustments to make in the way that you listen and process what he’s written because this is not like any of the other letters from Paul or Peter or James or John that have been circulated and read aloud to your church before. The reading of this letter is more like a dramatic performance. Everyone in the room is having a similar experience. Their perception of what is really happening in your church and in the world is being altered by the experience of entering into John’s dramatic visions.

As you walk back home past all of the Roman architecture and evidence of Roman rule, you would find that you’re now seeing it through the lens of the vivid counterimages contained in John’s letter. You’ve seen an alternative reality that is true reality, and it has changed how you see everything else. John’s “blessed are those who read aloud the words of this prophecy” has proved true. God has blessed the reading aloud of his word, evidenced by the way in which all who heard it read at your church are thinking and feeling, singing and suffering, worshiping and waiting. You have been blessed by it. But not merely by hearing it. You’ve been blessed because what you heard is changing how you think, how you feel, what you say, what you believe.

There is no magical blessing in simply hearing what is revealed in Revelation. There’s no blessing for those who hear it but choose to

5 Iain Duguid, “Doxological Evangelism in Practice: Preaching Apocalyptic Literature,” Westminster Conference on Preaching and Preachers, Westminster Theological Seminary, October 21, 2020.

ignore it, reject it, rebel against it, or simply treat it as fodder for their curiosity. The blessing is for those whose lives are impacted and shaped by what is in it. It changes their priorities. It builds up their courage. It impacts how they spend their money. It leads them to worship in spirit and in truth. It sends them to their knees in prayer. It emboldens their witness. It takes away their fear of death. It fills their imagination and fuels their anticipation of where history is headed, and it shapes their understanding of how their suffering will resolve in the new heaven and the new earth.

The first servants of Jesus who heard what is written in Revelation were believers around Asia in the first century. It was exactly what they needed to hear in their day. But it wasn't just what *they* needed to hear. John wrote it down for every believer in every century since then. It has always been exactly the truth believers need to hear, the reality believers need to see. It shows us:

- ~ the opposition we can expect to escalate
- ~ the endurance we need to cultivate
- ~ the judgment we will celebrate
- ~ the victory in which we will participate
- ~ the enemy Jesus will annihilate
- ~ the sorrow he will alleviate
- ~ the creation he will regenerate
- ~ the marriage he will consummate
- ~ and the home we can anticipate sharing
with him forever.

That's what I call blessed.

Hearing Revelation as a Letter

So Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy, which is its own unique literary genre. It includes the promise of blessing for those who hear and keep it. It is also a letter or epistle. After John explains the provenance and promise of the book, he addresses a specific group of recipients:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia. (Rev. 1:4a)

Revelation doesn't simply *contain* letters to the seven churches; it *is* a letter that John intends to be circulated to seven churches in Asia. It was written to meet the very real needs of believers in his day. Some of them were compromised and needed to be jolted out of it. Some of them were enduring costly persecution and needed to be strengthened for it. All of them needed to understand the cosmic battle against evil being waged in heaven and earth that will resolve in the establishment of God's kingdom at the coming of the King.

So why these seven churches? There were certainly other churches in Asia. We're going to discover that the number seven has tremendous significance in Revelation. Something is being communicated whenever we come upon seven of anything in the book. Seven is one of the numbers of completeness. So, by addressing seven churches, John is saying that his letter is written to the church as whole, to Christians throughout the centuries. Each of the seven churches addressed represents struggles and victories that are present in the church in every generation. The comforts in it aren't reserved only for believers living in Asia at the end of the first century, and neither are its commands.

After stating who the letter is being written to, we get a sense of what is being imparted to them by means of this letter:

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, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (Rev. 1:4b–5a)

We've read other letters in the New Testament that begin with a greeting of grace and peace. So perhaps it is easy to read right through this greeting as standard politeness. But I don't think we should. John knows that if the believers who will hear this letter read to them are going to be able to keep or obey what is written in it, they will need supernatural help. They are going to need grace to persevere instead of

compromise. They'll need peace if they are to endure constant conflict with the world's system. This kind of grace and peace has only one source. And that is exactly who John says will provide it. Each member of the Godhead is getting in on it.

John works his way through Father, Spirit, and Son as the source of this grace and peace. Here he refers to the Father as "him who is and who was and who is to come." We're about to read about some very difficult realities. In facing those, we can be sure of the support of the God "who was"—the God who has always been a helper to his people—and the God "who is" even now caring for his people. We're about to read about some stark realities in the future. We can be sure of the sovereign oversight of the God "who is to come" over those realities. Then he speaks of the Holy Spirit as "seven spirits who are before his throne." We can be sure that the Holy Spirit will deliver this grace and develop this peace in the servants of Jesus. Then he gives us three names or titles for the Son, and each one speaks grace to us and brings us peace:

- Jesus is the faithful witness. We can trust that Jesus will tell us the truth about ourselves, about the world we're living in, about the future, about everything.

- Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. He was the first human to rise from the dead and never die again. But he won't be the last! He is our hope for life beyond this life when our lives are threatened.

- Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth. Sometimes it seems to us like governments and organizations and philosophies and the dominant culture have all of the power in this world. But they don't. Someone is ruling over them. Their days are numbered.

These three titles for Jesus seem to move John to praise. We can almost picture him looking up from what he's writing, lifting his hands toward heaven, and saying:

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. (Rev. 1:5b–6)

John is moved to worship this triune God who is revealing so much about who he is, what he is doing, and what he is about to do in “the things that must soon take place.” It’s not some remote robotic being revealing these things. He’s receiving this revelation from someone “who loves us.” It is always easier to hear hard things when they come from someone who loves us, isn’t it? And how do we know he loves us? John stated it clearly in one of his earlier letters, which we know as 1 John. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). The love of Jesus toward us is not merely sentimental; it’s sacrificial. He actively demonstrated his love for us by offering himself as a substitute in such a way that sin doesn’t have the power over us that it once had. We’ve been “freed from our sins by his blood”—freed from its penalty and its power.

In the next verse, John combines familiar images about the Messiah from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10 to turn our gaze toward anticipation of the day when Jesus will come again to this earth in power and glory:

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. (Rev. 1:7)

The whole world will see him when he comes. His coming will not be a secret. But his coming will not be a day of celebration for all who see him. For those who have rejected him, ignored him, and refused his offer of grace and mercy, his coming will be a day of great wailing and mourning. All those who crucified him, rejected him, mocked him, and refused to believe in him will finally see his glory. And it will bring them to their knees, weighted down by sorrow and regret.

Finally, John enables us to hear God himself speak. What God says about himself assures us that he is a reliable source for all we’re about to read in this book:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Rev. 1:8)

Think for a minute about all that someone who is and who was and who is to come has seen. Think about all that he knows, all that he understands from his perspective. And then imagine that he wants to pull back the veil between heaven and earth so that you will be able to see, know, and understand these things. Imagine that he wants you to have his perspective on what is going on in the world, his perspective on what is going on in your life. That is the great purpose of the book of Revelation. God has chosen to apocalypse, or reveal, his perspective to us so that we can meet the uncertainty, the unfairness, and the undoing of life in this world with faith and hope.

Two times in just these opening eight verses God has identified himself as the one “who is and who was and who is to come.” We’re going to hear him say it again in 4:8. And then we’re going to hear him say it again later in the book, except it will be slightly different. Later, we’ll hear him identify himself as the one “who is and who was” (11:17; 16:5). He’ll leave off the “and who is to come.” Why? Because he will have come!

Finally, God identifies himself as “the Almighty” (1:8). God reveals himself to a people who may have wondered if he was aware of their suffering, if they should really put their lives on the line for the gospel, if they were risking everything for something that wasn’t real or true, and he reminds them of his name—a name that reflects the reality that he has the power and position to control everything. Oppressive governments are under his control. False teachers are under his control. Evil is under his control. The suffering of his saints is under his control. The destruction of the devil is under his control. Time is under his control. The earth and stars are under his control. Everything is under his control because he is not just mighty; he is the Almighty.

Imagine what it would mean for us if none of what we’ve been shown in these first eight verses were true. What if God did not choose to reveal or uncover these things for us? What if he did not act to reveal to us where history is headed? The sorrow and persecution that so many endure for him would seem meaningless and truly unbearable. Imagine

if we had no resource for grace or peace. Without Jesus as the faithful witness, how would we know what is true in a world of so many lies? Without Jesus as the firstborn from the dead, how would we have any hope of life beyond our number of years on this earth? Without Jesus as the ruler of kings on earth, what would keep us from despair over the corruption, oppression, and misery that is so pervasive in our world? If Jesus did not love us by freeing us from our sins, we would still be ruled by them in the here and now, and we would be destined for destruction because of them in the hereafter. If he had not made us a kingdom and priests to his God and Father, our lives would have no dignity or purpose.

But instead, he who is the Alpha and the Omega has revealed to us what we can expect in this in-between time—in between his ascension to heaven and his return to this earth. He who is and who was and who is to come is present with us now by his Spirit and will be fully and intimately present with us when he comes. Because he is the Almighty, we can rest knowing that he has the power to provide the blessing promised in this book, to accomplish the elimination of evil and suffering portrayed in this book, and to prepare us as a bride to present to the Son as pictured in this book.

Hearing and Keeping Revelation 1:1–8

Earlier we read that those who hear and keep what is written in the book of Revelation are blessed. So beginning in this first chapter, and in every chapter that follows, we want to ask a very practical and hopefully penetrating question: What will it mean for us to “hear and keep” it? What will it look like for us to live in light of what has been revealed? We need to know, because this is where the blessing is. And we want every blessing God has for us.

To hear and keep Revelation 1:1–8 means that we hear it as something God wants us to know. More significantly, we hear it as something we simply *must* know if we’re going to be able to live as servants of Jesus, waiting for him to come again. So perhaps it leads us to pray as we begin our study of Revelation, “Lord, I want to see everything you want to show to me. My eyes, my heart, and my mind are all open.”

It means that we open ourselves up to being moved and challenged and perhaps shocked out of our complacency by what John saw. We refuse to take a casual or merely intellectual approach to what is being shown to us. Instead, we are desperate enough for the blessing this book promises that we are open to being wrong, open to coming under conviction and responding in repentance, open to having our deeply entrenched ways of interacting with the world challenged and changed. Are you that desperate?

To hear and keep these verses is to rest in God's sovereign control over the past, the present, and the future in such a way that we aren't constantly feeding on regret over the past, frustrations in the present, and fears about the future. Instead, we want to live in the light of the grace that has covered our past and is empowering us to live in the present as those who have really been freed from our sins by his blood. We have peace now because we really do believe that we have been and are now loved in the way we most need to be loved. And we have peace about the future, because we know that the Alpha and Omega, the Almighty, has it firmly in his grip. He will bring everything John saw to pass.

Perhaps hearing and keeping these first eight verses of Revelation means that we get on our knees and pray, "Lord, I need this revelation of who you are to do more than simply inform me. I need this revelation to move me. I need this revelation of your eternity and your sovereignty to fill me with the courage to live in light of it. I need this grace and peace to permeate—even define—my life. I need for you to radically adjust my perspective about what is real, what is worthwhile, and who is worthy of my worship."

These first eight verses are a bit like the buildup to the big reveal on a home improvement show. We've been introduced to the person who has been at work behind the scenes. We've heard his promise of blessing, the assurance of his love, and the extent of his power. God himself is pulling back the curtain, and he has invited us to see into the reality we most need to see. And so we find ourselves on tiptoes, anticipating all that he has to show us—to apocalypse to us—about the coming of his kingdom.