

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

REVELATION LESSON 1 (Keys 1-3)

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Ben Bailey.

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John” (Rev. 1:1). Welcome to our study of the Book of Revelation. Revelation is probably one of the most-discussed (and in many people’s minds, one of the most-interesting) books of the Bible. Yet at the same time it is one of the most-misused and most-abused books in the Scriptures. People come to the Book of Revelation with ideas that God never intended for Revelation to convey. Revelation often has become a launching pad (of sorts) for these types of ideas. People have used Revelation to “prove” such things as past wars or future events. In fact, they even (allegedly) have found such things in Revelation as submarines and aircraft! But that is **not** what God intended the Book of Revelation to be about. The Book of Revelation also has been abused, in the sense that it has become fertile ground for many false prophecies. Sometimes those prophecies are things that people look back on in human history and say, “See, the Book of Revelation prophesied that.” At other times, those prophecies are events that supposedly will occur in the future. For example, one advertisement suggested, “If you would like to find out about Armageddon, as well as Nostradamus and his prophecies concerning the years 2009-2012, look in the Book of Revelation.” These types of things have nothing to do with the purpose for which the Book of Revelation was written in the first century, and they surely are not an application for us today either. God gave the Book of Revelation to first-century Christians who were suffering greatly. He intended it to be an encouragement to them so that they would “keep on keeping on” and never give up. He wanted them to know that if they would do that, then in the end they would be victorious.

Placing the Book of Revelation in its proper category within the New Testament helps us understand its purpose. For example, the books of Matthew through John (the Gospel accounts) were written to tell us about the life of Christ—Who He is, how He lived, and how He died for each one of us. The Book of Acts tells us how to become a Christian. Once we learn about Jesus, Acts then tells us how to become a member of the body of Christ (a follower of Christ). Romans through Jude tell us how, on a daily level, to live for Jesus, as well as what God expects of us once we have become Christians (members of the body of Christ). Revelation (the grand ending to the New Testament) tells us how to die faithfully as children of God. We learn about Jesus. We learn how to become a Christian. We learn how to live. And we learn how to die faithfully as a member of the Lord’s body.

In this lesson, we are not going to present a detailed account of every image in the book. Nor are we going to go through the Book to give a chapter-by-chapter explanation of every image or item. Rather, we are going to do two things. First, we want to offer some keys (or helps) that will help Bible students go to the Book of Revelation and understand what some of the main images and ideas are. Second, we want to show that the Book of Revelation is a very practical book. It does not have to be a mystery. I have heard of Bible stu-

dents who were members of the Lord's church and who said, "I do not like studying the Book of Revelation, and I do not think it should be in the Bible." Such an attitude is, at the very least, irreverent, and at the worst is, for a Christian, blasphemous. We need to understand that we **can** understand the Book of Revelation, and that it is a book that applies to us on a very practical level.

Let's begin with some basic helps by discussing some key ideas that appear in the Book of Revelation. For example, the Book of Revelation tells us that it **can** and **must** be understood. Notice Revelation 1:3. From the very outset, God says that we not only can, but must, understand this book. "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near." The idea of being "blessed" has to do with divine happiness. Divine benefits are promised to the person who reads, understands, and obeys the things written in the Book of Revelation. Why? For first-century Christians, the time of their demise was not very far off. The same principle, by application, applies to us today. If we want to receive God's divine blessings, and if we want to know how to deal with, face, and overcome tribulation in our lives, then we need to read and understand the Book of Revelation. God is not trying to confuse us. He did not give us the Book of Revelation to merely pique our interests or give us a launching pad for things that He never intended to be included in the book. It is a book that, when kept in context, can be read and understood. It promises a divine blessing to us when we do that. Throughout Scripture, blessings are promised to those who read it. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." The psalmist showed us the benefit of following God's Word as we deal with sin. He wrote, "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!" (Ps. 119:9,11). We must understand that if we read God's Word, we can keep ourselves from sin. If we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we **will** be filled. God's Word is a "light unto our feet and a light unto our path" (Ps. 119:105). Look at that blessing. Just as these passages teach, we will find a divine blessing in the Book of Revelation when we come to the book with the mind-set that we can read and understand what the book is saying.

In order to understand the Book of Revelation, we need to understand some of the key ideas, and especially some of the key verses. Revelation 11:15 is a good summary statement regarding what the Book of Revelation is all about: "Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.'" How does that sum up the message of the Book of Revelation? Christians were living during the time of the Roman Empire. It was a wicked and ungodly empire that was not favorable to Christianity. In fact, the Romans were trying to stomp out Christianity. Throughout the Book of Revelation, God tells Christians, "If you will hang on, refuse to give up, and remain faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10), you can be assured that Christ and His kingdom (the church; Mt. 16:19) are going to be victorious over all world governments." If we remain faithful to the church, no matter what happens (even if we lose our lives!), we still will be victorious. That is the key idea in the Book of Revelation. We must not let any ideology change us. Rather, we must remain true to God and His kingdom—no matter what. If we do, we will be the winner in the end. We must understand that God still rules in the kingdoms of men (Dan. 4:25-26).

The key word in the Book of Revelation is the word "overcome." This word is used about seventeen times in the Book of Revelation. For example in Revelation 3, to the seven churches of Asia, Jesus said, "He who overcomes can come over and sit with Me and My Father." In essence, when Jesus uses the word "overcome," He is saying that if we over-

come, if we refuse to give up, if we persevere, and if we endure, then we can come over and live with Him. This is one of the grand encouragements that the Book of Revelation has for each child of God. Here is how this is practical. Yes, the book was written to first-century Christians to tell them not to give up. But Christians still suffer today. In fact, 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus **will** suffer persecution.” We may well suffer. But the Book of Revelation tells us that if we overcome, if we never give up, if we never bow down, and if we never allow our tribulations and troubles to overcome us (but instead **we** overcome **them**), then we can come over and live with Jesus in the heavenly realm.

There is a key question in the Book of Revelation, which occurs in Revelation 6:10. Christians are suffering. It appears as if the Roman Empire will be the reigning world power. Christians are wondering: “God, we have held true to you; we have not given up; how long will we have to endure this?” The key question from those who were being sacrificed at Rome’s altar was, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Christians wanted to know, “How long will this continue to go on? God, aren’t you going to avenge us?” But God gives them white robes and tells them to wait a little while longer because He **will** exercise vengeance on the ungodly. The lesson here is so powerful. Christians are enrobed in white (as a symbol of purity before God), and God tells them not to give up because He will repay those who are wicked. God is the One Who will take care of the ungodly. This, then, is an encouragement to be faithful and not to give up.

Part of understanding the Book of Revelation is understanding its key ideas. The Book is like a drama or vision unfolding on the scene. If we are going to understand it, we must understand some of the main characters and some of the main ideas. If we are unfamiliar with those things, then we may end up approaching the Book of Revelation in a rather flip-pant manner. What are some of the key ideas? I plan to offer seven—the first three in this lesson, and the next four in the lesson that is to follow—that can help us approach the Book of Revelation and be ready to understand it.

The first key is that Revelation is written in symbols. It is a book that tells us it is symbolic and figurative. It is not to be taken in a literal, word-for-word fashion. For example, notice Revelation 1:1 where John said, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.” The word “signified” tells us that this is a book that is symbolic. God is going to set forward for Christians certain images. For instance, in the Book of Revelation we see a dragon. Think about that image. A dragon is one of the most mythical beasts in all of human history and literature. It can never be tamed. It wreaks havoc on the countryside. It is powerful, and it is something to be feared. That is the image of the dragon. But is God speaking of a **literal** dragon? No. That is not what God is trying to get across. We also see a sea beast. People who live near oceans have heard rumors about a “great beast” that lives in the ocean. It can sink any ship, and no sailor could ever pierce it with a harpoon. That was a fearful image. We also see riders on horses, and a picture of a temple. All of these are images that are not to be taken literally. Instead, they are presented to make an impression upon the mind that will last and that has a singular idea—like the dragon, which is a powerful beast that is to be feared, yet that also can be overcome with God’s help. We know that Revelation is a symbolic book because in Revelation 1:1 God said that these things were to be “signified,” and the word signified means “to be shown by signs.” God said to John, “I am going to give you this revelation, which I will present to you in signs.” Here is why a lot of people do not understand the Book of Revelation. When people come to Matthew through Jude, they read those books literally—and

rightly so because the text demands that in most places. They then come to the Book of Revelation with the Matthew-through-Jude mind-set that wants to look at the book literally and that sees a literal dragon and a literal beast with seven heads and ten horns, and they get confused. The Book of Revelation is a different type of literature that is filled with apocalyptic language—which is a language in which God, through signs and symbols—showed His power and gave His message to Christians. In fact, Revelation itself is from the word *apocalypsis*. The word means “an unveiling.” God unveils for Christians (on a grand stage) in figurative language certain images that they (not people in the world) would understand so that they could know His message. This type of writing (apocalyptic language) was designed specifically to reveal God’s message to some, while veiling it to others. Christians would understand about the temple. They would understand about the city foursquare, and the twelve tribes or the 144,000. They had a clear understanding about those things. But when a Roman government leader read it, he would think it was simply something fantastical or interesting—but not a direct threat to the Roman Empire. So, the book revealed the message to those who were familiar with its symbols and language, while hiding it from those who were not. Many of the images were simply reminders to those who were descendants from the Israelites in the Old Testament. Much of the imagery in the Book of Revelation takes us back to a time in the Old Testament—a time in history with which first-century Christians would have been familiar. Not all of the book, but much of it, takes us back to Old Testament history—which Christians would have understood.

Part of understanding this first key has to do with the fact that some of the symbols are given as numbers. Numbers play a very important part in the Book of Revelation, and if we fail to understand the significance of the numbers, then we will miss out on much of what the book is saying. For example, the number 3 is an important number in the Book of Revelation, where it is used several times. Throughout Bible history, the number 3 always has represented God. Think about it. You have: (1) the Father; (2) the Son; and (3) the Holy Spirit—the Trinity or Godhead. Three is a “divine number” that represents the Godhead itself. Then we see the number 4, which represents the Earth or things that are physical (as opposed to being spiritual). There are four directions—north, south, east, and west. There are four elements (earth, fire, wind, and water). The number 4 often represents things that are earthly. Then we come to the number 7. When you combine the things represented by the numbers 3 and 4, you get the number 7—which always represents perfection. There are 7 days in a week. There are 7 churches discussed in the Book of Revelation. These are things that are complete or that represent a totality. Then there is the number 6, which is one less than 7. If 7 is perfection, then 6 falls short of perfection, which will help us when we come to the number 666. If 7 is perfection, and if 6 is one less than 7 (or imperfection), then what would 666 be? It would be complete and utter **imperfection**. That is all the number 666 is trying to get across to us. The number 12 often was a number that represented humanity. There were 12 tribes. There were 12 apostles, representing humanity or people. The number 1,000 represented an indefinite time period. We see 1,000 years, 1,000 years of tribulation, or 1,000 years during which Satan was going to reign. Those are not literal thousand years, but should be viewed as indefinite time periods that one day will come to an end and will not last forever. Thus, part of understanding the symbols in Revelation has to do with understanding what some of the numbers mean.

The first key is that Revelation is a book that is written in symbols, and that it must not be approached as a word-for word, literal discussion because the text is symbolic. The second key is that Revelation was written about things that would “shortly take place.” If we can understand this, it will help us get a good grasp of the Book of Revelation. In Rev-

elation 1:1 we read, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.” When God gave this revelation to first-century Christians, it was about things that were going to happen during their lifetimes. This is where so many people get off track regarding the Book of Revelation. The book is not about the year 2009. It is not about what happened during the medieval times. Revelation is not about what is going to happen 10,000 years down the road. We must look at the book and understand that it was written for first-century Christians about things that would “shortly take place.” Revelation 1:3 says, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; **for the time is near.**” Did you know that the book closes on this same tone? Notice Revelation 22:6, where we read, “Then he said to me, ‘These words are faithful and true.’ And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things **which must shortly take place.**” The dragon, the sea beast, the land beast, the riders on horses—all of those images were not of future events for us, but were things that were going to happen during the lives of the Christians who read about them. Too many people approach the Book of Revelation with an eye toward the present. In reality, we need to read the book with first-century glasses. W.B. West wrote a commentary titled *Revelation Through First-Century Glasses*. We will be a step ahead in studying the Book of Revelation if we approach the book with the understanding that the things that discussed within it were about to happen shortly to first-century Christians. Revelation is not dealing with Hitler, Social Security numbers, Saddam Hussein, or world wars. Revelation, by application, tells us that God will take care of us just like He took care of those Christians who were enduring tribulation during the first century. During tribulation, His kingdom will always outrule and outreign all others. The Book was written for first-century Christians to help them overcome the persecution they were facing. The symbols were things they understood, and represented things that happened during their lifetimes.

Not only is Revelation symbolic, and not only was it written about things that would shortly take place, but the third key shows us that the Book was written for the purpose of comforting persecuted Christians. Revelation 1:3 says, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.” The idea of “blessed” carries with it the concept of being comforted, helped, or benefited. That blessing was offered to the Christians who read the Book of Revelation, who understood it, and who obeyed it. Christians during the time of the Roman Empire (i.e., during the writing of the Book of Revelation) were suffering greatly at the hand of the Romans. History records that some of the Roman rulers (like Nero or Domitian) were so evil and ungodly that if they found you openly worshiping Christ and claiming to be a Christian, they would take you from your home in front of your family, kill you, soak your body in flammable liquid, place you on a cross in the emperor’s garden, and light you on fire to be used as a human candle. Some were even taken from their homes and, as a type of sport, were thrown to lions in the arena for people to watch. That is the kind of suffering that was occurring. If you were a Christian, you were not a “half-way Christian” because you knew that you might die for Christ. The Book of Revelation is written to encourage and comfort Christians who were suffering beyond anything we might be able to imagine today. The point is that God **knows** our sufferings, and He **cares**. If we will endure to the end, then we **will** win the battle. Revelation 14:13 is an encouraging passage: “‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ “Yes,” says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.’” God said that those who die in the Lord are blessed. God knows and cares. Even if a person dies, comfort is available because in God’s sight there is a great blessing waiting for that person. This reminds me of Romans 8:18 where Paul said, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to

be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” There is a passage in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that is a commentary on the Book of Revelation. There, we read, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” This is the idea behind the Book of Revelation. God is not going to allow us to be tempted beyond what we can endure. We need to remember that God is faithful, and He will make a way of escape so that we can endure. Christians needed to know that. Their escape may have been only through death. But they got out of their persecution, and God took care of them in the midst of that.

These first three keys begin to give us an understanding of what Revelation is all about. This book is one of the most-powerful pieces of inspired writ that we as Christians possess. We will help ourselves immensely if we open the Book of Revelation with the idea that God wants to help us. The message is clear. God loves His children so much that He will help them and will offer them aid. He knows and cares when we are suffering. If anything, this initial lesson ought to impress upon our minds how we need to be faithful children of God so that we can receive God’s comfort and blessing. There is nothing more important in all the world—especially in the times during which we are living when there is so much ungodliness, sin, and persecution—for Christians to live faithfully before the Lord today. The Book of Revelation tells us how we desperately need to be children of God.

Are you a faithful child of God? Are you a Christian? Have you ever obeyed the Gospel? God’s plan of salvation is very simple. One must hear the Word of God. Having heard that Word (Rom. 10:17), one must believe that Jesus is the Son of God (Jn. 8:24). A person also must repent, because as Jesus Himself said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Then a person must confess Jesus as the Christ (Rom. 10:10; Mt. 10:32-33). A person also must be baptized in water. Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk. 16:16). Once we become children of God, then the blessings and benefits are ours. And no matter how hard times may get, and no matter what government we live under, the message is still, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.” May God bless each of us as we strive to live according to the Gospel of Christ.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR REVELATION LESSON 1 (KEYS 1-3)

1. According to Revelation 1:1, when were the events discussed in the book supposed to take place?
2. According to Revelation 1:3, were the things being discussed in the book said to have been “near” or “far away”?
3. According to Revelation 1:3, did God intend for the things written in the book to be understood and obeyed?
4. Which of the following is the Book of Revelation intended to be: (a) a mysterious book; or (b) a practical book?
5. What is there about the passage found in Revelation 11:15 which suggests that it is a good summary statement of the content of the Book of Revelation?
6. According to Revelation 2:10, what were Christians of the first century to do?
7. Does the statement in Revelation 2:10 apply to Christians today?
8. According to this lesson, what is the key word in the Book of Revelation?
9. According to Revelation 3:21, what promise did Christ make to those first-century Christians who remained faithful to Him?
10. Under what empire were Christians in the first century living when the Book of Revelation was written?
11. According to Revelation 6:9-10, what was happening to Christians during the first century?
12. What does 2 Timothy 3:12 say that all faithful Christians will have to endure?
13. This lesson discusses three “keys” to understanding the Book of Revelation. What is the first of those keys?
14. What is the second key to understanding the Book of Revelation?
15. What is the third key to understanding the Book of Revelation?
16. In the Book of Revelation, what does the number “3” symbolize?
17. In the Book of Revelation, what does the number “7” symbolize?
18. In the Book of Revelation, what does the number “6” symbolize?
19. What important message is found in Revelation 14:13? Does that message apply only to Christians of the first century, or does it apply to Christians today, too?