

1. In Patmos and "in the Spirit"

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[0 : 00] Now let's have a moment's prayer before we look at Revelation 1. And God our Father, as we come to this tremendous word at the end of the canon, prophecy's last word, with its glorious imagery, its powerful and penetrating pictures, and its amazing picture of the Lord Christ enthroned above earth and heaven, and we pray indeed that we will find Christ in the scriptures, that you will guide us, you will lead us, and in the midst of the mysteries of Revelation, help us to hear the practicalities, help us to find that this is a book about living, a book to help us to live now in the light of then.

And we ask that in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. So it would be a help if you could have your Bibles open, please, at Revelation 1.

From time to time, books or series of books become popular in the Christian book world. One which was extremely popular, or one set of books which was extremely popular a number of years ago, was the series called Left Behind by Tim LaHaye.

Before you rush to the bookroom to find if it's there, let me assure you it's not. And 30 years before that, back in the 1970s, there were books by American writer Hall Lindsay called The Late Great Planet Earth, and these books expounded a particular theory of the book of Revelation.

Some of you may have grown up in what is called predispensational millenarianism. If you haven't, thank the Lord that you didn't, and don't bother about it.

[1 : 59] But these books put forward that view very, very briefly. What these books argue is that in chapters 1 to 3, the church is on earth, and then in chapter 4, it's rapture to heaven, and the events that unfold in chapters 4 to chapter 20 are events that happen after the rapture, and then Christ again returns at the end of the age, and puts things right after reigning for a thousand years, literally in the physical city of Jerusalem.

Now, we've spent all of this first sermon on that kind of thing. I'm not going to because it's not profitable. But I will pick up these particular issues as we come to them, and I promise you, when we come to chapter 20, eventually I will give you my views on the millennium, because probably by then I'll have worked out what they are.

So, that's not the view you are going to hear. On the other hand, some people in reaction against that have seen Revelation as little more than a series of pictures saying, everything's going to be just fine.

A series of pictures which are not especially related to particular events, which say it will all work out all right in the end. Well, of course we do believe that, but it seems hard to believe that this last, this final word of the canon is not saying a bit more than that.

So, let me tell you how I'm going to try and look at the book as we look at it together. I think the best way to get into a book is actually to listen to what the book says about itself, rather than come to it with ideas which we already impose on it.

[3 : 49] Four times in the book of Revelation, there occurs a very significant phrase, and I'm going to take that as the key to unfolding the book. Look at chapter 1, verse 10.

I was in the Spirit. Four times that phrase occurs. In 1, verse 10, that introduces us to the first section, which is Christ in the middle of the seven churches, which I take to mean not only literal churches then, but the whole church across time and space.

The second time it appears is in chapter 4, verse 2. I was in the Spirit. That's a long section that begins there, to the end of chapter 16, which is really Christ and the world.

Christ and the church, then Christ and the world. Although in that long section, there are interludes which tell us what's happening to the church during the time these events are unfolding on earth.

Then chapter 17 to chapter 20, chapter 17, verse 3, I was in the Spirit. This is about Christ and judgment.

[5 : 07] The judgment of Babylon the Great, the city which begins way back in Genesis with Nimrod. The world, as John calls it in his letters.

And then finally, in chapter 21, I was in the Spirit. This is Christ and the new creation. Now, I'll be coming back to that, obviously, as we go through it.

But that's the way I think we can best explore this wonderful but rather puzzling territory. In other words, we've got three sections from chapters 1 to 19, which basically, 1 to 20, which basically deal with the present age between the comings, and then 21 and 22, which deal with the new creation. That's basically the way I'm going to take it. The other important thing I want to say is this. This is not the book of Revelations.

That's not to be pedantic. When you hear people talking about the book of Revelations, almost always they talk about it as if it were the Da Vinci Code or something like that. Full of marvels, full of wonders, full of bizarre happenings and bizarre individuals.

[6 : 21] It is the book of Revelation. It is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The title I've given to this whole series is Christ, the First Word, and the Last Word.

That's what the book of Revelation is about. Christ, the First Word, and Christ, the Last Word. And just a couple of other things by way of introduction.

Who and when. We are told it is written by John. Now, this is almost certainly the Apostle.

And obviously we're not going to go into all the arguments for that. But it seems to me the most convincing argument is the one that John Stott makes. He says, obviously someone who simply refers to himself as John is almost certainly the Apostle.

The alternative is to believe that at the end of the first century the Church was overrun with brilliant Christians who were so famous that they only needed to mention their first name.

[7 : 26] This is almost certainly the Apostle John, the last of the Apostles to be alive, outliving the others. And we know he was particularly associated with Ephesus and the Church is mentioned and the Church is mentioned here.

So, these are the words of Jesus Christ through his angel to the Apostle John. And if you go through the book you'll find many, many expressions, many ways of thought, many images, which seem to come straight from the Gospel.

Probably written almost at the end of the first century. In the 80s and in the 90s of the first century the Roman Emperor Domitian unleashed a horrific persecution on the Church.

And that is almost certainly the background of this book. And one of the things Domitian insisted was he called himself my Lord and my God.

And you can see that instantly clashes with the Church. If Domitian is Lord and God then Jesus cannot be Lord and God. So, John is on Patmos but he's also in the Spirit which is my title this evening on Patmos and in the Spirit.

[8 : 46] And that is true for all Christians everywhere, isn't it? Notice the message through Jesus Christ to the angel, to the Apostle John and then to his servants, to all of God's people.

Glasgow, Melbourne, wherever you happen in New York, wherever you happen to be, whatever your Patmos happens to be, this is a message for you. So with that in mind then, let me say three things about this chapter.

First of all, we have an open book in verses 1 to 4. Now some of you may say that's the last thing you can say about the book of Revelation.

Revelation. Revelation is full of mysteries. Revelation is full of puzzles. Of course it is. We're not going to solve all the mysteries. One verse I commend to you.

It's easy to remember where the verse is. Deuteronomy 29, verse 29. Read that verse. Think about it. If necessary, frame it and put it up in your room.

[9 : 49] The secret things belong to the Lord our God. But those which are revealed belong to us and to our children that we may walk in the way, in the paths of his law.

Now you see the point. There are things that God does not reveal. But the things that he does reveal they are for us and for our children so that we can live the Christian life.

We cannot see everything about the book of Revelation. But that doesn't mean we can't see anything. So what kind of a book is this open book?

Well first of all it is a revelation, an apocalypse. Sometimes it's called the apocalypse. Now the important thing to realise about apocalypse is that it means unveiling, revealing.

In other words the object of this book is to reveal, not to confuse. It's the unveiling of the world, the unseen world which lies beyond our senses.

[10 : 52] Now some books of the Bible and I think especially of Esther, that world is totally invisible and can only be grasped by the eye of faith. In this book, John on Patmos, the curtain is thrown aside and the angel says to John, John this is what's really happening.

It's not that you're not on Patmos. Patmos is real. The problems are real. But look what else is happening. And these books, sometimes called Apocalypses, Daniel, Zechariah, but also parts of other books, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter, have elements of Apocalyptic in them and the so-called Olivet Discourse, the words of the Lord to his disciples on the Mount of Olives before he died, outlining what was going to happen.

The feature of this, there's a lot of imagery, a lot of pictures. Now the pictures are not there for us to draw. You get absurd, you get really absurd kind of paintings if you try to draw them.

The symbolism is there in order to stir our imaginations, in order to show us the beauty, the wonder of the Lord. We have symbolic numbers, seven, for example, a number of completeness, the seven churches and so on.

Three is the number of the Trinity. Four is the number of Earth. So very often the word four meaning completeness over the whole Earth.

[12 : 24] And the number six, as in 666, the number of the beast, the number of humanity. By the way, whatever else that means, it means that humanity is not good enough.

666 doesn't make 7, which is the perfect number. So you see what's being said. And that's more important than trying to work out an exact individual who may or may not correspond to these numbers.

So John is being showing realities, the things that must soon take place. Now, soon. Nearly 2,000 years have passed since John saw this vision.

When you read the word soon in apocalyptic and prophetic writing, it means that God has a predetermined plan which is going to be worked out. Paul says this in Acts 17, God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world.

It means it will surely happen. That's the first thing. It also means it's an urgent reality for every generation. Every generation of the church must live as if it might be the generation to which the Lord will return.

[13 : 39] We don't know. Of course, we don't know. The Lord may return in the lifetime of people in this room. He may not return for many hundreds of years. We don't know. The point about apocalyptic literature saying soon is it means it's going to happen.

There's no possibility of it not happening. And the Lord himself says in Matthew 24, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

So this open book is an apocalyptic book, an apocalypse to reveal to us the reality of the world beyond the senses. Notice verse 3.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. Remember in the ancient world nearly all reading was aloud. Many people couldn't read and it was very, very common in the ancient world.

People, even when they were reading privately, would probably read aloud. But notice, those who hear and those who keep. There's two stages there. There is reading, there is hearing, and there is keeping.

[14 : 41] So it is a prophecy. Now, I don't, as some people, do want to draw a rigid distinction between apocalyptic and prophecy. Apocalyptic is a type of prophecy focusing especially on the last days.

But surely what is being said here is this is the culmination of the word of Scripture, the word of the prophets and the apostles. One old common tune in Revelation is called prophecy's last word. And of course it's prophecy's last word because the last word of God, Jesus Christ, has introduced us into the last days. And in these last days, the last word for us is the words of the prophets and the apostles, and not least, this word.

One interesting thing about the book of Revelation is this. There are almost no direct quotations from the Old Testament. And yet, every phrase echoes the Old Testament.

John is so soaked in the earlier Revelation that when he brings to us this word, it's the culmination of all the earlier words pointing to Christ.

[15:51] And in chapter 19, verse 10, he writes, the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. What's prophecy about? What's its spirit?

What's its meaning? Its true meaning is Jesus Christ, the first word and the last word. So it's an apocalypse unveiling what's happening behind the scenes and how this affects our world.

Secondly, it's a prophecy, a word spoken once but spoken for us all. And thirdly, in verse 4, the first part of verse 4, it is a letter.

Remember that the whole book of Revelation is a letter. The book of Revelation is the letter to the seven churches. What we call the letters to the seven churches are actually individual notes to each of the churches.

And when you read the letters to the churches, every church has to listen to all the other messages. The one who was near, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[16:54] If you're in Ephesus, you need to hear what's said in Smyrna. If you're in Philadelphia, you need to hear what's said in Laodicea. So first of all, then, an open book. At the very end of Scripture, as if the Lord is saying, look, this is what it's all been about.

Looking back, bring it all together and looking forward. Secondly, it is an eternal gospel. Verses 4b to 8.

The sweep. What's the sweep of this book? Well, taking up the words of Psalm 90, it's from eternity to eternity. Its sweep is absolutely tremendous.

Just as it gathers up the whole of Scripture before it, so it looks beyond time and space into eternity. From eternity to eternity.

Now, you see how practical that is. The church is facing persecution. Even if they're not facing persecution, they're facing trials and difficulties. And this is the great solid securities, the promises that cannot fail when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail.

[18:02] Indeed, that phrase, the eternal gospel, is used in chapter 14, verse 6. It's one of the reasons why I reject the view I mentioned at the beginning. The whole Bible is the gospel.

We don't have different gospels at different times. When you're preaching Esther or Ecclesiastes, you're preaching Christ. You're not preaching the introduction to the gospel. You are preaching the eternal gospel.

And there are some tremendous things here. First of all, this book comes from the Trinity itself. Look at verse 5. Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.

A translation, a paraphrase of the divine name, Yahweh the Lord, revealed to Moses, the one who was and is and is to come. It was not one who is confined in Patmos or Glasgow, not one who is confined to the first century or the 21st.

This is the one who is Lord of time. And here's one of the first controversial passages in Revelation. It commentates the seven spirits who are before his throne.

[19:12] I want to suggest that refers to the Holy Spirit himself and the fullness of his power and the comprehensiveness of his presence. Not all commentators agree.

But it seems to me what we've got here is a Trinitarian blessing from him who was and is to come God the Father. And then from the Holy Spirit, the seven spirits before his throne.

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the rulers of the kings on the earth. Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the true witness, the one who is the truth, echoing surely the gospel, chapters 3 and 14, his resurrection, which not only guarantees his resurrection but the resurrection of those who believe.

He is the firstborn from the dead. And he is the ruler of the kings on earth, reference to Psalm 89. He's the descendant of David, the one who will rule the nations.

Now these are great, eternal, mind-boggling facts. The Trinity is at the very heart. Take away the Trinity and you take away the gospel. Take away the Trinity and you destroy the gospel into some kind of thing our rational minds can grasp.

[20:29] This has been some of the problems throughout history. Sometimes, people have started believing only what they can explain, only what they can rationalize.

Why do you think it is that over so many parts of Europe and later in America, many flourishing Reformed churches became Unitarian? They did because they stopped believing in what they could not explain rationally.

Of course, you can't explain rationally the three in one and the one in three. You can't explain rationally the virgin birth. You can't explain rationally the resurrection. But these are the great saving events.

But you'll notice how they are not just eternal facts. They actually come into time and space. Look at later on in verse 5. To him who loves us.

Now that's the eternal fact. That is true from eternity to eternity. But, has freed us from our sins by his blood. This is where it enters time and space.

[21 : 33] The cross reveals what was and will be what was and is and is to come if you like an eternal truth. Fulfilling what happens in Exodus 19 when God's people are called to be priests.

So you see we've got the eternal realities. They come into time and space with the cross and the resurrection and then they culminate in verse 7. Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him.

So the entire saving event caught up here. Now, you can see how strengthening that is to faith. We need to hold on to these great truths and be gripped by them.

Because there will be times when you will feel utterly depressed. There will be times when everything will seem flat and still. there will be times when it doesn't seem real at all.

These are the times we need to hold on to these great eternal realities. I said before, I find profoundly unhelpful the old resurrection hymn. You ask me how I know he lives.

[22 : 48] He lives within my heart. I hope he lives within your heart. But, that's not the assurance. The assurance is that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth and has the keys of death and of Hades.

There will be times when your heart is wintry, grieving and in pain and you won't be feeling he reigns. No, the important thing is these eternal facts. I am the Alpha and the Omega.

Not just the first and the last but all the letters in between if you like. This is a powerful summary of the eternal gospel. From eternity to eternity and coming into time and space.

So the open book unfolds the eternal gospel which leads to the first main vision of the book verses 9 to 20 which is the triumphant Christ.

What is the open book and the eternal gospel about? It is about Christ himself. Come then with prayer and contemplation. See how in scripture Christ is known.

[23 : 57] John was on Patmos a small rocky island in the Aegean. Why was he there for the he was there on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Probably there in other words because of his faithfulness to the gospel. We don't know the details of course we only know things we can pick up from John's own writings.

But Patmos is not the ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is he is in the spirit. The new age has dawned. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day.

Now what does that mean? The commentators differ. I think as so often the differences are really too sharp. Some argue this means that John was in the spirit on what we call Sunday the Christian Sunday which certainly by the second century Christians started to call the Lord's day.

Others argue it means he was like the ancient prophets the spirit was revealing to him the day of the Lord the coming kingdom the reign of David's son the reign of the reign of the Lord.

[25 : 12] I want to suggest to you that both these ideas are right because the point about the day of resurrection the point about the first day of the week the Lord's day is that is the day which has opened the kingdom of heaven to believers.

That is the day which guarantees the coming of the day of the Lord. Hence the words like soon and quickly and so on. An irreversible process.

So the veil of the unseen world is thrown aside and John sees a glorious figure. This is not Christ as he was in his earthly life except that John of course had seen a glimpse on the transfiguration mountain.

Not even Christ as he will be. This is Christ as he now is. A glorious figure. And notice the link of voice and vision.

Revelation is continually mixing its metaphors in order to bring out different aspects of the truth. The lion who is the lamb, the bride who is the city, and of course the voice and the vision.

[26 : 17] Verse 10, I heard a loud voice like a trumpet. Of course, taking us back to Sinai and the trumpet which announced the coming of the Lord to his people there.

And verse 12, I turned to see the voice. There's this wonderful mixed metaphor, I turned to see the voice. Once again, the link of vision.

And notice what he's told. He doesn't say draw what you see in a book, he says write what you see in a book. Because this is something which is to be preserved for the whole church throughout the last days.

I turned to see the voice and I saw seven golden lampstands. And in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, and he is holding the seven churches, the seven lampstands.

And that seems to me to echo the gospel that none will, no one can snatch them out of my hand. And the effect on John is devastating.

[27 : 20] Isn't it? Verse 17, I saw him, I fell at his feet, as though dead. When people say they want to see a vision of the Lord, I wonder if they realize what they're asking about.

This is not something that's going to make John go away and tell his wonderful experience. John is utterly devastated. Like Isaiah in the temple, like so many others, he falls down as if dead.

And surely that's the note that's so often missing in our worship today, this sense of awe, this sense of reverence. And that's right because after all it needs to be someone like this who is going to cope with the gigantic problems of the world, the gigantic problems of spiritual evil evil, and so on.

But notice his first words, words which John had heard many, many times before during Jesus' earthly life. Don't be afraid. How many times we need to hear these words, don't we?

We're so afraid so much of the time, afraid of people, afraid of events, afraid of what others think, afraid of so many things. Now our fears are often fantasies, but they're not all fantasies, they're real fears.

[28 : 40] And what does Jesus say? Don't be afraid. I wonder if John remembered that time on the Sea of Galilee when he said these very words. But now, from this glorious figure, they come with tremendous power.

I'm not going to go into the details of the vision, except to say that clearly they are highly symbolic, once again. The voice, his authority, the flame of fire which suggests, his penetrating eyes, and of course the sharp two-edged sword, Hebrews uses that about the word of God.

It's this figure who says, don't be afraid. And why do not to be afraid? He says, I am the first and the last.

And it was John, I know why you're here, I know how long you're going to be here, and this is not the end, this is not the terminus for you, that's far, far more beyond.

And he says that to all of us. I know the first and the last. He's one who understands what it is to die, I died, he says.

[29 : 52] And what all that means, but I am alive forever more, and have the keys of death and Hades. Hades doesn't exactly mean hell, although it can mean in some parts.

Hades simply means the unseen world, the world beyond the senses. You see, the Roman emperor Domitian might have the keys of death in the sense that he has the power of life or death over the people of his empire.

He certainly does not have the keys of Hades of the world to come. And therefore, he said, right therefore, in other words, in light of all this wonderful thing, right what you've seen, so that your brothers and sisters throughout the world now and your brothers and sisters throughout the world in all the ages will understand.

Right, he says, the things, those that are, and those that are to take place after this. The things that are is the present situation, his present situation, and our present situation.

After this is ultimately the end of all things. But not only that, it means the unfolding pattern, of our lives as we go through them. Ultimately, the end and the new creation.

[31 : 05] I think that's how the book develops. It seems to me, as I said already, chapters 1 to 19 are about the things that are, in the sense they are telling us what the whole of the last days will be like.

The things after this come in the creation of the new heaven and the new earth. So, what is the book of Revelation saying to us? The book of Revelation is saying, take your stand on these great realities.

There is an open book. God has chosen to reveal this. It's not that John went off to Patmos or to the desert and meditated and thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if God would give me some kind of vision, some kind of dream that I could tell the people.

God has given us an open book. And that God who has given us an open book, in that book is the eternal gospel, relevant for us and relevant for all who will come after us, as it was for all before us. Because that is about the triumphant Christ, the first and the last. So as we journey through the book of Revelation, let's hold on to this important key for interpreting.

[32 : 14] What's the book of Revelation about? It's about Christ, who is the first word and the last word. Amen. Let's pray. Father, how we praise you have opened the book to us.

There is much we do not understand. You've given us enough so that we and our children can walk in the ways of your law. We praise you for the eternal gospel. You have not changed your mind or altered your ways of working.

Above all, we look upwards to the triumphant Christ, who one day will close earth's story and reign in righteousness forever and ever.

Amen.